

WRITING FREEDOM: PUERTO RICAN WOMEN'S LITERARY
CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD AND MEMORY BEYOND
ARCHIVES

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Writing Freedom: Puerto Rican Women's Literary Conceptualizations of Motherhood
and Memory Beyond Archives

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Jason Cortés

My dissertation project examines how Puerto Rican women conceptualize freedom and independence while considering their body, diasporic, feminist, and *independentista* politics. To do so, I focus on Julia de Burgos' poetry, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's historical fiction, and Nicholasa Mohr's novels to trace a genealogy of women defining freedom in their own terms and providing spaces and ideas of freedom for women, Puerto Ricans, and Latinxs.

I study how space, community, and genre contribute to Burgos', Figueroa's and Mohr's definitions of freedom to complicate how body politics inform notions of liberation. By examining each author's positionality: Julia de Burgos' was an exile – first in Cuba then New York City, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa was born in Puerto Rico and was raised in both Puerto Rico and New York City, Nicholasa Mohr is a product of diaspora living in New York City, I consider how body politics shape Puerto Rican women's conception of freedom and their accessibility to it. Because these women are writing freedom(s) in their own terms, they are actively writing against a colonial empire and its ideas of patriarchy, masculinity, and colonialism among other ideologies. However, these

authors' portrayals and notions of freedom in their texts depends on their individual investments in feminist, *independentista*, gender, and race politics.

I engage with Puerto Rican women's literature, theories of biopolitics, the body, the archive, and cultural studies to analyze and distinguish the definitions of freedom provided by Burgos, Llanos-Figueroa, and Mohr in their literary works while navigating gender, race, class, motherhood, womanhood, and Puerto Rican identity.

Para mi mamá:
tú siempre creíste en mí y me enseñaste que nada es imposible.

& to all of the maternal figures in my life:
Abuela Chila, Grandma Sarah, Aunt Rosalind, Tía Sonia y Tía Nilda.

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**Introduction:
Remembering Puerto Rican Women's (Literary) Work**

This dissertation project emerged at a time when I, a second-generation Puerto Rican woman born in the U.S., had to decide how my graduate education and training would culminate into a book-length research study in a meaningful way. Questions about what I found important and necessary to study began to occupy much of my time. During this ‘thinking period’ Hurricane María, one of the most catastrophic hurricanes in Puerto Rican history, made landfall in September 2017 weeks after Hurricane Irma left many parts of the island without power. While a lot of scholarship emerged from this moment due to the lack of media coverage, the federal withholding of funds and aid, and the general ignorance from many U.S. Americans, including Puerto Ricans’ citizenship status in the U.S., I began to think about memory and how memory projects are curated and created. In my own attempt to preserve my family’s experiences, I asked my family members about their stories to document their narratives in some fashion. And, this prompted greater questions such as: How are the United States and Puerto Rico documenting this moment? How have big, impactful moments been remembered on a national scale in Puerto Rico and the United States? Whose voices contribute to the dominant narrative and whose are excluded? I thought about my own familial history and how many of the accomplishments, labor, and the bequeathing of traditions depends on the women in my family – mi mamá, mis tías, y mis abuelas.¹ This led me to question how Puerto Rican women have generally been omitted from the ‘bigger story’ despite their contributions that helped shape our identity and culture.

¹ Translation: my mother, aunts, and grandmothers.

Writing Freedom is a cultural and literary study on how Puerto Rican women conceptualize freedom and independence while considering their body, diasporic, and feminist politics. This project examines three Puerto Rican women writers and their literary works – Julia de Burgos’ poetry, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s historical fiction, and Nicholasa Mohr’s novels – to trace a genealogy of women defining freedom in their own terms and providing spaces and notions of freedom for women, Puerto Ricans, and Latinxs. By considering belonging and home in relation to freedom, I am also examining the idea of memory and how it relates to the Puerto Rican experience and the preservation of it. I study how space, community, and genre contribute to each author’s definitions of freedom to complicate how body politics inform notions of liberation. By examining each author’s positionality: Julia de Burgos (1912-1953) was an exile – first in Cuba then New York City, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa (b. 1949) was born in Puerto Rico and raised in both Puerto Rico and New York City, Nicholasa Mohr (b. 1938) is a product of diaspora living in New York City, I consider how body politics shape Puerto Rican women’s conception of freedom and their accessibility to it.

In thinking through body politics, I reflect on how the body moves across space and is defined and regulated through power – it is power that assigns the body meaning which is subject to change in different planes thus highlighting what women of color feminists mean when they say ‘the personal is political.’² In “The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva” (1989), Judith Butler assesses the maternal body and describes the body as “an instrument and effect of power, the body only gains meaning within discourse in the context of power relations” (Butler, 116). Margaret Lock develops her anthropological definition of body

² Moraga, Cherrie., and Gloria. Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 2nd ed., Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983.

politics borrowing from feminists who theorized about the body its representation in the quotidian and Foucauldian discourse on bodies in relation to power via surveillance and discipline. In “Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge” (1993), Lock addresses the question of subjectivity that Butler began to address in relation to sexuality: “the question of the body requires more than reconciling theory with practice. It brings with it the difficulty of people both having and being bodies; subjectivity and its relation to biology and society cannot be ignored [...] The relationship between theory and practice takes on special meaning for those writing about the body” (Lock, 136-7, 148). In this dissertation project, attention is given to body politics for each Puerto Rican feminist writer and their characters considering how Black and Brown female bodies are assigned their subjectivities, surveilled, regulated, and punished.

In this research project I contextualize the history of colonialism on the island of Puerto Rico and its consequences on the island’s politics and Puerto Rican identity and culture as colonial subjects. Included in this historical context is the history of imperial projects on Puerto Rican women’s bodies through sterilization and birth control experimentation during the early twentieth century. The inhumane abuse and exploitation of women’s bodies and absence of consent is an example of how reproductive freedom was denied and is an example of how motherhood is a notion associated with restraint.

Theoretical Framework

Because of Puerto Rico’s colonial history and status, I frame my dissertation using theories of decoloniality, postcolonial thought, and women of color feminisms to interrogate the legacies of systemic and gender-based violence, anti-Blackness, and colonialism in the island and its diaspora. This dissertation specifically focuses on New

York City as a place for diasporic communities because of the authors' relationship with this city though there are many other possible sites for radical transformation to occur. New York City is also a site where many Latino communities were formed, including mass migrations of Puerto Ricans who created their own enclaves, or colonias.³ Analyzing each author's legacy and literature within this theoretical framework helps me reimagine freedom that extends beyond colonial notions of the human and limited understandings of liberation. Specifically, I draw from postcolonial/decolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, and their ideas of decolonization rooted in understanding how the institutions of imperialism, capitalism, and modernity, for example, have burdened, or "damned," various nations and societies through colonization. This foundation is key to begin to create or contribute to decolonial political projects in ways that really seek a transformation of ongoing forms of colonialism and coloniality and that do not further disenfranchise groups and populations. In addition, the theorization of coloniality (of power), a concept developed by Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and María Lugones is useful and productive in grasping the still-lived effects of colonialism and power in the modern capitalist, global system.

Other scholars who utilize coloniality in productive ways that illuminate my work include Ramon Grosfoguel who uses the notion of coloniality to examine the Puerto Rican colonial condition in *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (2003), and Nelson Maldonado-Torres who writes about coloniality and decolonial projects aimed towards liberation. Maldonado-Torres draws upon DuBoisian thought and Black Studies

³ Duany, Jorge. *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island & in the United States*. University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Print.

to conceptualize how he imagines the decolonial turn as a liberatory project: “The Decolonial Turn is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility in light of a large stock of ideas that must necessarily include the critical reflections of the ‘invisible’ people themselves” (262).⁴ His work is paramount in thinking through liberation projects and conceiving their viability in the production of discourse and archives – I provide an analysis of epistemology and its relation to archivization in chapter three. The rhetoric on the dichotomy of invisible vs. visible and its relation to power help me assess various notions of freedom. This is a complicated idea and cannot easily be summarized in essentialist ways. If a certain group of people are always rendered invisible by institutions, systems, and people in power, it is easy and reductive to assume they are not free. Whereas, if these peoples who are made invisible find ways to make themselves (and their stories, voices, perspectives etc.) visible despite institutional and systemic erasure, then they complicate what it means to be free. They have agency and enact their own projects of liberation outside of these systems and apparatuses of power. In this dissertation, I conduct three case studies of Puerto Rican women who are rendered invisible (in different ways) but have found ways to use their voice and autonomy to imagine, conceptualize, and obtain at least a modicum of freedom for themselves and their communities.

⁴ Maldonado-Torres highlights how The Decolonial Turn is a pragmatic shift that necessitates a ‘new school of thought’: “The de-colonial turn involves interventions at the level of power, knowledge, and being through varied actions of decolonization and ‘desgener-acción’. It opposes the paradigm of war which has driven modernity for more than five hundred years, with a radical shift in the social and political agent, the attitude of the knower, and the position in regards to whatever threatens the preservation of being, particularly the actions of the damnés. The transition from modernity to transmodernity lies first and foremost in the political and epistemic interventions and creations of the damnés, not the ‘people’ (of the nation) or the ‘multitude’ (of Empire)” (262).

María Lugones, Xhercis Méndez, and Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso have invaluable contributions to decolonial theory by thinking through and centering the “Coloniality of Gender” and interrogating the remaining legacies of racialized gender, sex, and sexuality as constitutive of the modern/colonial project. They have also critiqued the absences of decolonial and feminist scholarship by examining how women of color are excluded from discourses of liberation struggles. Their scholarship contributes to postcolonial and decolonial thought in ways that reflect on how colonialism has shaped institutions and systems of knowledge, discipline, education, capital, culture, and debt while impacting the quotidian ways people see themselves and interact with others.

The contribution of women of color feminists and philosophers are critical to decolonial theory and politics. My project adds to the cadre of decolonial feminist work by centering feminist theory and literature developed by women of color that not only questions how and why gender matters but also aims to analyze how women have been marginalized or excluded from white women’s feminism. In this regard, my theoretical framework is also a meditation on my methodological practice and what led me to this dissertation project in the first place. The Combahee River Collective and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw theorized how women of color and women of the Third World navigate gender, race, class, and other oppressions simultaneously and using words like interlocking, overlapping, and intersectional to describe this experience. Feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Aurora Levins Morales, Brittney Cooper, Sylvia Wynter, María Lugones, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie root their approaches and theories in their experiences impacted by interwoven oppressions in a way that mainstream white feminist movements excluded. Black, Indigenous, Latin American, Caribbean, Asian, and Latina

women centered the lived experiences of women of color and by doing so created works and political projects that were holistic, affirming, and decolonizing.

My project is rooted in diasporic theoretical framework. In “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World” (2000) Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley provide a basic understanding of diaspora: “the dispersal of people of African descent, their role in the transformation and creation of new cultures, institutions, and ideas outside of Africa, and the problems of building pan-African movements across the globe” (Patterson and Kelley, 24). My understanding of diaspora and diasporic culture builds on the works of Juan Flores, Edouard Glissant, Brent Hayes-Edwards, and Yomaira C. Figueroa. In *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literatures* (2020) Yomaira C. Figueroa, for example, moves towards relationality as a concept that connects Hispanophone Caribbean and Equatorial Guinean material productions in culture and literature due to similar diasporic experiences and the shared Spanish language. Moving towards relationality builds upon the notion that diasporic identities are global – there are more ways diasporic peoples are connected and similar. For example, “the fact that black labor migrations (in slavery and freedom) were generally produced by many of the same needs of capital, the same empires, the same colonial labor policies, the same ideologies that forced so-called coolie labor from China and the Asian subcontinent to work on the plantations, mines, railroads, of European empires and of the Americas” (Patterson and Kelley, 24-5). While diasporas are global, Juan Flores analyzes and studies diasporas in a (Hispanophone) Caribbean context in *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2009). He focuses on the relations between Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican diasporas and the similarities

between their languages, culture, and their circular migrations, which he deems as Caribbean counterstreams where people and culture are transformed and in movement. Furthermore, he defines this diaspora as a cultural diaspora while extracting from Robin Cohen's definitions of global diasporas:

The Caribbean region and its peoples are thus a site of diasporic formation throughout history. Beyond that Afro-diasporic foundation, and thinking of the modern Caribbean and its new migrant communities in Europe and North America, the Caribbean is a quintessential cultural diaspora because of the ample evidence of "cultural retentions or affirmations of an African identity,...a literal or symbolic interest in 'return,'... cultural artifacts, products and expressions that show shared concerns and cross-influences between African, the Caribbean and the destination countries of the Caribbean [people] and indications that ordinary Caribbean peoples abroad [...] behave in ways consistent with the idea of a cultural diaspora (Flores, 51-2).

The contextualization of Caribbean diasporas as sites for cultural transformation is helpful in analyzing productions of culture such as language, food, music, and art that capture these nuances. Because the Caribbean diaspora is cultural and ever-changing, it needs to be explored, documented, and taught; diaspora theory grounds the call to investigate memory projects and archivization.

Cultural memory projects are important because they preserve, protect, and document the lived experiences of a group of people. On the national scale, they serve as representations of the livelihoods of certain groups and populations while educating the national population. These types of projects exist in archives, museums (permanent) exhibits and collections, online repositories, and textbooks and required reading in school curricula. Due to the weight and responsibility these projects carry, they must be executed well and in ways that authentically capture these experiences, histories, and stories while representing these populations with dignity and respect. For example, the traditional ways

of knowing and being of marginalized groups are generally unaligned with dominant discourses of knowledge and education. Consequently, these epistemologies are reduced to illegitimate, wrong, or non-existent. These political decisions are significant – they decide who and what *deserves* to be archived, and thus remembered. Using Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Marisa Fuentes’ *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (2016), and Tristan Platt’s “Archive as Field Event” (2012), notions about the archive and archivization, this project traces how three Puerto Rican women imagine freedom on colonized lands and fight against national projects of memory that displace, erase, or omit their stories and contributions. In this dissertation project I aim to point towards misrepresentations in the archive or general erasure(s) in archival representations of certain stories or narratives. One particular trend was the omission of women’s stories and contributions to Puerto Rican history or community formations. Moreover, in the first chapter I study the way one Puerto Rican woman, Julia de Burgos, has not been remembered in the way in which she saw and defined herself. Later in the dissertation I question the omission of Nicholasa Mohr from national archives as well as offer different conceptualizations of archives in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s novel. In Llanos-Figueroa’s novel, the main characters rely on their own processes of archivization because they are rendered silent and invisible in their society. These moments of erasure and silence speak volumes to gendered, ethnic, racial, and class oppression(s) and highlight how archival violence(s) need to be questioned and interrogated.

Literature Review

Much of the canonization of Puerto Rican literature in the early twentieth century has been dominated by elite, white male writers who often demoralized women through the maintenance of misogynistic cultural nationalism in their writings. The writers of the *generación de los treintas* (The Generation of the 30's) resisted assimilation to U.S. American culture and wrote to express what Puerto Rican culture was as a (cultural) project that was crucial to preserving their identity. One of the most notable writers of this decade, Antonio S. Pedreira, wrote *Insularismo: An Insight into the Puerto Rican Character* in 1934 to question and begin answering what it means to be Puerto Rican a few decades after the U.S. colonized Puerto Rico in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. Pedreira's text highlights Puerto Rican's Spanish roots as an essential part to their character while dismissing the Indigenous and African roots as pieces that taint the composition of Puerto Rican identity. He believed Puerto Rico's African slave population was parasitic and tarnished the nation's racial purity.⁵

A few decades later writers of the *generación de los cincuentas* (The Generation of the 50's), René Marqués and José Luis González responded to Pedreira's canonical text with their books: *The Docile Puerto Rican* (1956) and *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country* (1980). Marqués blamed and dramatized the notion of Puerto Rican docility for

⁵ Pedreira begins *Insularismo* describing the racial make-up of Puerto Ricans to literally answer the question "what are we?" In his description of the colonial legacy that contributes to what is Puerto Rican, he negatively mentions Africans while celebrating the Spanish conquistadors though they exterminated the Indigenous people on the island: "Gradually exterminated by plague and subjugation, the fusing indigenous race stops being a major factor in the racial mixture some years after the conquest, leaving two races with contradictory roots and dispositions face-to-face. The superior race provided intelligence and planning, and the so-called inferior race reluctantly contributed the work. Both had traits that were difficult to reconcile. Between the two the distance that separates the free man from the slave, the civilized from the barbaric, the European from the African intervened. The white race decreed; the black carried out the decree. One imposed the project and ruled; the other lent his brawn and obeyed [...] Blacks belong to a group that participates but does not create, that follows but does not initiate, that marches in file but does not lead the parade. Generally, he lacks the fervor to be a leader" (12-3).

Puerto Rico's unfulfilled political and radical potential. Furthermore, his writing perpetuated Pedreira's sexist and racist imaginary of Puerto Rican culture and identity while using masculinist language in his comparison of Puerto Ricans to docile women. González provided a more profound analysis of Puerto Rican history, culture, and identity and responded to Pedreira and Marqués' ideas in a way that complicated their reductive insight of Puerto Rican history and demystified a predominantly Spanish (white) national culture. His text provided a holistic study of Puerto Rican identity by including all of the *storeys* as key elements using the metaphor of a house. In this analogy, González describes defining moments of Puerto Rican history and identity as floors of a house, or *storeys*: The first storey consists of Spanish colonial rule and the immersion of slaves into the island, which eventually creates the mulatto class, during the 16th century. The second storey is configured from the beginning of the 19th century the idea of national culture is not a big idea yet and Puerto Rican society encounters more Spanish and Latin American immigrants and it influences their social, cultural, political, and racial dynamics. The third storey is set in 1898 marking the end of the Spanish-American War and the American invasion on the island that transforms the social, racial, cultural, and political make-up of the island again. The fourth (and final) storey examines 1952 when the official political status of the island changes to a commonwealth (González, 5). On the question of national identity, González concurs with Pedreira that Puerto Rican national identity is not exactly formed – this is what they were questioning at during the middle of the twentieth century. Although some writers were problematic in many aspects, they attempted to define Puerto Rican identity and culture after the colonization of two empires, first Spain then the United States, and contributed to the cultural project of Puerto Rican nationalism.

Julia de Burgos did not pose great questions about Puerto Rican identity in her writing. Instead, she wrote about the struggle for Puerto Rico's freedom as well as women's and decorated her poetry with Nationalist and feminist messages and symbols. Burgos is a celebrated poet and Puerto Rican literary icon who was born in Puerto Rico and later moved to New York City. Her collection of poems, *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos* (1997), showcases the complexity in Burgos' writing through the myriad themes she writes about: death, independence, race, gender, nature, and nation. While many scholars focus on the representations of nationalist and gender politics in her writing, I am more focused in the imagery of phantoms, darkness, and ghosts that suggest Burgos is writing about colonial hauntings. Vanessa Perez Rosario contributes to the discourse of Burgos's political status as an exile by referring to her as a sexile and highlights it was her status as both a radical and woman that cast her out of her island in *Remembering Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon* (2014). Yet, there is a hesitation to label Burgos as an exile. This project explores this miscategorization and argues that Burgos' life and legacy have been ghosted/haunted in Western discourse and also bridges the ideas about ghosts and phantoms that Burgos illuminates in her writings at the end of her life.

While Puerto Rican literature from the early twentieth century navigated questions of identity and culture, by the mid to late twentieth century, diaspora, migration, language, gender, and feminism were important themes writers explored. While migration 'floods' to the mainland took place after Puerto Ricans were given American citizenship, Puerto Ricans had migrated to large cities, like New York City, since the nineteenth century. The mass exodus of Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States in the 1940s and 1950s produced different notions of culture and identity for Puerto Ricans. Virginia Sánchez-

Korrol captures early Puerto Rican migration and community development from 1917-1948 in New York City in her foundational *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (1983). Her work is the only book-length historical study of Puerto Rican communities in the United States and studies how early “colonias” developed into communities. Arlene Davila’s *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (2004) examines New York City Puerto Rican and Latino communities threatened by gentrification and false promises of upward mobility by critiquing how the neoliberal city capitalizes on its Latinidad as a marketing scheme but pushes out Latino populations.

I consider these texts in my analysis of Nicholasa Mohr’s texts and the accessibility to freedom. Mohr’s writings explore Puerto Rican livelihoods and daily life in New York City. I read her texts as an attempt to humanize the lives of people of color in poverty and as a representation of an intangible or inaccessible upward mobility. While the literature of the Nuyorican poets and writers navigate similar themes and ideas in relation to Puerto Rican life in New York City, their writings have been studied extensively. What I want to do here is focus on Nicholasa Mohr and her work since she is one of the understudied writers of the Nuyorican cohort. And, while Nuyorican poets are quite popular and well-known, the writers that are often celebrated for this work are male despite the contributions made by women. Here, I am also questioning how gender factors into how Nuyorican writers are honored and remembered.

On the island, the question of gender began with the generation of the 70’s when writers like Rosario Ferré changed the political and cultural landscape of Puerto Rico with the implementation of feminism and gender equity in literary texts. In addition, Ana Lydia

Vega, Carmen Lugo Filippi, and Magali García Ramis are writers from this generation who also challenged the male dominated canon and ideas of machismo and patriarchy, thus shifting the conversation. Another writer worth noting from this generation is Luis Rafael Sanchez who wrote one of his most famous works, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976), which captured Puerto Rico's culture in the city of San Juan through the use of the radio as a tool and symbol of transmission.

Rosario Ferré also co-founded and published the journal *Zona de carga y descarga* in 1972 as a collaborative project that unified women's voices and gave them a space to write and publish their work that critically engaged with meanings of feminism and women's livelihoods in Puerto Rico. Frances Negron-Muntaner writes that "Ferré burst into the cultural scene as a supporter of independence and the co-founder of *Zona de carga y descarga*, a literary journal that radically modernized Puerto Rican letters. Over the course of its nine issues, the journal declared itself as a space for freedom, confrontation, poetry, complexity, and *búsqueda*, launching a new cohort of writers, whose works came to culturally define this era" (Negron Muntaner, 157).⁶ Although the journal was short-lived, ultimately reaching its end in 1975, its impact is everlasting and solidified Ferré's commitment to Puerto Rican feminism and women's issues.

Ferré's first English language written novel, *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), critiques Puerto Rico's *gran familia* narrative by exposing the underlying, and sometimes obvious, racist, sexist, and classist notions rooted in the island's nationalism and literature. Many critics praise her for being one of the first female writers to explore and celebrate female sexuality. In her interview with Rosario Ferré, Negron-Muntaner writes, "Ferré

⁶ Translation: search. It is my interpretation that the writer uses this word in an italicized manner to indicate a long quest or search that is deeply rooted in complexity and answering 'big' questions.

exposed that if women are denied in the precise place where they are engendered as subjects, freedom is a constant battle waged against the self, the social order, and language” (Negron-Muntaner, 157). While Ferré’s revisionist novel is often celebrated for its usage of feminism, its representation of Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood and womanhood reproduces racist and patriarchal notions about the Black (maternal) body. A part of my scholarly contribution is instead analyzing Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of The Stone* and highlighting how she accomplishes the task of rewriting a nation’s history and what decisions and elements factor into this *new* story.

Caribbean literature is imbued with representations of women in relation to the nation who as mothers symbolically reproduce national and cultural discourses. This is seen, for example, in Haitian author Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) where various maternal practices exist to challenge or reproduce patriarchy. In “M/Othering the Nation: Women’s Bodies as Nationalist Trope in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*” (2011) Simone A. James Alexander writes that Danticat decodes nationalist discourses and gender roles in a way that challenges male domination and the repression of women’s sexuality. James Alexander utilizes a feminist theoretical framework to interrogate this role of Caribbean women as mothers of the nation:

[the] nation and/or country is fundamentally constructed as feminine, a construction that deservedly *requires* being saved and protected. In keeping with this theory women are burdened with the task of maintaining the nation’s (read men’s) honor and integrity. As a result, they are titled “mothers of the nation,” an assigned designation that surreptitiously further justifies controlling women’s sexuality (373).

Similarly, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) represents how Eurocentric white, patriarchal culture in England is deemed as a point for intervention as it is used to control Afro-Caribbean mothers who live in England. In the novel, a white mother interferes with two

Black women's mothering practices by trying to be a pseudo-mother to their children. Here, she represents how an anti-Black and national discourse is reproduced in the policing of Black mothers and intervening in how they raise their children. These examples demonstrate how the trope of Caribbean mothers as reproductions of the nation is a literary tradition in Caribbean literature. My goal is to examine how women write about themselves and their roles as mothers in ways that define freedom, liberation, and motherhood in *new* ways.

Within U.S. literature, Latinx literature is not often considered a component of U.S. American literature even though Latinidad is a social construct produced in the U.S. Each chapter focuses on one Puerto Rican feminist writer and their works and their challenges in the diaspora – each writer travels to or lives in New York City at some point in their life. New York City is thus a site or contact zone where transformation and transculturation occur.⁷ Therefore, they characterize how the Puerto Rican experience is also an American experience and forces a reimagination of Puerto Rican literature, and by extension Latino literature, as essential pieces to U.S. American culture and the U.S. literary canon.

Chapter Breakdown:

The first chapter, “Gendered Exile,” employs a literary analysis of Julia de Burgos’ poetry to establish how she has been, borrowing from Dixia Ramirez’s *Colonial Phantoms: Belonging and Refusal in the Dominican Americas, from the 19th Century to the Present* (2018), misrepresented and “ghosted” in western discourse and national archives as solely a Puerto Rican poet when she was an exile, too. In *Colonial Phantoms* Ramirez argues

⁷ Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

that Dominican cultures and resistance have been miscategorized and misrepresented in archives, discourse, and knowledge production and describes these processes of erasure as colonial ghosting and haunting. This misrepresentation does not define Julia de Burgos as an exile although she perceived herself as one. Part of the work of this chapter is undoing the colonial ghosting of Julia de Burgos' legacy by remembering her as she was – an exile, and thus an exilic writer. Denying Burgos' exilic status is to deny her the political significance of her poetry and her life. Everything she wrote and the way she lived her life was defined by the fact she could not reside or simply 'be' in her homeland. Thinking through Avery Gordon's "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity" (2011) and *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), I am also considering how Julia de Burgos writes about hauntings and phantoms, especially in her later works that foreshadowed her death such as "Poems for a Death that Could be Mine," "Farewell to Welfare Island" and "Poem for My Death."

Julia de Burgos was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico and began to write at a young age. In 1938, after finishing college Burgos joined the women's branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, the Daughters of Freedom, and published her first collection of poems, *Poem in Twenty Furrows (Poema en veinte surcos, 1938)*. Her investment in Puerto Rican Nationalist and *Independentista* politics and feminism inform her poetry. I explore Burgos' status as an exile and question how her exilic status as well as her politics inform her writing and notions of freedom. Her wishes for Puerto Rico's independence and notions of gender and racial progress were not subliminal at all, which is why she felt she had to leave the island and vow to never return (Garcia, 2018). In a recent obituary in *The New York Times*, Maira Garcia aims to remember Julia de Burgos as not only a great Puerto Rican

writer, but a woman and thinker who helped define Puerto Rican identity in the twentieth century. Although she mentions that Julia de Burgos felt compelled to leave the island and could not return due to her radical politics, she never hesitates to define Burgos as an exile:

Her poetry gave her entree into Puerto Rico's intellectual circles, yet she did not really fit. It was the 1930s, after all, and she was a divorced woman in a conservative Roman Catholic society, as well as working class and of African descent. The Puerto Rican intellectuals shaping the island's identity were not ready to embrace the idea of social justice for African descendants — much less feminism. She had to leave. Yet in absence, she would become a force to be reckoned with (Garcia, 2018).

Julia de Burgos critiques and writes about the (Puerto Rican) nation, a task usually reserved for men. She uses her writing to represent Puerto Rico's struggle for freedom through the inequalities and lack of freedoms in Puerto Rico in gender, race, and nation. Why is Julia de Burgos not remembered as an exile? Is it a notion, or *honor*, reserved for revolutionary men? Is there a gendered way in memorializing and remembering Puerto Rican writers and thinkers of the 20th century that does not celebrate the sacrifices of women but privileges those of men? These questions lead my literary study of Julia de Burgos' poetry and legacy and critiques on the gendered processes of archivization. Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, a pioneer in Puerto Rican Studies, debuted her novel *The Season of Rebels and Roses* in 2018 and it poses questions of missing archives in relation to women's work and the status of exilic women. Using this metaphor of missing or absent archives, I argue that archives are imagined in fictive texts to highlight and make sense of the erasure of women's work.

The second chapter "Humanizing Poverty in Diaspora," is framed by Arlene Davila's *Barrio Dreams* which details how gentrification in New York City pushed Puerto Ricans and Latinxs out of their neighborhoods to improve the lives or status of wealthy

investors and New York City transplants. In this regard, the Puerto Rican communities, and other communities alike, were deemed ‘disposable’ with limited access to social services and aid. In addition, this form of race and class-based violence limits access to resources to vulnerable communities. As a primarily under read and understudied writer of Puerto Rican literature, I center Nicholasa Mohr’s voice as vital to understanding the Puerto Rican diaspora. Her work illuminates how Puerto Rican communities were deemed disposable by the state due to police brutality and gentrification.

Nicholasa Mohr considers herself a Nuyorican because she was born in New York City to Puerto Rican parents. She is trained as an artist and has had a prolific writing career, including The New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year Award (1974) among other literary prizes for *Nilda* (1973). Though Mohr has published many novels, there are no collections of her work in the Puerto Rican National Archives or The Center of Puerto Rican Studies Archives and she is not recognized as one of the most important writers of the Nuyorican Literary Movement. Mohr belongs to a cohort of Puerto Rican writers that questioned racial and ethnic discrimination, inhumane working conditions, poor housing, and second-class citizenship through the Nuyorican literary movement though her male peers are often the faces of the movement. Therefore, I question the ways in which cultural memory and archivization often erase women’s work and contributions.

In the final chapter, “Memory and Puerto Rican Motherhood,” I combine notions of motherhood and memory to offer a possibility of freedom via Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood and alternative archives in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s historical novel. Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of the Stone* (1990) is centered on the brutal legacies of slavery and colonialism in Puerto Rico that created an Afro-Puerto Rican population,

though notions of anti-Blackness, sexism, racism, and violence dominate cultural discourse and dismisses black history and black women's history as Puerto Rican. Llanos-Figueroa's novel is centered around the livelihoods and stories of five generations of Afro-Puerto Rican women and their history, a history that is generally ignored or minimized by Puerto Rican intellectuals and elites who prefer to paint the island in lighter colors. Through the generational bequeathing of knowledge by women, Llanos-Figueroa demonstrates that Black Puerto Rican women are keepers of knowledge akin to the history of the nation, which in turn offers a different perspective and situates black Puerto Rican women at the center of knowledge production. Not only do they (re)write history, Black Puerto Rican women are represented in roles that are not dehumanizing or rely on negative stereotypes. Furthermore, Llanos-Figueroa debunks cultural myths about Puerto Rican motherhood, specifically a racialized motherhood, in her depictions of Fela, the enslaved African mother and her descendants.

I also question how and why an island-based Puerto Rican woman rewrote Puerto Rico's history and placed Black Puerto Rican motherhood at the center of her novel while also interrogating which forms of motherhood are valorized and praised and how notions of motherhood are associated with freedom(s). Because *Daughters of the Stone* positions women's stories and narratives at the center of their texts, I examine how Llanos-Figueroa's feminist politics contribute to the role of women actually writing their own texts within the novels: Carisa, the protagonist, attempts to write her own stories based on her family's memory and lives. To assume that the placement of women rewriting the nation's history fulfills a feminist agenda is too simplistic. Instead, I focus on why Carisa wants to write this story and how it impacts the dominant discourse. In doing so, I also analyze how

the author of the novel, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, employs her ideologies of freedom and feminism into the writers of their stories. How are the authors using their characters to rewrite national history, women's history, black history, and blackness in Puerto Rico? How do the novels explore freedom in terms of race, class, gender, or the intersections of these livelihoods i.e. for Puerto Rican women, Afro-Boricuas, working class Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Ricans in general? Lastly, how is writing, as a tool and method, utilized in these novels: specifically, for the authors who are writing the novels, and the characters writing a novel within a novel? *Daughters of the Stone* is an attempt to revise Puerto Rican history and recover the stories of Afro-descendant peoples who contributed greatly to the construction of the island and its culture though often erased and silenced.

While the original proposal for this project was ambitious, there were unintended omissions in the dissertation. For example, I planned to include archival documents based on each writer and their works but was mostly unlucky. With the exception of Julia de Burgos's books being catalogued in national libraries and archives, there were no references to her exilic status, travel forms, or other miscellaneous documents to sustain or complicate my argument. Furthermore, the limited space and time for this research project prevented me from including the lives of more Puerto Rican exilic and diasporic writers. Because I focused on one writer in each chapter, I represent the (Afro) Puerto Rican exilic, diasporic, or island-based in the perspectives of the authors I selected. I was also unable to look at more contemporary material productions on Puerto Rican history and culture.

I conclude the dissertation by alluding to how literary imaginations of freedom and memory projects help us understand the present struggles for national and gender liberation for Afro- Puerto Ricans. Because these women are writing freedom(s) in their own terms,

they are actively writing against a colonial empire and its ideas of patriarchy, masculinity, and colonialism among other ideologies. However, these authors' portrayals and notions of freedom in their texts depend on their individual investments in feminist, independentista, gender, and race politics. Thus, I trace how Burgos, Llanos-Figueroa, and Mohr conceptualize freedom in their literary works while navigating gender, race, class, motherhood, and Puerto Rican identity. I utilize a women of color feminist framework and propose new ways of imagining Puerto Rican motherhood and national archives in relation to freedom that aims to change American Studies, Latinx Studies, and Caribbean Studies scholarship. Because Nicholasa Mohr's and Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's literature is widely understudied and Julia de Burgos has been misrepresented in the archives, this project analyzes their works and memories to reject the *silences* around their legacies.

Chapter 1
Gendered Exile:
Freedom, Myth, and Memory in Julia de Burgos's Poetry

In 2018, The New York Times published an obituary on Julia de Burgos in which she was recognized as “the literary foremother of the Nuyorican movement [whom] defied societal norms and advocated for the island’s independence” who “had to leave” Puerto Rico (Garcia, 1). Though the notion that Burgos ‘had to leave’ Puerto Rico conveys a sense of urgency and forcefulness that suggest exile, many writings about Burgos’s life paint her as a migrant. Julia de Burgos came from a rural background and *campo* town of Carolina, which is now a part of the island’s San Juan metropolitan area. Her upbringing in a mountainous town most likely influenced her to write about nature and also see herself in it. In her poetry metaphorical birds take flight and illuminate her great desire to flee and be free. This avian metaphor can be interpreted as a stand-in for understanding how her life and poetry functioned in dualities: the person she was and the person she sought to be.

While reading about and conducting research on Julia de Burgos for my dissertation project, I was struck by the notion of mythology associated with her life and legacy especially in regard to her memory. Some scholars and writers focus on the mythology of Burgos’s death; for example, how her legs were cut off for being too long to fit in her coffin or how she foreshadowed her death in poems like “Farewell to Welfare Island” or “Poem for My Death.” The very idea of mythology reveals that much of Burgos’s life is unknown, up for debate, and that these ‘folkloric tales provide either a modicum of truth or sense of validity that eases people. Perhaps these myths attempt to make sense of an Afro-Puerto Rican woman’s life and legacy because her feminist and *independentista* politics kept her out of her homeland and in an almost tragic life in New York City. Julia de Burgos was

found dead on a street in El Barrio, a pseudonym for East Harlem, a Puerto Rican neighborhood in, NYC, blocks away from a hospital. While she died of liver damage, Burgos also had cirrhosis due to her alcoholism. Before her death she was admitted to Goldwater Memorial Hospital for treatment and was subject to experimentation.¹ This, however, was no myth – as Burgos reveals details about her institutionalization in her diary.

Jack Agüeros anthologized and translated all of Burgos's poetry in *Songs of Simple Truth: the Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos* (1997) and contextualizes Burgos's life from a small rural town in Puerto Rico and beyond while defining her as a unique and talented woman who excelled in school and self-published her first book of poems. In this collection, Agüeros contributes to the ongoing mythology concerning Burgos's life and work by heavily suggesting that the anthology is incomplete; there are more poems, lost poems. He writes about his quest to find manuscripts that are believed to exist but will probably never be seen: "I have seen multiple references to a fourth manuscript of poems by Julia, and believe it because of the sources. So I go on believing that I may get lucky and find more poems, but the myth of Julia de Burgos and her missing poems, I recognize now will never end. Thus, there will always be "lost poems" for Quixotic writers to pursue" (Agüeros, xxxvii). In "From the Archives: On Two 'Lost' Poems by Julia de Burgos," Cristina Pérez-Jimenez uncovered two of Burgos's 'missing' poems ("La novia del campo" and "Pequeño viaje a tu alma") and writes about Burgos's maternal desire and life in New

¹ Jossiana Arroyo explores Burgos's hospitalization as institutionalization in her juxtaposition of Burgos's and Lebron's lives and writes "While Burgos has not been labeled officially a political prisoner, the fact that she was institutionalized and subjected to medical experiments -albeit with her consent- puts her in a similar category with other political prisoners and racialized peoples who were subjected to the same procedures in the decades following World War II" and implies how Burgos' body, like many other Puerto Rican women's bodies, served as sites of experimentation (130-1).

York City, which are themes present in her final collection of poetry.² What is also revealed here is that Agüeros was right – there was more of Burgos’s work that had yet to be uncovered. This begs the question: what other myths about Burgos’s life and memory require more attention?

One of the myths I explore in this chapter is based on Burgos’s migratory status - was she an exile or migrant? Burgos’s death at the age of thirty-nine has been a subject of study and mythologizing in Puerto Rican Studies and Caribbean Studies. For instance, Jossiana Arroyo, who also refers to Julia de Burgos’s exilic status in her essay “Living the Political: Julia de Burgos and Lolita Lebron,” explores the lives, exile, and poetry of both of these nationalist symbols and states “Burgos went into exile – first to New York and then to Cuba- led by her relationship with Jimenez-Grullón” (Arroyo, 136). Arroyo juxtaposes the lives, works, and memories of Lebron and Burgos to ascertain how their life-long desires for Puerto Rico’s freedom actually reveals a maternalistic death drive that consumed most of their lives.³

Arroyo also writes, “myths are contested sites for inspiration, creativity, and continuity for Puerto Rican artistic, social, and political spaces. Additionally, they are manipulated narratives in which the stories of the self and the collective are made and remade through time” and provides a thoughtful logic as to why myths in Puerto Rican Studies and culture must be engaged with in an intellectual manner (Arroyo, 129). Sometimes myths are used to mask what is real or provide reason, though they may be untrue, and soon become etched in our collective memory and recounted through

² Translation: “The Girlfriend from the Countryside” and “Small Trip to Your Soul.” These translations are my own – there are no translations provided in this article.

³ I explore this idea in the third section of this chapter.

generations to make sense of events and moments in life that are at times unexplainable. What I intend on doing in this chapter is not to debunk myths or contribute to existing mythology, but to challenge the memory and legacy of one of the most famous Puerto Rican poets and reevaluate her poetry in a way that honors her memory.

A more recent anthology of Burgos's poetry edited by Judy García Allende, *Y fui todo en mí: Antología poética en el centenario del natalicio de Julia de Burgos* (2014), chronologically organizes Burgos's poems with accompanying notes that contextualize publication date, space, and place. What makes this anthology different, Luis Othoniel Rosa writes is: "Políticamente, Julia de Burgos está mucho más cerca del anarco-feminismo proletario de Luisa Capetillo que del nacionalismo de Lolita Lebrón o de Albizu. El enemigo político en los poemas de Julia no es el imperialismo yanqui de Albizu, es el capitalismo patriarcal, y esto es una diferencia crucial de la cual esta antología se desentiende" (317).⁴ An essential addition to the existing archive of Julia de Burgos's work is a collection of letters exchanged between Burgos and her sister Consuelo Burgos: *Cartas a Consuelo* (Letters to Consuelo, 2014). Because the letters were written in Spanish, Burgos's native tongue, without any translations, it poses a language barrier for scholars who are not Spanish speakers. These letters are essential to Vanessa Perez-Rosario's rethinking of Burgos's life where she affirms Burgos's exilic status and writes about her

⁴My translation: Politically, Julia de Burgos is much more aligned with Luisa Capetillo's anarcho-feminism for the proletariat than the nationalism of Lolita Lebrón or (Pedro) Albizu (Campos). The political enemy in Julia de Burgos's poems is not the yankee imperialism Albizu writes about, but it is patriarchal capitalism. This is the crucial difference to which this anthology is concerned.

Rosa, Luis Othoniel. "Y fui toda en mí. Antología poética en el centenario del natalicio de Julia de Burgos." *Centro Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Hunter College, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Oct. 2014, 316–19.

simultaneous exiles in *Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon* (2014).

Burgos's poetry relies on metaphorical depictions of nature that not only represent Puerto Rico and the island's struggle to gain freedom, but also Burgos's personal struggles as a feminist woman who sought for Puerto Rico's freedom, as well as her own. In her poetry, the mythical bird is used by the poet to represent herself and her desire to fly and flee. Birds are often portrayed as animals that soar high in open skies while also existing in perpetual flight. In Puerto Rican literature, the image of the bird has been popularized through Lola Rodríguez de Tío's poem "Cuba y Puerto Rico son de un pájaro las dos alas" (Cuba and Puerto Rico Are the Two Wings of One Bird, 1893) where she connected the island's mutual colonial history and cultural formations in ways that forge a fictive kinship and analogous relationship. While this relationship is not explored in this chapter, it is interesting that the metaphorical bird exists in Puerto Rican literature though conceptualized and imagined in different ways. Edna Acosta-Belén perceives poet Julia de Burgos as a phoenix, a bird that rises from the ashes, in her article "Rediscovering Julia de Burgos: The People's Rebel Soul Poet" (2017):

"A rereading of Burgos's complete body of writings continues to reveal the consistency of thought and action by this passionate revolutionary woman whose quest was envisioning a new society in which human liberation reigns. No matter what the precarious financial circumstances; truncated dreams of furthering her college education and achieving due recognition as a poet; painful blows from frustrated love and broken marriages emotional and social rejection; addiction and deteriorating health, Burgos would manage to fall and rise again from the ashes like a mythological phoenix, ready to open its wings and spread them freely against resisting winds, always with a determination and resolve that never stopped her from writing, until her body reached for its last breath. During the bleakest moments of her life, poetry was always her salvation, her gleam of hope" (Acosta-Belén, 202).

Though Burgos does not write about a specific bird, Acosta-Belén imagines Burgos as a phoenix due to her resilient nature and contributes to the mythology around Burgos's life and how we remember the poet. Her poetry is her way of 'resisting winds' when she can no longer fly, so it is extremely fitting that Burgos imagines herself as a bird in her poetry to signal her desire to achieve freedom. In this chapter, I argue that the bird metaphor changes in Burgos's poetry collections - first representing freedom in exile (flight) and then representing restraint (wingless or with broken wings). Therefore, exile, to Burgos, changes as well. Though images and sentiments of exile are scattered throughout Burgos's poetry, dominant discourses still perceive Burgos as a migrant and do not honor Burgos's memory.

In my analysis, I consider Dixá Ramírez's *Colonial Phantoms: Belonging and Refusal in the Dominican Americas, from the 19th Century to the Present* to analyze how Western discourse and archivization have ghosted Julia de Burgos' memory. Ramírez explores how the Dominican Republic was 'ghosted' in the identity formation processes of the Americas that ignored the nation's blackness and productions of black culture. Ramírez explores a myriad of cultural sources, including literature and art, to examine how certain cultural products have been erased or forgotten in the formation of a national identity and argues how these products actually define Dominican culture and resist anti-blackness. *Colonial Phantoms* is particularly useful in this chapter because I am interested in how national memory projects assign value and meaning to certain ideas and moments while also reckoning with the questions: "who" and "what" do we remember, and why? But more importantly, these projects reflect on how these people or moments fit into the dialogue about the nation and answer questions about national identity, narrative, historical discourse, knowledge and cultural production, and gender. Because of this, an examination

of Julia de Burgos' writing as exilic writing, or writing in/from exile, disrupts the defining notion of Burgos' life and legacy as a migrant.

I examine Julia de Burgos' poetry to establish how she has been, borrowing from Dixia Ramírez's *Colonial Phantoms*, misrepresented and ghosted in Western Discourse and national archives as solely a Puerto Rican poet and migrant when she was an exile, too. This misrepresentation does not define Julia de Burgos as an exile although she perceived herself as one. I offer a reading of Julia de Burgos' poetry and life in an attempt to undo the colonial ghosting of her legacy by remembering her as she was – exile, and thus an exilic writer. Julia de Burgos critiques and writes about the (Puerto Rican) nation, a task usually reserved for men. She uses her writing to represent Puerto Rico's struggle for freedom through the inequalities and lack of freedoms in Puerto Rico in gender, race, and nation. I question how gender affects cultural memory projects. Specifically, I challenge why men get honored as exilic (literary) heroes while women do not. I interrogate why men's labor and contributions are considered more valuable than women's work in the 20th century.

In the introduction to the complete anthology of Julia de Burgos's poetry *Songs of Simple Truth*, Jack Agüeros writes "and although [Burgos's] body died just yesterday as far as history is concerned, so much of what we should know about her is very hard, if not impossible to find" (Agüeros, v). While Agüeros is hinting at something missing, he also contributes to the myth that Burgos's work is lost and still waiting to be found. His contribution to this myth not only reveals that Burgos's life has been mythologized, he 'exposes' the cracks in scholarship and archivization that *forget* to include women's work. There is almost a mythology of disappearance and loss in reference to women's work

whether it be missing records and texts, or simply that their work was deemed ‘not important enough’ to archive or store. I examine Virginia Sánchez-Korrol’s notion of the missing archive in her debut novel *The Season of Rebels and Roses* (2018) to underscore how the notions of loss and disappearance metaphorically mark women’s work, particularly exilic women’s work, as insignificant. This is a metaphor I carry with me as I analyze gendered exile and question what is missing, what is purposefully omitted, and how scholars and writers have navigated this loss.

Ella misma fue su ruta: Longing for Escape and Exile

Julia de Burgos is a renowned, award-winning Puerto Rican poet who lived parts of her life in other islands: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and New York City (Manhattan). Always hinting about pathways via the imagery of water in her poetry, most notably in rivers and seas, Burgos wrote about her desire for escape and exile in her writing. It is no surprise that she was an actual exile fleeing Puerto Rico at a time when her lifestyle and poetry was considered too taboo for a woman. Julia de Burgos declared herself an exile though many obituaries, academic journal articles, and other writings concerning her poetry and her life refer to Julia de Burgos as a migrant, thus denying her the right to be remembered the way she saw herself. Burgos could not stay in her homeland and was forced to build a home elsewhere – thus confirming her exilic status. Where is the hesitation to honor Burgos’s memory as an exile and to honor her in the way she viewed herself?

In recent scholarship, Vanessa Pérez-Rosario not only refers to Julia de Burgos as an exile but claims it is the expression of her politics concerning Puerto Rico’s freedom, women’s suffrage, and refusal to comply or perform a gendered role that pushed her out of Puerto Rico. Pérez-Rosario borrows the notion of sexile as defined and used by Larry

LaFountain-Stokes and Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel.⁵ In her book, Pérez-Rosario extends the definition of *sexile* to “include heterosexual women who have been excluded and displaced because they are deemed sexually transgressive within patriarchal, heteronormative discourses” and claims “Burgos’s rejection of marriage and traditional roles for women, her poverty, her race all factored into her conflicted relationship with her home country and significantly influenced her decision to depart” (Pérez-Rosario, 47-8).⁶ She contends, “By reading her second and third collections of poetry, and her understudied letters with attention to gender, her experience of migration no longer appears as victimization; rather Burgos emerges as an early figure of *sexile*” (Pérez-Rosario, 46). In following this logic, I too, agree that Julia de Burgos is an exile though I analyze her first and second books of poetry and view her longing for escape and intellectual freedom as a form of intellectual exile.

Furthermore, Pérez-Rosario argues that Burgos’ life is defined by multiple exiles; Burgos was exiled out of Cuba by a former husband and fled to New York City.⁷ What

⁵ They refer to people who have been banished from their homelands due to their sexuality and combine the notions of ‘sexuality’ and ‘exile’ to coin *sexile*. These scholars draw from Manolo Guzman who first coined the term to “refer to” the exile of those who had to leave their nations of origin on account of their sexual orientation” (Pérez-Rosario, 46).

Guzmán, Manolo. *Gay Hegemony / Latino Homosexualities*. Routledge, 2006. Print.
See Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Lawrence M. La Fountain-Stokes.

⁶ I recognize that the term *sexile* is productive in describing her life and how women of color exist outside the national imaginary and usually challenge prescribed notions of womanhood in society and culture. It is also helpful to consider how Burgos influenced queer diasporic Caribbean subjects in various forms of culture (Pérez-Rosario, 68).

⁷ In correspondence to her sister, Consuelo, Burgos revealed that she had plans to study in Cuba and master various subjects at The University of Havana. Her plans were hastily interrupted when her then husband “[Juan] Jimenes Grullón short-circuited her plans less than two months later when he informed her that she would be returning to New York City -- alone. On 22 June, Burgos wrote to her sister, “On Friday at 12:00, Juan returned from the interior region of Cuba with the sweet gift of a plane ticket for the 4:00pm flight. I was not given time to prepare for this trip” [...] Burgos had again been exiled” (Pérez-Rosario, 64).

does it mean to be cast away and pushed from one island to another? In my analysis, the image of islands, water, escape, and disappearance are critical to my examination of Burgos' exilic writing. Jossianna Arroyo writes "The sea, the motif that comes with exile, connects with other water motifs in her poetry (el río)" and emphasizes Burgos's exilic status exemplified through the imagery of water in Burgos's poetry (Arroyo, 134). For example, her final poem "Farewell from Welfare Island" presents a 'lost at sea' trope that signals goodbye and loss by the encapsulating image of water surrounding an island – distant and away from a mainland and without proximity to resources that are necessary for survival. Therefore, I offer an interpretation of Burgos's later writing that suggests colonial haunting and ghosting via phantoms, shadows, and specter imagery and pervasive darkness that lurks burdens her.

Wings, Flights, and Seas: Intellectual Exile and Freedom

Although Vanessa Pérez-Rosario denotes Julia de Burgos as a sexile to confirm her exilic status, I employ Edward Said's notion of 'intellectual exile' as a way of interpreting and analyzing Julia de Burgos's exilic status and life. While Pérez-Rosario relies on an interpretation of exile based on Burgos's gender, it is her contributions to literature, which reveals her political leanings and radical beliefs that casted her out of Puerto Rico. In fact, it is in Burgos's (intellectual) exile that she is able to find, see, and create pathways and routes to freedom. It is in intellectual exile where freedom is a possibility for Julia de Burgos. This freedom is symbolized in the viability and multiplicity of routes, paths, and flight(s) in her early poetry while she still lived in Puerto Rico. Her first and second book

of poems, *Poem in Twenty Furrows* and *Song of the Simple Truth* were published during her last years in Puerto Rico, before she left for New York City, then Cuba, in 1940. These poems were written at a time when Burgos felt trapped in Puerto Rico and was longing to leave which is heavily illustrated in avian imagery of birds longing for flight, in flight and attacked by wind, wingless birds, damaged or broken wings. Yet, the birds in her poetry did manage to fly; although the birds were stranded, lost, abandoned, or shipwrecked at sea, there was a glimmer of hope and sense of possibility.

In Burgos's first book, *Poem in Twenty Furrows*, she established herself as a serious and talented poet and distinguishes herself as a feminist poet who challenges anti-blackness and patriarchy in Puerto Rico. With notable poems like "Yo misma fui mi ruta" (I Was My Own Route) and "Río Grande de Loíza" (Grand River of Loíza) in this first collection, other poems are overlooked.⁸ In addition to these poems, "Mi alma" (My Soul), "Soy en cuerpo de ahora" (I Am Embodied in Now), "Mi símbolo de rosas" (My Symbol of Roses), "Se me ha perdido un verso" (I Have Lost a Verse), and "Momentos" (Moments) illuminate Burgos's feminist politics while also suggesting that she felt trapped and was searching for a new route, a waterway, or a possibility for escape. Consequently, "I Was My Own Route" is the final poem in this book signaling that Burgos needed a way out (of Puerto Rico) that was created by herself and imagined new escapes.

This 'loss at sea' symbolized exile for Burgos because it is in this moment where the bird begins to take flight and multiple paths are available. It is in exile where Julia de Burgos is able to imagine other routes and paths for herself and perceive herself free – free as a bird flying wherever her heart desires. Even Sherezada Vicioso interprets her being as

⁸ The poem "Río Grande de Loíza" is not translated into English in the *Songs of the Simple Truth* anthology. This is my translation.

a bird, writing about Burgos's experience with the "contradictions of the Puerto Rican social structure" and how she "fashioned herself into an untamed bird oblivious to any sort of restriction in its search after life and love" (Vicioso, 69).

In *Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals* (1993), Said considers the privileges and powers exiles have in their position as a foreigner in their new (host) country.

On the condition of exile Said writes,

The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider, which I believe is the right role for today's intellectual, is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives (so to speak), tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You can't go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation (Said 1993, 117).

In his definition of (intellectual) exile, Said claims exiles are always marked an outsider, even when they are home, and they are marked in their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs. Therefore, the imagery of the bird or a creature with wings is ideal for Burgos, since she imagines herself on the move and in flight from one island to another. In fact, she lived in various islands in her lifetime and lived multiple exiles, which is most notably tracked through Burgos's letters to her sister Consuelo Burgos.⁹

In "My Soul" Burgos uses the concept of her soul to represent her truest desires. In the beginning of the poem she writes that her soul is a "broken harmony" that has to negotiate many emotions. In the second stanza Burgos writes about herself and her body

⁹ Burgos, Julia de and Burgos-Lafuente, Lena. *Cartas a Consuelo*. First Edition. San Juan, Folium: 2014. Print.

in third person to show how her soul witnesses how some citizens of Puerto Rico betrayed her:

“How they want to lay her down,
acclimate her,
recompose her,
The long-dead mortals” (Agüeros, 51).

Here, Burgos highlights how she was cast out of her society for her refusal to adjust to societal norms and perform the tasks of a woman. Burgos was known to be with men and in their literary salons discussing politics, culture, and literature. It is for this reason and her “unconventional behavior” that Burgos is eventually forced out of Puerto Rico.¹⁰ Burgos’s famous poem “To Julia de Burgos” is applauded for the notion of duality represented in two Julias who exist in conflict with each other. The internal fight between these two Julias that exist in the same body represents her desire to leave the Julia that lives in Puerto Rico and its societal expectations while she imagines another Julia who is free and away. In a similar manner, this poem demonstrates how Burgos lived in conflict with her beliefs and ideals (which are etched in her soul) in Puerto Rico and her desire to be someone else elsewhere:

“The madness of my soul
cannot repose,
it lives in the restlessness
in the disorder
in the imbalance
of things dynamic,
in the silence
of the free thinker, who lives alone,
in quiet exile” (Agüeros, 51).

¹⁰ Edna Acosta-Belén writes “Burgos’s unconventional behavior and frequent fraternization with her male counterparts began to generate the kinds of gossip and rumors that eventually distanced her from being fully accepted in those circles” (193).

This affinity for exile demonstrates how Burgos imagined herself free in exile, so she wrote about nature in ways that showcased her ‘real self’s’ desire to be free. That is why this poem ends “today more than ever she plants/ her innate rebellion/ in stanchions of strategic leaps” with a sense of hope that Burgos will eventually be free (51). Because this poem was written while Burgos lived in Puerto Rico, it seems that one of the two Julias is already in exile though she has not left Puerto Rico yet. Said writes about intellectual exile being an ideological position where “there is no real escape, even for the exile who tries to remain suspended, since that state of *inbetweenness* can itself become a rigid ideological position, a sort of dwelling whose falseness is covered over in time and to which one can all too easily become accustomed” (Said, 120). As a self-defined free thinker, and by extension an intellectual, Burgos was already in intellectual exile long before she departed from Puerto Rican soil, which is represented in her torn soul while her being and body are trying to be controlled and “recomposed,” thus implying there is something wrong with Burgos.

Burgos writes about existing in duality, but also about multiplicity in “Moments.”

She writes about being boundless but also about being confined:

“Me, multiple,
as in contradiction,
tied to a sentiment without edges
that binds and unbinds me
alternately,
to the world” (Agüeros, 15).

Though one of the Julias is “ideologically” exiled, Burgos writes about wanting to live in exile and the possibility of being lost or in open waters. This poem ends with a question and an answer: “And all for what? / --To go on being the same” (Agüeros, 15) that denote the need for something more outside of Puerto Rico, an exile that is not only ideological

but also physical. She craved to be outside of the island where she imagined she would find her freedom.

It is no surprise that her second collection, *Song of the Simple Truth*, picks up where *Poem in Twenty Furrows* ends and develops the avian metaphor in a way that complicates how freedom and exile are represented in her poetry. In *Song of the Simple Truth* the depictions of open waters and pathways via water and birds is much more apparent and reflects a shift in her work. It is in this book where there is a prevalence of avian metaphors and the notion of flights emerge as foundational concepts to Burgos's work. Here, birds symbolize a desire to flee and fly (towards exile). For instance, the poems "Winged Voyage," "Transmutation," "High Sea and Seagull," and "The Flight of My Steps" convey these messages. In the most basic sense "High Sea and Seagull" establishes the two notions of escape by self-defining as water and a bird:

"For your life I am
high sea and seagull:
in it I vibrate
and grow..." (Agüeros, 91).

Burgos once again employs notions of multiplicity to define herself in ways that align with her desire: to flee and be free. Therefore, she writes about water which connotes infinity and possibility in what is not finite or determined. In addition, she professes herself to be a bird – its flight is her ultimate expression, and desire, of freedom. Nautical metaphors and water relations are further constructed and elaborated in "The Flight of My Steps" via anchors, docks, and seas.

The second stanza contains the lines that are repeated throughout the poem - each line as the final sentence to the preceding stanza – revealing the message of the poem:

“(There is no anchor that resists
the flight of my steps
that row daylights.)” (Agüeros, 97).

The repetition of the phrase “there is no anchor that resists” and “the flight of my steps” represents the desire to not be *anchored* anywhere and find joy in rootlessness and in being lost at sea - undocked and open to possibility, or the unknown. This rootlessness can be read as a literal and figurative desire to detach from Puerto Rico where this detachment is not necessarily what she wants but how she reconciles with being outcast by society. Moreover, being outcast in her homeland is indicative of the ideological intellectual exile Said explains in his essay. She resolves this conflict towards the end of the poem where she confronts societal issues head on and finds her ‘flight’ as a result of being unanchored. The nautical symbol of the anchor changes throughout the poem dependent on the sentence’s intention. For example, the anchor does not resist when it appears in parenthesis, but it achieves its function in the final stanza of the poem declaring:

“I anchor my heart
in a port without ships
sprayed with emotions.
(That row daylights.)” (Agüeros, 97).

In the fourth stanza Burgos may be alluding to societal gossip and news that can be detrimental to a person or population. Because Burgos sees herself as a bird, it sometimes serves as a productive metaphor to write about her life. By writing of her life, she critiques her country and the systemic forms of power that exclude her and cast her an outsider. For instance, the fourth stanza reveals the danger in circulating gossip about her life, as a radical woman, and others like her:

“Rumors without words
imprison seagulls

in an intimate impulse.
(The flight of my steps.)” (Agüeros, 97).

The poem ends with the couplet that commences the poem - “Life goes barefoot/ over the sea’s cloud” – where the conceptualization of pathways is ultimately minimized to one where she writes herself, and other exiles, out of the nation. How the poem begins and ends directly correlates with the title because of the implication that symbolic ‘flights’ and ‘steps’ depict an internal struggle for freedom. The infinitive-ness of the sea and (barefoot) steps conveys a resolution in being lost and not knowing: Burgos alludes to exile and to vast opportunities for freedom in it.

In Burgos’s third book, the notion of waterways and escape still connote freedom, though many poems reflect a shift where there are phantoms and shadows lingering. These specters haunt the subject of the poem, usually Burgos, and disallows her from achieving freedom- she no longer equates exile to freedom. Pérez-Rosario links the images of paths and routes depicted in water as a strategic escape changes by contextualizing her Afro-Puerto Rican identity. This context problematizes Burgos’s initial idea that migration could lead to freedom, but instead she encounters other struggles similar to life in Puerto Rico:

“With her image of waterways, routes, and pathways, Burgos creates a dynamic subject that could not be fixed or contained, placing her among the historical *vanguardias*. She attempts to create escape routes as a liberator strategy, but in the end confronts similar patriarchal structures abroad, suggesting that migration is not a liberator strategy. She satisfied her quest for freedom through the imagination. While themes of Puerto Rican independence and U.S. imperialism cut across her work, other important motifs include the rights of women and their struggle to assert themselves in a patriarchal society. The escape routes in Burgos’s poetry, in her prose, and in her creatively productive life in San Juan, Havana, and New York helped her write herself out of the nation, challenge the work of the *treintista* writers, and provide routes for other island-based writers who chose to work from a position of exile. These routes allowed her to write herself out of a nation that consigned her— a working-class woman of African descent— to the role of a housewife and mother. Her deployment of paths, routes, and journeys is not limited

to her poetry” (2).

Though Burgos continued to use her radical voice in her exile, she realized it was not what she imagined. In her third book the avian metaphor changes and there are more ‘wingless’ birds or birds with broken wings – their flight is altered, but why?

Wingless Birds and Broken Wings: Reexamining Exile

Burgos changes the representations of nature – birds and flights, sea and waterways and routes – in her third book to symbolize sadness, haunting, and loss instead of hope, possibility, and freedom. While some of these symbols and motifs are still present in her third book, they represent a morbid shift that denotes a different signification. In her first collection of poetry, Burgos writes about exile as a pathway to freedom – somewhere she can be her most authentic self. While there are references to sadness and rebellion that lead her to forge her own path as a woman as well as some water imagery consistent with the first book, there is a new signification and symbolic meaning of the birds (in relation to flight and escape routes) and the lost at sea (exile and freedom) motifs in the third book. The flights almost always convey impossibility in stark contrast to her first and second books where they initially represented possibility and freedom. Moreover, the birds are almost always unable to fly or get to their destination, which provides a new meaning of exile for Burgos. The once clear path to freedom is now clouded with darkness. This darkness has brought an entirely different element to Burgos’s writings so that exile and the proximity to freedom in exile has shifted. Where exile once embodied freedom, exile reveals a conflict.

Exiles must confront notions of belonging and non-belonging to their homelands and their new *home* land. Edward Said writes about how exiles and exilic communities

continue to fight for nationalist causes while they are no longer in their homeland and theorizes about the relationship between nationalism and exile:

We come to nationalism and its essential association with exile. Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. I affirm the home created by community of language, culture, and customs; and, by doing so, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. Indeed, the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other. All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement" (176).

Because nationalism is developed and redeveloped in exile, as Said argues, these two notions cannot be discussed without involving the other. The relationship is forged in ideals of exclusion and inclusion. It is no surprise that much of Burgos's poetry conveys nationalist messages; she fought for her homeland's freedom as well as her own in exile. Said claims most liberation efforts, like the fight for American independence, occur in exile and that exiles are responsible for various formations and developments of nationalism and nationalist ideology. In fact, Cuban and Puerto Rican exiles strategically formed alliances in New York City and organized against the Spanish empire. However, these notions do not just inform one another theoretically, they also define much of the exilic experience – that of non-belonging to the host nation or the homeland in literal and metaphorical ways. Said writes,

Because exile, like nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology- designed to reassemble an exile's broken history in a new whole- is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world (177).

Said poses a greater existential dilemma for exiles as people who have been forcefully torn from their land where the rupture is a form of violence that has lasting effect on exiles that

manifest in a myriad of ways. Exiles, then, feel a critical need to repair themselves from being disconnected from their homeland, culture, people and nation. Their sense of self, too, is ruptured, and they are in a desperate attempt to repair their lives but this 'broken history' follows them and defines their subjectivity. They can never undo the process of being exiled and forced to flee from their home. They must carry and live with this wound. What messages are the productions from this wound conveying; more specifically, how does Julia de Burgos characterize this wound?

Yomaira Figueroa's notion of *destierro* from her book, *Decolonizing Diasporas* (2020) offers new ways of thinking through the violent ruptures of displacement and banishment of exiles, and other displaced people, experience from colonialism and colonality. Figueroa utilizes the notion of *destierro* "to call attention to the impossibilities of home in decolonial contexts" since exile and diaspora are notions mostly undeveloped in decolonial studies (Figueroa, 160). She "argue[s] *destierro* is a term that can capture the complex and multiple forms of dispossession and impossibilities of home for Afro- and Indigenous-descended peoples in the modern world" where *destierro* provides helpful and productive ways to think about tangible forms of decolonial work (Figueroa, 160).¹¹ In

¹¹ Figueroa provides *destierro* as an idea to think through decolonial work(s) and also as a tool: "Destierro can become a decolonizing tool if, in calling attention to how it is a constitutive part of exile and diaspora, it also focuses on the long legacies of self-determination by peoples on the underside of modernity. Holding that dialectic central to understanding the phenomenological, ontological, and epistemological experience of *destierro* is critical if we are concerned with not only documenting suffering, but also marking, holding, and remembering resistance" (166). Towards the end of this chapter, I analyze Julia de Burgos's death drive as a form of freedom, though I do not contend that this is the only form of decolonial work, or freedom, viable for Puerto Ricans, Latinxs, and women. This tool is critical in thinking about larger projects of decolonization that begin with honoring the radical work of the past and present to continue imagining, documenting, and being active in decolonial work now. *Destierro*, as a concept, is also mentioned in Burgos's poem "Mi alma" (My Soul) and represents feelings of rupture and colonial wounding as a consequence of exile.

order to do the work, one must understand the colonial project(s) at work and how to dismember the systems and institutions that continue to uphold these oppressive legacies in the present in what scholars deem as coloniality.¹² In her third book, Burgos writes about how the colonial wound has manifested itself as a colonial haunting onto her life in exile.

Figueroa's theorization of displacement and exile as forms of violence that is in need of restitutions and reparations, reinforces my analysis that connects colonial haunting with exile. The shift in Burgos's poetry demonstrates that her initial conceptualization of exile as a pathway to freedom is mistaken; once Burgos leaves Puerto Rico and arrives in the United States (New York City), she feels a lurking presence that does not leave her. These are colonial ghosts haunting her body and spirit and therefore, exile no longer signifies freedom. Said references Simone Weil's definition of exile when he contends that the most important thing for the human soul is to be rooted and that statism is the worst because it is the root of unrooting – it tears people apart (183). This 'tearing apart' constitutes parts of the violent ruptures and displacement that Figueroa theorizes about as *destierro*.

In *Song of the Simple Truth* sadness and impossibility only prevail in a few poems but the meaning of the avian metaphor does not change. In this book, Burgos dreams of exile or of the possibilities in being lost. In her final book, *The Sea and You*, "Where you

¹² I am referring to Ramón Grosfoguel's definition of coloniality that draws from Anibal Quijano's definition and situates it in a Puerto Rican context: "coloniality" refers to the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system. "Coloniality of power" refers to the crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor, subaltern group political strategies, and Third World migrants' inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan global cities (4). Grosfoguel, Ramón. *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective*. Los Angeles: University of California, 2003. Print.

Begin,” “Blue to Earth in You,” “Shipwreck,” “Constellation of Wings,” and “Victim of Light” demonstrate notions of impossibility that are inconsistent with the previous avian metaphor. This change suggests something happened; coincidentally this collection was published posthumously after Burgos lived close to twelve years in New York City. This change comes with a new address and a different place – Burgos is exiled on the island of Manhattan and it is the last place she lived and for the longest period of time.¹³ Therefore, the shift in her writing suggests she is haunted in the United States. These dark figures, shadows, and specters do not appear in her earlier books, both of which were written and published when she lived in Puerto Rico. This begs the question: what is this darkness Burgos encountered in the United States? Because of the time, space, and place, when the poems were written, the darkness and shadows present in Burgos’s final book surely represent colonial haunting.

Burgos begins the poem “Meanwhile the Wave” with a declaration of the presence of shadows, dead birds and her exile. In the second stanza Burgos connects the shadows to her solitude: “Alone, unbridled on earth by shadow and by silence. / Alone. / breaking my hands with the withered desire to build doves with my last wings” (Agüeros, 181). In this solitude, Burgos is hopeless and sad where “sunless paths” suggests there is too much darkness in her life and that her path to freedom is no longer accessible (Agüeros, 181). Moreover, she purposefully reiterates the notion of shipwreck: first, “My heart knows no

¹³ According to *Cartas a Consuelo*, a collection of letters exchanged between Julia de Burgos and her sister Consuelo, Burgos spent the years between 1940-1953 in transit between New York City and Cuba, with some brief time in Washington, D.C. This timeline is provided by the text and has been condensed to solely reflect Julia de Burgos’s location for the given month and year including the date of her last letter in Puerto Rico: August 1939: San Germán, Puerto Rico, January 1940 – June 1940: New York City with one brief trip to Washington, D.C., June 1940 – June 1942: Cuba, June 1942 – July 1944: New York City, August 1944 – May 1945: Washington, D.C., June 1945 – June 1953: New York City.

beach without shipwrecks./ My heart hardly has a heart now” in the fifth stanza and second, “shipwrecked birds,/ hurled from the sky, mutilated, voiceless” in the seventh stanza (Agüeros, 181). Here, the shift of the avian metaphor is clear - the birds are no longer flying and there are no more flights of possibility. Instead, the birds, which represents Burgos, are damaged, unable to speak or fly, and are no longer on their way to freedom. Burgos used to envision herself as a bird – rootless and free – where exile represented a pathway to freedom. This point is reinforced towards the end of the poem in the proclamation “I am defeated.../ Dawn so far away, / that even my shadow is frightened at its shadow” (Agüeros, 183).

In “Return” there is a desire to come back to the homeland but the desire to go is also gone representing the internal conflicts of an exile. “Bitter Song” explores Burgos’s internal conflicts and a Shakespearean existential dilemma: “To be or not to be...that’s the split” which is explained in the coexistence with “a slow shadow that beats me” and her desire to die while still finding a way to stay alive: “while the soul is dying,/ the miserable body still has strength” (Agüeros, 169). *The Sea and You*’s final poem, “Poems for a Death that Could be Mine,” highlights Burgos’s longing for death in a way that is not so obvious in the other poems from this collection. Here, death is perceived as an opportunity to be free and is not a sad occasion to be met with tears: “Let no one profane my death with sobs,/ nor blanket me forever with innocent earth; that in the free moment I may freely/ take the planet’s only freedom” (Agüeros, 183). The sentiment that death was welcomed by Julia de Burgos as a way to liberate herself is further developed later in this chapter.

Burgos’s final poems, which were not included in her books of poetry, focus primarily on death, darkness, and shadows and completely replace the avian metaphor. The

poem “After” is essentially a guide on how to remember Julia de Burgos *after* her death. Since death is the main theme of the poem, the title signals that Burgos knew her death was near and used this poem as an opportunity to participate in her memorialization. Of these poems, “Farewell from Welfare Island,” clearly conveys Burgos’s confrontation with her colonial wounds.

Julia de Burgos’s imagery of phantoms and shadows in “Farewell from Welfare Island” depict a haunting of the Puerto Rican body that originates in U.S. colonialism. The theme of haunting in her poem reinforces the notion of Puerto Rican colonial subjectivity and anti-colonial rhetoric that not only secures its subversive nature but also provides a sense of futurity. This poem exhibits a dissatisfaction with life due to lack of freedom, despair, and a phantom. I argue the image of the phantom is employed by Burgos to signal a haunting from her colonial subjectivity. As an Afro-Puerto Rican woman, Burgos’ writing itself is subversive in nature, but her dialogue with haunting is rooted in her nationalist, feminist, and anti-colonialist rhetoric. Previously, Burgos portrayed “a discourse of mourning for the bodies lost in the war against the U.S. presence in Puerto Rico” in her poetry, which demonstrates her ongoing dialogue with mourned or haunted bodies as well as her nationalist position (Arroyo, 145). Furthermore, because Burgos comes from a society where writing about the nation is mostly reserved for men, her anti-imperial and anti-colonial critiques on both Puerto Rico and the U.S. are feminist. In fact, in the *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican World in Two World Contexts* (1987): anthology, the defiance of patriarchy and colonial power in women’s writing is radical:

survival through personal and group consciousness of the true nature of power requires a shift from men and women as victims to that of agents of change, and an understanding that the liberation of women and the understanding that the liberation of women necessitates the liberation of all human beings... ultimately, there is also

[Puerto Rican writers'] recognition that "to write subversively in more than a means of exercising influence. It is a form of struggle- and power" (Rodríguez de Laguna, 85).

The struggle and power are emphasized in Burgos' cries, quest for freedom, and ominous presence of a phantom throughout the poem, which I interpret as a haunting so that the real struggle lies in moving beyond the discourse of trauma when considering Puerto Rican bodies and their colonial subjectivities.

The phrase 'welfare island' in the title presumes a dialogue with the island of Puerto Rico and its dependability on government assistance due to poverty – a poverty she experienced as a young girl in Puerto Rico and as an adult in New York City. Because the poem ends with her farewell, which technically takes place in New York City, and a general sense of disenfranchisement while living in New York City, I argue the poem takes place in both places, or in diaspora – rooted in both. While some migrants left the island to escape poverty or the U.S. colonial grip suffocating the Puerto Rican nation, they remained colonial subjects in the United States. Essentially, Julia de Burgos is encountering and trying to rid the haunting of U.S. colonialism on her body and psyche through the ghost that lingers her everyday life. She also questions the freedom to move "without the heavy phantom of despair," which can be interpreted as a ghost that haunted her in Puerto Rico and followed her in her exile in the United States.

The second stanza of the poem is structured into one sentence that introduces a shadow forming or creeping up on the narrator. The line, "The past is only a shadow emerging from/nowhere" alludes to the fear that the shadow has always been lingering on her body since there is no one way to locate its formation (Agüeros, 357). The shadow also symbolizes the darkness or afterlife of imperialism and colonialism on the island of Puerto

Rico- the present day coloniality of the island. The darkness and morbidity in her writing require an analysis beyond trauma and into the realm of haunting, especially through the figures that Julia de Burgos encounters and struggles with. I suggest moving towards an analysis of haunting after reading Avery Gordon's "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity" where she links traumatic experiences with hauntings because trauma usually leads to hauntings; hauntings follow you, lurk, and are omnipresent.¹⁴

Because a shadow follows every step a person takes, it is safe to say that the employment of the shadow is no coincidence- the shadow represents the relentless haunting of Puerto Rican bodies that infiltrates and crosses borders. The persistence and sense of permanence of this haunting is traced to the legacy of trauma from U.S. imperialism and invasion in Puerto Rico. The invasion of the land was in turn an invasion of Puerto Rican bodies that still exists as a haunting. Thus, Burgos's employment of shadow and phantom imagery are key indicators about the state of the nation and this colonial wound.

In *Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico* (2009), Soto-Crespo analyzes two famous Puerto Rican paintings as productions about the nation and political states through the scenes of mourning that depict an emptiness or dissatisfaction with Puerto Rico's state of coloniality.¹⁵ In his reading of nineteenth century Puerto Rican art, Soto-Crespo concludes "the significance of the appearance and disappearance of the political state in Puerto Rican writing as a strategy of negotiating political loss through

¹⁴ I refer to Avery Gordon's definition of haunting here: "haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in linear time, alters the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view [that] prompts a something-to-be-done" (Gordon, 2).

¹⁵ The two paintings Soto-Crespo works with are: Francisco Oller's *El Velorio* and José Campeche's *Gobernador Don Ramón de Castro* (Soto-Crespo, 25-26).

culture; for it is through this vexing dynamic, between presence and absence, that we can elucidate the foundation of an anomalous state that emerges from the space where the nation-state is mourned” (Soto-Crespo 29). Similarly, Burgos utilizes her poetry to criticize the U.S. empire’s grasp on Puerto Rico, which in turn haunts her body despite her exilic positionality in the mainland. Burgos highlights her feelings of sorrow and mourning in relation to a sense of lost freedom, and haunting by the U.S. empire:

“Life was somewhere forgotten
and sought refuge in depths of tears
and sorrows;
over this vast empire of solitude and darkness.
Where is the voice of freedom,
freedom to laugh,
to move
without the heavy phantom of despair?” (Agüeros, 357).

It is evident that Burgos feels troubled as she recognizes that her body cannot escape the empire because her body belongs to the empire. The colonial ghost seeps like a dew over the island and traps Puerto Rican bodies and the nation thus reinforcing the state of coloniality in Puerto Rico. The loss that Burgos mourns here is freedom. What does the mourning of the loss of freedom allude to – the nation state, political rights, a claim over the body? A claim for any of these losses can be defended, but what I find to be the most provocative is that Burgos links her haunting with loss. Perhaps, this colonial condition leads to losses at various levels including debt and economic turmoil, civil rights abuses, neglect, and death.

Furthermore, her reference to the empire of solitude demonstrates a frustration with the American empire while she lives exiled in New York City, which is why she bids farewell at the end of the poem. The solitude and darkness can also represent her experience as a poor, black Puerto Rican woman where her race, class, gender, and migrant status

contribute to her colonial subjectivity in an American city. Therefore, her solitude can also be read as alienation as she is forced to straddle two cultures (two worlds) in her exilic positionality that reminds her she does not belong. Despite feelings of non-belonging, her isolation also indicates that her colonial subjectivity will constantly cast her as an outsider in her own country and in the U.S. Throughout her life Burgos has lived in four countries where the ‘phantom of despair’ or the ‘empire’s darkness’ prevented her from attaining freedom. In the poem, the lack of freedom she is unable to attain- through her body politic and voice- has an allegorical function and represents Puerto Rico’s lack of freedom (due to its commonwealth status that demarcates it a U.S. colony). As a member of Pedro Albizu Campos’ nationalist party, her strides towards political freedom are cries that are tormented by the phantom of despair:

“My cry that is no more mine,
but hers and his forever,
the comrades of my silence,
the phantoms of my grave
among comrades of silence
deep into Welfare Island
my farewell to the world (Agüeros, 357).

The phantom is then transformed from a phantom of despair to a phantom of her grave to depict her cries of freedom that have now been silenced and dead. The cries are no longer solely Burgos’s – she is crying for the nation and for Puerto Rico’s loss. Ultimately, viewing both New York City and Puerto Rico as geographical islands, her final farewell, “among comrades of silence/ deep into Welfare Island/ my farewell to the world” can be read as a farewell to both places (Agüeros, 357). Both places are welfare islands due to the literal fact that many Puerto Ricans in New York City and Puerto Rico, are dependent on welfare, but also because in both places Puerto Ricans belong to the U.S. Gordon affirms

a futurity in haunting that prompts for something to be done because there is loss, a gap, and something missing. In “Farewell in Welfare Island” Julia de Burgos is not only utilizing her nationalist position to critique colonialist legacies on the island or the haunting of Puerto Rican bodies, but she is also crying, or prompting, for something more to be done. Perhaps, she pens one of her final poems in English in an effort to be inclusive of her Puerto Rican brothers and sisters on the mainland who may not speak Spanish, her native tongue, as a way to collectively fight for their freedom(s). Julia de Burgos’ call to action is not definitive, but she assures her readers, her witnesses, that her haunting is caused by the American empire.

Burgos’s writings about death and exile in her final writings signal how she coped with (colonial) haunting. In the final years of her life, Burgos spent her time in Goldwater Memorial Hospital where she endured experiments on her body as a way to compensate for her struggles to maintain a job and steady income and to, in a way, overcome her life in poverty in New York City.¹⁶ In the recontextualization of Burgos’s life and memory, Pérez-Rosario writes,

Burgos’s life evokes the experiences of those migrants who faced discrimination and criminalization because of their linguistic and cultural differences, race, class, and gender. Her poetry binds the experiences of Puerto Rican women, energizing and legitimizing collective emancipatory strivings for many Puerto Ricans in New York. In her final poems, written in English in the months before her death, Burgos wrote of the loneliness, despair, and anguish that shroud the migrant’s experience. In theme and emotional inflection, her work and her life inspired the work of a generation of Puerto Rican diaspora writers who came into their own during the 1970s (Pérez-Rosario, 5).

¹⁶ Arroyo suggests that Burgos voluntarily accepted experimentation in exchange for a warm place to stay and food given her precarious life in poverty. Arroyo writes, “Having only a few family members and friends to look out for her and visit her, she might have seen hospitals as a solution for homelessness. She discovered the hospital library and was able to be left alone to read and write when she was not under the scrutiny of the nurses and doctors [...] It could be argued, in other words, that Burgos was making the best of her situation” (139).

How does Julia de Burgos's death, then, relate to her work? Some myths concerning Burgos's life suggest that she predicted her death. Though this cannot be proved, it is interesting to entertain the idea that Burgos wanted to die. Would her death then be an escape from this colonial haunting and represent her final fight, or chance, for freedom?

Burgos's Death Drive and Freedom

What does resistance look like for colonial subjects of the U.S. empire? Puerto Ricans have endured copious struggles with gaining autonomy and resisting American power, yet many leaders were imprisoned or killed because their efforts to liberate Puerto Rico were deemed acts of treason. It is quite problematic that fighting for the liberation of one's nation is deemed illegal. Despite limits, Puerto Ricans have made advancements against American colonial rule on the island and on their bodies, such as removing the U.S. Navy out of the island of Vieques, regaining the ability to wave their own flag, and electing their own governor.¹⁷ However, I would argue that the act of writing has had an everlasting legacy of radicalism on the island and in the diaspora. One of the most notable and studied Puerto Rican writers is Julia de Burgos.

As an Afro-Puerto Rican woman, the act of writing itself is a form of political resistance where "one must consider the ramifications of writing within the two competing patriarchal discourses of colonialism and nationalism" (López Springfield, 701). In addition, her body politic informs her colonial subjectivities in Puerto Rico and New York

¹⁷ I write this dissertation following the summer protests of 2019 where Puerto Ricans eventually removed the governor, the highest democratically appointed public office on the island. I say this to reflect on current mobilization efforts in Puerto Rico against the Puerto Rican and U.S. governments that are ongoing. Puerto Ricans have always fought injustices and continue to fight for their freedoms.

City, and by extension – her writing. To better understand the subversive nature of her writing, we must “view the individual work of the poet in relation to its proximity to (or distancing from) ethnic parameters of national identification and characterization” (López-Adorno, 8). Does her positionality affect her feminist and nationalist politics? In Puerto Rico her struggle to situate herself as a female writer in a male-dominated canon has changed Puerto Rican literature; “not only did she resist collective pressure to adhere to female roles, but she also struggled within and against a cultural ambience that left no ample space for feminist writers” (López Springfield, 703). She challenged ideas of nationalism and independence to include the perspectives of people of the periphery. Her gender and race, which define her body politic, directly informed her feminist and nationalist politics and generations to come. And, by writing about death and haunting in her poetry, Burgos elicits new ways of imagining and defining Puerto Rican nationalist politics and exile.

The act of writing is a form of bearing witness and that, for Burgos, highlights how the colonial wound is still open: “trauma resurface[s]...in the form of storytelling” (Schwab, 20). On writing and exile Said claims: “Much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals. Each of these occupations requires a minimal investment in objects and places a great premium on mobility and skill” (Said 2000, 181). In fact, exiles live in perpetual non-belonging: “No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who *feel* their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood” (Said 2000, 182). Julia de Burgos endured alienation in a strange land and was unable to find the freedom

she longed for because her fight was not hers alone. Her fights for women's freedoms and that of Puerto Rico's left her exiled and isolated in a new land with colonial ghosts.

Jossiana Arroyo challenges the trope that Burgos and Lebrón were merely 'soldiers' of the Nationalist cause and were simply 'doing their part' to fight for Puerto Rico's freedom in her essay "Living the Political: Julia de Burgos and Lolita Lebrón" (2014). The tropes around soldiers in war generally pervade a sense of heroism for the nation where all wounds and losses are deemed a part of the job, or role. In Arroyo's comparative analysis of Julia de Burgos and Lolita Lebrón's lives she includes Freuds' notion of the "death drive" to highlight the misreading of both of their biographies and offers a reading of semiotic politics and motherhood instead. While reviewing both Lebrón's and Burgos's exilic status and their writings, Arroyo contests that their lives were informed by nationalist politics and sacrificed their lives for Puerto Rico's freedom. This sacrifice can be read as a maternal sacrifice, as Arroyo argues that motherhood is a "semiotic construction" and maternity as a symbol in Nationalist women's writing, especially for Lebrón and Burgos.¹⁸ The attachment of motherhood and maternal desire for Burgos is seen in her poetry, most explicit in "Poema del hijo no nacido" (Poem for the Unborn Child), which appears in the third section of her final book *The Sea and You*. Because Burgos was recognized as the literary foremother of the Nuyorican movement in *The New York Times* it is not a 'big theoretical leap' to suggest others imagined Burgos as a symbolic mother to Puerto Rico in some capacity.

¹⁸ While motherhood is deemed a repressive gender role in alignment with patriarchal societal expectations in Puerto Rico, I offer an analysis on Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood in the third chapter of this dissertation that attempts to perceive it as a liberatory role and practice.

Though Lebrón was in fact a mother, she was also perceived a figurative mother to the Puerto Rican independence movement when she sacrificed herself for her country in the way that mothers pay in their lives for their children.¹⁹ Arroyo uses the motif of motherhood to argue that it fueled Lebron's and Burgos's death drive:

The matrix of intersectionality – race, gender, class – has influenced the critical/mythical interpretations of these two women in relation to the “loca/sensible” archetype-- in other words, the way that they build a female excessive *arché* or *will* fueled by desire, sexuality or loss. What Freud reads as a “death drive” fuels, then, in many ways the feminine agency articulated in their political activism, internationalism, and diasporic experiences. In the case of Burgos, these connections led to a construction of a lyrical voice that asserts itself in specific flights or nothingness (*la nada*) (bodily, physical, insular) (Arroyo, 132-3).

Death functions as a motif in Julia de Burgos' poetry to provoke the imagination of liberation and freedom via nationalist and feminist rhetoric. It is in the allusions to death or moments of death itself in her poetry where Julia de Burgos is liberated. I argue that the motif of death in Julia de Burgos' poem “Farewell from Welfare Island” functions as a moment of freedom or liberation, which in turn signals a utopian break and the possibility of hope. Death is utilized in this poem as the only possibility of freedom for Burgos and others like her whose subjectivities are defined in marginalized positionalities; for Julia de

¹⁹ Irene Vilar's memoir, *The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets*, traces the generational trauma of the women in her family, including herself and her grandmother Lolita Lebron, while converging Puerto Rico's brief colonial history with Spain and the U.S. Utilizing Pedro Albizu Campos' notion of the nation as the mother and the maternal body as tribute or sacrifice for the nation. Following the life of revolutionary Lolita Lebron, her grandmother, Vilar tells the story of how she sacrificed her body and self for the nation, and Albizu Campos concedes “the Nation is a woman and that she cannot think of her mother as a slave” (Vilar, 93). At the same time, Vilar realizes that Lolita has struggled to be a mother to her children – abandoning her mother Gladys and her other children yet was able to be the mother the nation needed. She was willing to die for her country's freedom and independence, and at The Ladies' Gallery in D.C. she wrapped herself in a Puerto Rican flag and shot her gun waiting to die or go to prison. This memoir explores Lebron's maternal sacrifice for Puerto Rico. Because the memoir is about Irene- her educational endeavors, becoming a woman, struggle with mental illness and suicide attempts at Syracuse University, the story of trans-generational trauma, haunting, and suicide among the women in her family is at the forefront of this text.

Vilar, Irene. *The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. New York: Other Press, 2009. Print.

Burgos it is her race, gender, ethnicity, exilic status in the mainland United States. Therefore, the multiple illusions to death represent Burgos's only source of freedom since her body is haunted by the 'phantoms' and 'shadows' in the poem (and her life). Haunting presupposes a traumatic experience or wounding where the lack of closure leads to the haunting of colonial subjects, which is why she warns, "the past is only a shadow from nowhere" (Agüeros, 357).

In Gabriele Schwab's analysis of transgenerational haunting she "highlight[s] the effects of trauma as a "colonization of psychic space" that transforms into perpetual haunting (Schwab, 26). It is no coincidence that Julia de Burgos needs to die as an act of resistance and an attempt to liberate herself from the oppressive ghosts of her colonial wounds: exile and colonial subjectivity – occupying 'space' as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman. In her poem, she affirms a sense of despair and exhaustion with these colonial ghosts:

“over this vast empire of solitude and darkness.
Where is the voice of freedom,
freedom to laugh,
to move
without the heavy phantom of despair?” (Agueros, 357).

Burgos' positionality within the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York City suggests that the *vast* empire stretches beyond national borders and her body politic is still subjected to othering despite her leaving Puerto Rico. The argument about the formation and perpetuation of colonial subjectivities based on space and place requires a deeper look, but for the sake of this dissertation project it cannot be denied that colonial subjectivities are not bound by national borders. Burgos recognizes that her body cannot escape the empire because her body belongs to the empire. The colonial ghost seeps like a dew over the island

and traps Puerto Rican bodies and the Puerto Rican nation and in this trapping the state of coloniality in Puerto Rico is reinforced. The colonial ghost therefore follows Burgos wherever she goes and haunts her body forever, so the only escape or chance to achieve freedom is death. Because Burgos' body is not hers, but the empire's she shouts at the end of the poem "My cry that is no more mine,/ but hers and his forever,/ [...] deep into Welfare Island/ my farewell to the world (Agüeros, 357). In "Farewell in Welfare Island" Julia de Burgos is not only interested in exemplifying how colonial legacies manifest themselves as a haunting on Puerto Rican bodies (and the nation), but she is also crying, or prompting, for something more to be done.

Burgos's cries and haunting also signal a sense of alienation and non-belonging. One must consider what it means for a person to feel like she can never come back home. In her exilic positionality, she produces poetry mainly because her exilic and diasporic position in "New York [is] a space of exile, but also of poetry" (Arroyo, 129). In Arroyo's reading of Burgos' biography, she translates the motif of water in her writing as a metaphor of exile. She states, "her years in Cuba and in New York, but particularly the New York days, are represented [through images of] loss, sadness, depression, and old age. For many critics, what Puerto Rico gave Julia—meaning the imaginary from which she wrote—was completely lost when she left the island for the United States and Cuba. The sea, the motif that comes with exile, connects with other water motifs in her poetry" (Arroyo, 134). In "Farewell from Welfare Island" the imagery of water is difficult to ignore since the very essence of an island constitutes a floating organism or apparatus in a body of water. Considering Burgos's exilic positionality, the image of an island does not signal hope; it signals isolation and a disconnection between the mainland U.S. lands and the (distant)

island of Puerto Rico. Furthermore, the invocation of an island represents a duality – (1) Burgos is alienated and does not belong in either place she deems *home*, thus she is floating as an island at sea, and (2) her welfare island, Puerto Rico, will never be fully included into the conceptualization of the United States – it will forever be an exilic island – a fracture of the U.S. imaginary.

Because “decolonization of the mind and of psychic space is a political necessity” to overcome (transgenerational) trauma and haunting, Burgos utilizes death as an aesthetic in her poetry that reinforces her feminist and nationalist positions and ultimately lead to her freedom (Schwab, 27).²⁰ Therefore, her decolonial self had to kill the ‘un-awakened’ other in earlier writings and why death is the only possibility for true freedom in the “Farewell in Welfare Island.” The motif of death in Julia de Burgos’ poetry engages with the work of decolonization through the employment of feminist and nationalist rhetoric and allude a utopian break. Death as a central theme (and literal possibility) in her late poetry is indicative of a decolonial consciousness that ultimately led to her liberation. On death and Julia de Burgos life and poetry, Sherezeda Vicioso writes,

“Julia emerges increasingly more naked, but every time more intact, sustained in her search by a great rebellion against death, a death she dared. Julia so battled against death that, despite death’s apparent triumph in the struggle, she can mock it in her poetry, “dying” in the language that symbolizes the death of Puerto Rico - English - while continuing to live in Spanish, where our hopes still linger... “It has to be from here forgotten but unshaken among comrades of silence deep into welfare island and my farewell to the world”” (Vicioso,70).

²⁰ In her essay, Arroyo argues that Burgos utilizes the genre of poetry to guise death metaphorically: “Poetry, a material representation of language but also a transcendent construction of the self and the other, reads the self as a philosophical projection of the social and the political. In Burgos’s poetry, the lyrical voice remains connected to the body as a material conscience extended into the social-universal. Poetics and politics are organized in a visionary quest for a utopian future” (Arroyo, 144).

If we follow Vicioso's logic that Julia has already 'died' once, it is her life in the U.S. that dies. This 'death' is rooted in her colonial subjectivity that marked her a perpetual outsider and exposed her to a precarious life in poverty. This precarity also leads to her ultimate, non-symbolic death where she is found collapsed on a street in Harlem and her body would be unidentified for months. Eventually she is identified and sent to Puerto Rico where she finally returns and is laid to rest; her only return to the homeland is in death.

Said speaks of exile as an "alternative" to the modern world and its productions. It is useful in interpreting Burgos's death drive as an exile and symbolic mother to Puerto Rico. He writes,

I speak of exile not as a privilege, but as an *alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity. Perhaps the most rigorous example of such subjectivity is to be found in Theodor Adorno's masterwork *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Mutilated Life*. Ruthlessly opposed to what he saw in the "administered" world, Adorno saw a life as pressed into ready-made forms, prefabricated "homes." [...] Language is jargon, objects are for sale. To refuse the state of affairs is the exile's intellectual mission. Adorno's reflections are informed by the belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing (Said 2000, 184).

Here, I suggest we examine Julia de Burgos's exilic life and her exilic writing as her ultimate attempt at being free - by existing (in death) outside of normalized ways of being. Burgos is aware of her self and toys with the idea of what types of freedoms are accessible and tangible outside of this world. If freedom was no longer possible via exile, was Burgos's death drive her last hope at achieving freedom? If this is true, it would mean that her death was made possible on her own terms, and further, it would have been Burgos's latest jolt of freedom:

“Even in Burgos’s premonition of her own death, expressed in the two poems found to date that she wrote in her nonnative English language during her final days in Welfare Island’s Goldwater Memorial Hospital, her poetic voice --”forgotten and unshaken” and engulfed by solitude--bequeaths her cry to the world. But also guided by the internal freedom to live and die on her own way in words and deeds, Julia de Burgos could never relinquish her essence, her poetic rebel soul: “For my soul asks just/ Solitude,/ My smile depends on solitude/ And all of me is loneliness/ In a rebellious heart”” (Acosta-Belén, 202).

For a majority of her life, including the time she spent in exile, Burgos always wrote in Spanish – her native tongue. So, why the sudden switch? As an outsider and exile she already exists as ‘foreigner’ but by adopting the English language in her final poems, in which she claims her final goodbye, Burgos forces readers to question what it means to belong as an exile. Though she knew the language of the nation, she still did not overcome isolation or precarity. By writing in English, a language sort of foreign to her, she flips the notions of what is foreign and non-foreign while at the same time conforming to the hegemonic culture and language. Burgos does not merely “sit on the sidelines”: she is active in her quest for freedom. Because she cannot find it in exile, as she once believed; and, because she cannot return to Puerto Rico, she leaps toward a Freudian death drive and departs this world.

Conclusion

Much of what we remember and share orally throughout generations is history. How do we fill in the gaps for what we do not know or cannot remember? Some people rely on myths to make sense of the past – a past that is not available otherwise. For example, Jack Agüeros believes in the myth that there is more of Julia de Burgos’s work that we have not seen. This is the quixotic urge to search for ‘lost poems’ that he describes in his introduction to the *Song of the Simple Truth* anthology. While this is partially true, it was

not ‘proven’ until decades later. Until then, he believed in this myth to reconcile with some logic about the archivization of Burgos’s work and the legacy she left behind. The notion that there was ‘missing work’ or *unfinished* archives of Julia de Burgos’s work compelled me to ask greater questions: How is Julia de Burgos and her memory an example of the injustices in processes of archivization of women’s work, exilic women’s work, and the works of other working-class women of color? How have the archives erased and silenced Puerto Rican women? If Julia de Burgos is considered a national literary hero, then why is she dehumanized in her memory? Burgos defined herself as an exile and the dominant discourse concerning her life and legacy portray her as a migrant. This oversimplification erases the political depth and original meaning of her work produced in exile. It also negates the personal risk and sacrifice she made for her country and her literary work – she left in order to continue fighting for a more just and free Puerto Rico.

These questions were taken up by Virginia Sánchez-Korrol in *The Season of Rebels and Roses* (2018), an excellent example of an archival fiction that seeks to include the role Puerto Rican women had within the nationalist and independentista clubs in the exilic communities of New York City.²¹ The novel follows two women, Inocencia Martinez and Lola Rodriguez de Tío, in Puerto Rican history who pushed the efforts of the Cuban Independence Party and Puerto Rican Section forward through literature, literary salons,

²¹ I met Dr. Sánchez-Korrol at the 2019 Puerto Rican Studies Association Symposium at Rutgers University-New Brunswick when my advisor introduced us. She seemed really interested in my project because I was writing about Puerto Rican women, as did she I later learned, for her dissertation. When it became evident I was writing about Julia de Burgos and exile, Dr. Sánchez-Korrol recommended I read her book because it might be fruitful in my considerations about Puerto Rican exile and gendered exile. I knew this book would make its way into my chapter because she told me this book emerged from a question, she asked herself: what about the women’s efforts for independence? She too wondered about artifacts that were excluded from the archives or the myths forgotten in our national history. This novel helped me rethink gendered exile and how Julia de Burgos and Inocencia Martinez are examples of how archives have failed Puerto Rican women. It also poses greater questions about women’s work and the meanings attached to what is ‘worth’ archiving and what is not which is directly correlated to the intersection of gender, race, and class politics.

fundraising, and also supporting the men's chapters of these clubs. Inocencia, the main protagonist, weds Sotero Figueroa, a journalist who prints newspaper, and journeys with her husband to a life of exile in New York City. Her husband helps found Jose Marti's political newspaper *Patria* and is involved with the Cuban Revolutionary Party and the Puerto Rican Section of the party. It also follows Inocencia's interactions with Lola, who helps her find her voice and inspires her to join the efforts to liberate both Cuba and Puerto Rico. Although Lola is first exiled and fled to Cuba, her family's safety is threatened, and she is forced to flee to New York City where she and Inocencia reunite. Inocencia informs Lola of her accomplishments in founding Mercedes Varona: a women's club dedicated to the liberation struggle.

In *Myth and Archive* (1998), Roberto González Echevarría argues that archival fictions are written as derivations of modern myths where these myths are a way to forge a reconciliation of the past with possible answers to greater questions. He writes:

“How are archival fictions mythic, and how is the Archive a modern myth? First, they are mythic because archival fictions deal with the origin in a thematic and in what would be called a semiotic way. By the origin I mean the beginning of history, or a commonly accepted source of culture. Here I refer to the functions of the Archive troped in these novels, like the gaps in the manuscripts, the floating texts, the storehouse function, in hoarding and accumulation [...] Mythification is a version of the masterstory of escape from the structures of the dominant discourse through fusion with one of the main objects of that discourse: myth” (González Echevarría, 174-5).

Though I did not refer to Sánchez-Korrol's novel for literary analysis in this chapter, I mention it here because this derivation of archival fiction is productive in thinking about women's work, specifically the work of Puerto Rican women in an American society that marginalizes them based on their race, class, and gender. Because of their exilic status they do not belong to the nation or their native lands and also cannot return – the novel ends

after the Spanish-American War with a sense of loss and hopelessness since the Puerto Rican exiles in New York City were unable to achieve freedom. Upon this moment of tragedy, Inocencia talks with Lola about her sadness that the Puerto Rican section is dissolving and the efforts to liberate Puerto Rico are discontinued. Though Inocencia is disappointed at the aftereffects of the war, she is incredibly distraught she has to dissolve her women's club. She says, "That's one set of minutes I'll regret pasting into the Mercedes Varona scrapbook" – this scrapbook is an archive of the women's involvement in liberatory efforts. Lola presses Inocencia to save the scrapbook and other artifacts while stressing its importance: "Inocencia listen. The scrapbook is very important. Put it away with any of the notes you have about the clubs. Include newspaper clippings, photos, even letters if you have them" (Sánchez-Korrol, 219). Inocencia refutes "What good will that do? Nobody wants that old stuff" and discounts the value of her work and contributions of her club (Sánchez-Korrol, 219). To this, Lola replies:

It's for [your son] my dear. And, for my Laura's children, and all of our children. It's for them to see what we believed in and how we honored our commitments. That's what Dr. Henna vowed to do with the minutes and letters of the Puerto Rican Section. He has bundled everything in lock boxes. He'll keep them home until they can be published [...] This is our legacy. Put everything in that box where you keep Marti's cup and saucer (Sánchez-Korrol, 219).

Lola recounts that her life was lived mostly in exile and how this movement consumed her life. She is the voice of reason that teaches Inocencia the greater ramifications of the scrapbooking project by suggesting it is a documentation of the women's club. The scrapbook is deemed unimportant by Inocencia, yet Lola assures her it is something more, something meaningful that can impact generations to come.

The work by men is preserved and archived meticulously because they do not doubt their contributions or their work. Inocencia's hesitancy to preserve her work reflects her life as a woman in exile in the patriarchal societies of Puerto Rico and New York City where women are not asked to contribute to men's liberation efforts except to fundraise. At least, that is how it is depicted in the novel. While Inocencia doubts the worthiness of her scrapbook, it is the archive of Mercedes Varona Cub and also stands as a symbol of women's work; Inocencia's doubt is questioned by Lola because she knows men will archive all of their work. Sánchez-Korrol's archival fiction suggests that scholars are thinking about gendered exile in a way that is informed by thinking about what is missing and considering possibilities through fiction. Here, it is work and the ideas of these women which are believed to be in a lost scrapbook, thus signaling a missing archive. The notion of the missing archive is a tool employed by Latin American and Latinx writers in archival fictions to represent works-in-progress, or memory as progress. González Echevarría writes that the missing archive can also be deemed incomplete:

“The Archive is incomplete as evidenced by the many unfinished or mutilated documents that it contains. This incompleteness generates the hoarding, the cumulative thrust of archival fictions [...] This incompleteness appears as a blank, either at the end or elsewhere in the manuscript, and signals not only a lack of closure that works against the Archive's capaciousness and desire for totalization, but more importantly it underscores the facts that gaps are constitutive of the Archive as much as volume” (González Echevarría, 182).²²

²² This tradition is also seen in Latino literature and Caribbean diasporic literature. Jason Cortés' *Macho Ethics* explores the notion of the archive present in Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in his chapter “No Home-Run Hitter or Fly Bachatero.” Here, Cortés' writes about the narrator's (Yunior) need to archive Oscar's manuscripts in a way to overcome guilt and haunting. Though the archive exists, the documents are kept in a fire safe refrigerator in his basement and almost implies that it will never be accessed. Cortés connects this archive to death by denoting it a crypt, which helped my theoretical approach about archives and haunting.

Sánchez-Korrol's text not only implies that national archives are incomplete via the missing scrapbook in her novel, and her text suggests that these 'scrapbooks' are extremely real. How many scrapbooks, or other archival collections, concerning Puerto Rican women and their work are still missing?

There are various incomplete archival projects or 'lost archives' for people of color and women that are still waiting to be uncovered or may never be found. But, there is the ongoing problem of purposefully omitting the works of women of color and the works of marginalized populations that speak volumes to cultural memory projects of the nation. González Echevarría argues that the archive cannot fulfill national myths or be an ultimate narrative: "The Archive cannot coalesce as a national or cultural myth, though its make up still reveals a longing for the creation of a grandiose political-cultural metastory" (González Echevarría, 175). In a way, archival fictions attempt to compensate for the national narrative that is missing; and, this is why though some gaps have been 'filled' and 'answered' in the fictive text the archive is always perceived dead in some manner: lost, burned, disappeared, or inaccessible. González Echevarría insists that the Latin American literary tradition portrays archives and manuscripts (archival texts) in ways that are inaccessible, lost – thus dead: "The Archive is an image of the end of time" (González Echevarría, 175).

The notion of filling in gaps in myth, logic, or narrative forces me to think of Julia de Burgos's memory though she is not deemed an exile or exilic 'hero.' Puerto Rico has had many revolutionary thinkers exiled from the island – many of them notable writers like Eugenio María de Hostos, for example. While they are regarded as exiles, they are also remembered as national heroes because of their radical ideas and efforts for Puerto Rico's

freedom.²³ Yet, one of the most well-known and award-winning poets from Puerto Rico, who was also cast away from the island, is not regarded in the same manner. Through the close reading of Burgos's poetry, I reaffirm her exilic status, and also question how gender and race politics inform cultural memory projects in relation to Julia de Burgos's legacy. Within this legacy, a myriad of myths prevail about how poverty probably led Julia de Burgos to alcoholism and her alcoholism led to her liver damage. Though this myth, or theory, was not the subject of contestation, poverty definitely had an effect on Julia de Burgos's life. It is also a circumstance for many Puerto Rican migrants and their descendants in New York City. In the following chapter I aim to humanize poverty and the Puerto Rican experience through a close reading of Nicholasa Mohr's novels, which can be read as archival fictions, about the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York City during the 1940s-1980s.

²³ It is interesting that the National Archive in Puerto Rico has an entire room dedicated to Hostos' life and legacy as an exile and champion of Puerto Rican literature. This collection was not limited to papers - this room was filled with portraits, personal artifacts, and Hostos' desk. Yet, there are not materials of or about Julia de Burgos for viewing - only her books are available. The national archive of Puerto Rico recognizes male writers in ways that female writers won't ever be recognized or celebrated.

Chapter 2
Humanizing Poverty:
Reading Puerto Rican Novels of the Diaspora

Nicholasa Mohr's fictive texts are exemplary looks into Puerto Rican life in the diaspora from the 1940s-1980s. Yet, her works are not as widely read or discussed as Puerto Rico's national poet Julia de Burgos. Mohr belongs to a cohort of Puerto Rican writers that questioned racial and ethnic discrimination, inhumane working conditions, poor housing, and second-class citizenship through the Nuyorican literary movement (mid-1960s to the mid-1970s). Predicated on documenting and fomenting acts of resistance, Nuyorican writers portrayed Puerto Rican life in New York City. However, the most celebrated and memorialized writers of this movement are male writers like Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, Miguel Piñero, Miguel Algarín, who deserve praise but also overshadow women's involvement and literary contributions. This leads me to ask: are memory projects gendered? During my visit to the Center for Puerto Rican Studies archives in Harlem I was able to find only a handful of clippings or mentions of Nicholasa Mohr and her work in the folders of larger collections of other Puerto Rican men. There was not one folder dedicated to Nicholasa Mohr though she deserves an entire collection. El Archivo General de Puerto Rico lacked archival materials of Nicholasa Mohr's work as well. Though her work is prolific and exceptional, she is not remembered as one of the top contributing writers of the Nuyorican Literary Movement nor is her work memorialized in a national archive in the United States or Puerto Rico.

This chapter explores how Mohr navigates belonging, poverty, and home in relation to freedom for diasporic Puerto Ricans. Are notions of belonging and home related to freedom in any way? My chapter is guided by these questions: Is Mohr's writing a form of

bearing witness to gender-based and race-based violence enacted upon Puerto Ricans in New York City? By considering belonging and home in relation to freedom, I am also examining the idea of memory and how it relates to the Puerto Rican experience and why Nicholasa Mohr, a notable writer, is not *remembered* in the national memory projects. Here, the role of the archive is particularly important because it symbolizes how a nation or community produce knowledge and make greater claims about what is worth remembering, documenting, sharing, and teaching for generations to come.

I not only question the lack of archivization of Nicholasa Mohr's contributions to the American and Puerto Rican literary canons; I examine two of her novels, *Nilda* (1973) and *Felita* (1979), as archival ethnographies that showcase the experiences of the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York City. What I aim to do in this chapter is assess Mohr's novels as archival fictions, a notion I explore later in this chapter, and argue that her texts serve an archival function through their ethnographic quality. In *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (1990) Roberto González Echevarría identifies archival fictions as narratives that attempt to make sense of and document culture and identity in ways that mimic the work of ethnography and anthropology (Echevarría, 173). I read Mohr's novels as ethnographies that function as archival fictions in this chapter because she chronicles young Puerto Rican girls and women's lives to provide a usually concealed perspective. By reading Mohr's works as archival fictions that function as ethnographies, I consider how they may anticipate archival erasure and establish Mohr's legacy. This way, Mohr's texts are their own cultural memory projects. For example, *Nilda* is written like a diary – each chapter is 'titled' with a date and describes the the 'highlights' of the given time period – and doesn't follow the usual organization of a novel. Mohr captures the Puerto Rican

experience in a way that humanizes their livelihoods by providing what the titular young girl 'sees' in the quotidian observations. This includes when Nilda is a bystander when her mother is scolded or shamed by social workers because they do not understand her mothering practices or her culture, and it includes when Nilda witnesses accounts of police brutality in her community.

Scholars have written about the impact of Mohr's work and how it combats misrepresentation and dehumanization by documenting the experiences of Puerto Ricans, especially the perspective of Puerto Rican women, in the diaspora. Myra Zarnowski prefaces her interview "An Interview with Author Nicholasa Mohr" (1991) with Nicholasa Mohr stressing the importance of representation in literature, especially for children who often do not see themselves in the books they read. Zarnowski writes, "Not only are there fewer books about Hispanic Americans than any other U.S. minority groups, but many of the existing titles have been criticized because "frequently they perpetuate stereotypes rather than dispel them" and thus sparks two problems in the American literary canon (Zarnowski, 100). First, Latinos are excluded from American literature though, like Nicholasa Mohr, many Latinos are born in the U.S. and reshaped the culture and ethnic makeup of the country and the literature should reflect that. Second, though there is dearth of literature available, these books often inaccurately represent Latinos which contributes to existing stereotypes and do more harm than good in the greater discourse of *latinidad* in the U.S.

Nicholasa Mohr writes about the migrant experience in New York City in English and signals that the English language captures diasporic life. For Mohr, it is how she writes her most authentic self. Though Nicholasa Mohr was taught Spanish at a young age, it is a

language reserved for family and home. She writes in English because it is most aligned with her experience(s) as a diasporic Puerto Rican and has said:

Spanish as spoken by the Puerto Rican population was the language of my emotional life... But outside my home and neighborhood, English was ubiquitous. It was the language that commanded; it was the language of the greater society out there. And I understood early on that English was my language of survival. In order to succeed I had to excel in English (Vásquez, 30).

John C. Miller explores Mohr's literature and decision to write in English as a Puerto Rican migrant whereas the other authors he studies (José Luis González, Pedro Juan Soto, Emilio Díaz Valcárcel) write about their experiences in Spanish in "The Emigrant and New York City: A Consideration of Four Puerto Rican Writers" (1978). Miller claims Mohr's "portrayal of the Barrio is excellent" in *Nilda*; and, in tracing Mohr's adolescence through her "family situation with an older brother who is an addict, her stepfather, the welfare and medical systems, [as] the backdrop for the real education of a young woman" (Miller, 94). Moreover the "satiric episodes, such as the school teachers in P.S. 72 who do not understand the culture and so shame Puerto Rican children publicly" function as moments that highlight the disconnect between institutions and systems in the U.S. meant to help and uplift but often cause the populations they do not comprehend harm. This divide between Puerto Rican families and the state indicate there are barriers that function as borders fortified by language, culture, and ignorance. Mohr strategically writes about navigating borders in the U.S. in an evocative way:

For the Puerto Rican and the NeoRican in New York/New Jersey, too, the border between the Caribbean island and the North American mainland is, in several senses, a porous one. These places are bridged by political connections; the division of immediate family and extended family between the two places and the resulting affective movement, both literal and through longing; the perpetuation of island traditions; and the gift of orality. [...] Linguistically and culturally, too, the border becomes less porous as young NeoRicans return to the island only to find that they

are considered, and consider themselves to be, different. It is this reality that Nicholasa Mohr richly evokes in the pages of her memoir (Vásquez, 27-8).

These borders intuitively create tension and separate people into groups – those who belong and those who do not. I draw from theories of biopolitics and coloniality in this chapter to showcase how these two ideas help in analyzing Mohr's novels. I argue that colonial subjects are more susceptible to state sanctioned biopolitical projects that deem Puerto Ricans, in this context, disposable.

The theories of biopolitics and disposability are productive in framing this chapter and my analyses of Mohr's novels, *Felita* (1979) and *Nilda* (1973), because they show how Puerto Rican communities are viewed as “less than” and disposable by the state via police violence and discrimination by state employees. Moreover, these texts highlight how white Americans uphold the nation's values to remain racially and ethnically homogenous by being violent to these communities, too. The pervasiveness of violence suffered by Puerto Ricans in these novels performed by state institutions and white American citizens demonstrates that is a bigger problem with the ways Puerto Ricans are perceived in the United States. By reading Mohr's novels as ethnographic prose, they serve a dual role of witnessing and recording. Mohr's work not only documents these experiences, but in reading her work as ethnographic prose I also question cultural memory projects at the national level that have allowed for negative stereotypes and mythology to dominate the discourse about the Puerto Rican diaspora.

In studying the representation of Puerto Ricans in Mohr's texts, I examine poverty to flip the outdated dehumanizing victimhood tropes by critiquing the susceptibility to state violence and harassment suffered by this racial and ethnic minority at the hands of the police. Furthermore, I analyze the intersections of race and gender to examine how state

employees, teachers and social workers police Puerto Rican motherhood. Mohr's texts resist negative stereotypes about Puerto Rican mothers and their communities and humanizes poverty through her authentic portrayals of their livelihoods.

Mohr's reflections of Puerto Rican race, class, ethnicity in New York City urge me to think about how poverty and discrimination paralyze Puerto Rican mobility at this time. In *Felita*, for example, Mohr describes a Puerto Rican family that tries to access socio-economic freedom in a "cleaner and quieter" New York City neighborhood through the eyes of the youngest child and daughter, Felita. Once the family moves into this new neighborhood full of promise and better schools, with the hopes that it will lead to "good colleges" and access to a better life, they are forced to leave due to the violence enacted on various members of the family. Is this freedom an impossibility? If socio-economic freedom is an impossibility, what does this mean for Puerto Rican livelihoods in the diaspora? How does Mohr define freedom and Puerto Rican women and family accessibility to it? With these questions, I turn away from the dehumanization of working-class, urban Puerto Ricans, and other persons of color, in New York City that tend to focus on negative stereotypes or cast Puerto Ricans as victims. These inadequate perceptions mark Puerto Ricans as people who do not have agency in their lives and just drift from one place to another. Instead, I closely read Mohr's *Nilda* and *Felita* and their representations of Puerto Rican motherhood, freedom, and violence to argue that if Puerto Ricans are constantly vulnerable to state violence and biopolitical projects and if socio-economic mobility is unfeasible, then freedom seems to be an impossibility. Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos, have to forge their own pathways towards liberation and freedom that does not rely on the state. As depicted in the opening scene of *Nilda* when neighborhood kids open

the fire hydrant to cool their community of summer heat, an ideal is revealed: the people must liberate themselves.

The ideas of biopolitics and disposability in relation to theories of coloniality frame my analyses of violence in Nicholasa Mohr's novels: *Nilda* and *Felita*. They also help sustain my argument that freedom is depicted as an impossibility in these novels. While *Felita*, a short novel for children, focuses on violence from community members to Felita and her family, *Nilda*, a coming-of-age novel, digs deeper into state-sanctioned violence and discrimination at the hands of the police. Both texts illuminate the vulnerability to violence as sort of a prerequisite experience for Puerto Rican life in New York City. If a person is vulnerable to violence and bodily harm in their neighborhoods – a space that signals everyday life – then are they truly free? For example, Nilda, a preteen, witnesses two policemen physically beat her innocent friend and send him to the hospital on her walk home. While the act of witnessing her friend being physically abused at the hands of the men who are sworn to protect them is traumatizing, she also learns that the policemen walk free – they will never have to answer for their actions. The children, like Felita and Nilda, learn at a young age that they cannot trust the police because they are deemed guilty or suspicious simply for being who they are. At a young age, the protagonists learn that the people meant to help and protect them actually treat their communities harshly. Though they may not understand the concept of freedom yet, they learn they are treated differently.

Michel Foucault developed the theory of biopolitics which is briefly defined as the sovereign's power to "make" live or "let" die that is "a control over relations between the human race, or human being insofar they are a species, insofar as they are living beings

and their environment, the milieu in which they live in his groundbreaking lecture “Society Must Be Defended” in 1976 (Foucault, 244-5). From this moment came the birth of a new field of study and a way of understanding the regulation of power onto bare life via biopower. Scholars have been assessing how sovereign power regulates and politicizes life especially in regard to extreme examples where biopower was exercised to exterminate populations under totalitarian rule or these methods of population control. For instance, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and Giorgio Agamben examine the totalitarian and fascist rule and control of bodies during Nazism. While I acknowledge these scholars and their contributions to this field, what I bring to the field in respect to people of color as a point of inquiry and actual contributing factor to biopolitical rule.

I turn my attention to writers who have problematized how power manifests through discipline, regulation, and surveillance of bodies considering gender and race such as Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” (2013), Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” (2003), and Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ “On the Coloniality of Being” (2007). Though Foucault’s essay “Right of Death and Power of Life,” (1976) and his lecture, “Society Must be Defended” provide foundational notions of biopolitics and biopower, he begins his study on Nazism and disregards the atrocities to ‘bare life’ that preceded the twentieth century like colonization and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Foucault and the scholars who continue his work, discount how notions of race and racialization processes and coloniality and other legacies of colonialism and modernity implicate the contemporary world. Therefore, I analyze the literature of Nicholasa Mohr with notions of coloniality and the human, or non-human, to better understand the struggle for freedom in her novels.

Ramon Grosfoguel's notion of coloniality is an extension of Anibal Quijano's whose idea is founded in a Latin American context. Quijano shaped the theory of coloniality based on the position that multiple Latin American countries found themselves in – they were independent nations, but still economically and ideologically dependent on their former colonizers who had developed into the modern world-system. For instance, white, elite Latin Americans usually perpetuate colonial and racial ideologies and hierarchies that were 'brought over' by their colonizers. The modern/colonial/capitalist world-system functions in ways that valorizes the political and economic within a geoculture and ignores, or oppresses, race, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, Quijano's conceptualization of coloniality seeks to answer questions that "account for the entangled, heterogeneous, and mutually constitutive relations between the international division of labor, global racial/ethnic hierarchy, and hegemonic Eurocentric epistemologies in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system" (Grosfoguel, 4). Grosfoguel distinguishes between the state of coloniality which implicates colonial status in the modern era and his interrogation of the coloniality of power. It is this distinction between colonialism and coloniality that he believes to be most important:

"coloniality" refers to the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system. "Coloniality of power" refers to the crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor, subaltern group political strategies, and Third World migrants' inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan global cities (Grosfoguel, 4).

This coloniality of power allows the United States to create and maintain neocolonial arrangements, so that the U.S. was able to militarize Puerto Rico, exploit the island's labor force, while justifying copious federal funding cuts to the island. In essence, Puerto Rico's

political status as a colony in the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system is neocolonialism – “the colony without the benefits of the modern colony” (Grosfoguel, 6).

According to Foucault, the ability to govern others – “how to govern others, and by whom the people will accept being governed” – is split into two processes: the first is “shattering the structures of feudalism; [this] leads to the establishment of the great territorial, administrative and colonial states” and to also govern the spirituality (ideology) of subjects (Foucault, 87-88). The Foucauldian theory of governmentality and Grosfoguel’s borrowed notion of the colonality of power both function together in the ‘heterarchy’ Grosfoguel considers. Thus, the ideological, the state, along with the legacies of colonialism and imperialism embedded in racial, social, gender, sexuality hierarchies are deeply rooted in the smallest and largest decisions and actions of our lives. Due to the complexity and interfolds of these heterarchical powers, Puerto Rican citizens are colonial subjects, and along with other subaltern populations, experience the pervasiveness of the colonality of power. To emphasize, the state of colonality of power along with the governmentality of disciplined subjects has enabled the United States to conduct biopolitical projects in Puerto Rico that control the population and dispose of what they deem to be excessive, and by extension worthless.

Acts of Violence: Maintaining Borders and Homogeneity

Arlene Davila’s *Barrio Dreams* is a book about gentrification in New York City’s Spanish Harlem neighborhood that demonstrates how zoning laws and legislation pushed Puerto Ricans and Latinxs out of their neighborhoods to improve the lives or status of wealthy investors and New York City transplants. Davila focuses on the gentrification of

East Harlem, a neighborhood that grew to be majority Puerto Rican with negative stereotypes defined by ghetto culture, that was eventually commercialized as a Latinx space to attract tourists, investors, tenants, and franchises while pushing Puerto Ricans and other Latinos out.¹ This form of gentrification conceded that Puerto Rican (and other Latino) residents were ‘bad’ while using their Latinidad to brand the neighborhood as an up-and-coming, trendy space. In this regard, Puerto Rican communities, and other communities alike, are pushed out and deemed ‘disposable’ with limited access to social services and aid. Along with other literatures, I explore how this form of race and class-based violence limits access to resources to vulnerable communities.

While I do not provide analysis of Nuyorican poetry, I acknowledge that the literature of the Nuyorican Poets (and writers) examines and scrutinizes poverty, inaccessibility, discrimination, and violence. Nuyorican poets and writers reflected on what it meant to not belong in the United States and to be the children of migrants who were promised a better life only to be crammed into small apartments with no heating to be met with racism and discrimination, and be overworked for little pay. Nicholasa Mohr’s work is central to this tradition and she writes novels that showcases the vulnerability to violence Puerto Rican children and adults face in New York City, which questions their citizenship status and freedoms. While she confronts daily life for Puerto Ricans in el barrio, Mohr

¹ “A community with a long, multicultural immigrant history, as formerly a Jewish, Eastern European, and Italian enclave, East Harlem’s Latino/a identity spans the early 1900s and peaks in the 1950s with the massive immigration of Puerto Ricans spurred by the island’s industrialization program and the government-sanctioned migration of destitute agricultural workers into the States (Andreu Iglesias 1984; Sánchez-Korrol 1983). Soon thereafter East Harlem became a chief example of ghetto culture, an identity consolidated through representations in the media and in the social sciences literature. The archetype ethnic enclave, or the “island within the city” and the paragon of Puerto Ricans’ “culture of poverty,” East Harlem is also the site of numerous anthropological studies of lower-income urban enclaves, as well as of journalistic exposes of crime, urban blight, and poverty.”

Davila, Arlene, et al. *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*, University of California Press, 2004.

does not depict her characters as victims – they are wholesome people with agency. Because her narrator is a young girl, one could assume that Mohr is making a bigger claim that children are not only aware of this violence, but also begin to question their subjection though they cannot articulate it. The narrators in both texts are constantly aware of how they are different in various social spaces and hint to readers how they navigate their coloniality.

According to Foucault, the state has the sovereign power to exercise its biopower by choosing which subjects to “let live or make die” in ways that manage, oversee, and discipline populations. It would be ineffective and inefficient for states and various economies (in this global, neoliberal age) to let populations die though they are not deemed human. Foucault writes, “biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and a power’s problem” (Foucault, 245). Modern technologies maintain reproduction and mortality in ways to conserve bodies for labor, war, and other necessities of modern societies, including positing the population as a political problem that needs to be disciplined. Carlos Rivera-Santana claims,

Biopolitics is a technology of government that aims to control the vital processes of the population – such as reproduction, life expectancy, and illness – and optimize other conditions – such as sanitation, security, education, and economic conditions, among others – that allow people to have a ‘productive’ life in the function of capitalism (234).

That is, the state has designated which population(s) is desirable and which is excessive, or disposable in a way that keeps people alive enough to work, though they are dying slowly. These populations do not have the best education systems, access to (affordable) healthcare, access to (affordable and healthy) foods, and other modern goods necessary for

a ‘good’ life.² Therefore, in reading *Felita* and *Nilda* by Nicholasa Mohr I examine the impossibility of freedom for Puerto Ricans and aim to humanize poverty and the Puerto Rican experience in the barrio of New York City. Though the neighborhoods of the working-class and people of color in New York City are left in shambles, decrepit, and unkempt with pollution and few to no resources, Puerto Ricans in *Felita* and *Nilda* attempt to live good and fulfilled lives. Remembered as the ‘Garbage Offensive,’ members of The Young Lords Party, a radical group of mostly Puerto Ricans, and other Latino groups, formed to fight for the freedom and protections of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and New York City, gathered in the summer of 1969 to clean up garbage in Spanish Harlem because the city had neglected to do so.³ The Young Lords Party fought for a march to the United Nations to demand the end of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, freedom for Puerto Rican political prisoners, and an end to police brutality in our communities” (Morales & Oliver-Velez, ix).

The overcrowded and unsafe housing developments Puerto Ricans (African Americans and other Latino groups) occupied during the late twentieth century reflect how the state and national government exercised their biopolitical power onto poor people of color. In these novels the state exercises its biopower and disciplinary function of surveillance onto the Other (Puerto Rican communities) and white Americans maintain the state’s notion of the other (or enemy) through harassment and violence. Because these novels are narrated through the perspective of young girls, readers experience how their

² See Lauren Berlant.

³ “Garbage Fires for Freedom: When Puerto Rican Activists Took Over New York’s Streets”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/nyregion/young-lords-nyc-garbage-offensive.html>

worldview is shaped and informed by discriminatory language and violence by state institutions like the police and American citizens.

Nilda: Witnessing State Violence and Discrimination

In *Nilda* (1973), the reader follows the titular character, a 10-year old girl, and depicts the livelihoods of Puerto Ricans in El Barrio during the early 1940s at the onset of World War II. *Nilda* follows the protagonist while she attends summer camp and school, negotiates her ethnic and gender identity as a preteen in El Barrio, and watches her mother manage and run their household while their father is sick and unable to work. It is through the quotidian that Nilda documents her feelings and questions the attitudes of nuns, social workers, and teachers and how they perceive her friends, family, community and herself.

The book opens with the first chapter, “July, 1941,” with the description of the neighborhood during the summer as “unbearable,” due to the heat that has been ongoing for days (Mohr, 1). Because of this the members of the neighborhood were waiting for Jacinto to open the hydrant so it could provide a modicum of cooling relief. This desperation of enduring summer heat reveals the poverty in this community – obviously there are no refreshing air-conditioned homes or landlords who offer this sort of amenity. Even so, once the hydrant is opened, neighbors warn each other that the police are coming, which meant someone would be fined. The initial contact between a policeman and the community in regard to this incident:

“God damn you people, [...] you got no sense of responsibility. What if there’s a fire?”

Someone responded from way back, “Coño, leave the water on, man. It’s too hot here! Have a heart.” Everybody clapped.

“Shit. God damn you bastards, coming here making trouble. Bunch of animals. Listen, don’t pull that shit again. You’re acting against the law. If this happens

again, one more time, I'm going to arrest all your asses! The whole God damned bunch of you spicks."

"Animals!" the other policeman added. (Mohr, 5-6).

After this exchange Nilda felt fear and realized how truly powerful the police are and how they exercise their power by threatening members of her community and using dehumanizing language when talking to them. She also recognized that the police, who represent state power, are white while her community, who are mixed-race and ethnically different, are extremely powerless. She learns to fear the police, and perhaps not trust them: "She did not want to be near the policemen; she wanted them to disappear" (Mohr, 5). The opening chapter concludes with Nilda heading home and imagining herself at summer camp, and "these thoughts helped erase the image of the two big white policemen who loomed larger and more powerful than all the other people in her life" (Mohr, 7). As the opening chapter, this signals that the police will be a source of discomfort for Nilda and that she may distrust the police. In this opening scene Nilda witness racial slurs and hate language from the men who are sworn to protect her and her community and foreshadows negative encounters with the police in this novel.

In the chapter "February, 1944," towards the end of the novel, Nilda and her brother Frankie walk her friend Sylvia home. Frankie is a member of a street gang – The Lightnings – and he leaves Nilda to walk alone so he can attend a meeting. She comes across Chucho and Manuel, brothers from her church, and they offer to walk her home and a police car stops near them. The policeman yells "Hey, you! Wait a minute! Where are you going? What the hell are you doing hanging around the streets at night?" as he repositions his vehicle and steps out of it (Mohr, 226). During this confrontation, Nilda "could not believe that he was talking to them. Shocked and frightened, she looked at the

large policemen” (Mohr, 226). While two policemen question the boys’ motives for being out at night and their ages, which are fourteen and sixteen, he dismisses their answers and asks “where’s the rest of you guys?” assuming they are gang members (Mohr, 227). Although the boys were visiting their aunt and walking Nilda home, the policemen were violent:

“Come on, cut the shit. We know all about the rumble between the Lightnings and the Barons.” Nilda felt her insides begin to sink.

“We do not know, sir, who they are. We do not belong to any gangs,” Chucho said. Nilda did not know when or how it happened, but the first policeman held Chucho by the collar and up against the side of the building. “Look!” he shouted into Chucho’s face. “Don’t give me any shit, spick. I’m tired of this trouble. Now, either you tell me where you punks are, and quit lying, or I’m gonna smash your face.”

“Officer, we don’t know!” interrupted Manuel. He rushed to his brother, shouting, “We are of the Pentecostal faith. We do not believe...”

The policeman released his grip and let go of Chucho. He picked up his nightstick and swung hard at Manuel. Nilda heard a thud and saw blood coming down the side of Manuel’s face as he reeled over.

“Stop! Stop!” Chucho shouted. “He’s only a kid. Please, please.” The policeman kept swinging his nightstick at Manuel.

“Hey, leave me alone. Stop, hey!” Manuel cried out, trying to duck the blows of the nightstick (Mohr, 227).

The policemen assumed two Latino boys to be gang members due to their own racial biases and attacked them without asking more questions. This is no accident. While one of the policemen did not physically attack the boys, he idly watched and did not interfere to protect a young boy from his partner’s physical attack. When Manuel is released from the officer’s grip, “his eyes, nose, mouth, and hair were full of blood” (Mohr, 228).

This violence is the result of hate, racism, and discrimination that symbolizes how state officers, whose job is to protect their districts, are actually enforcers of racial violence. Furthermore, police brutality is the result of having solely white men, at this time, surveil and literally police black and brown neighborhoods. Although the boys did not die, this moment demonstrates how the state creates an enemy, or other, and uses its power to either

let the enemy live or die (slowly). In “Necropolitics” Achille Mbembe refers to the state of exception and the state of siege and writes “power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce it” (165-6). The creation of the other congeals a sense of community/nationality that reifies itself through the reproduction of this other. The other is not just an other – the other is different but also poses a threat, deemed dangerous, someone that can die or be hurt by the state or citizens, which— maintains the fiction.

The scene continues where Chucho begs the policemen to take his brother to the emergency room since Manuel’s face is swelling and he is in a lot of pain. The policeman that physically assaulted Manuel says:

”All right, we’ll drive you down to the emergency room at Flower Fifth, but next time stay off the streets or it will be worse. Now, we won’t press charges, but we don’t want any crap from you. O.K.?” the first policeman responds. “Please, sir!” Chucho said. “Just take us to a hospital. We don’t want no trouble.” The second policeman looked at Nilda. “You get back home; a young girl like you should be off the streets. Where do you live?” he asked. Nilda stared at him. “Not far; I can walk. It’s only down a few blocks, that’s all.” “All right, now get the hell off the streets and right home before we take you in.” “Yes,” she said frightened, “I’ll go right home.” [...] “Shit, Ned!” the second policeman said. “You oughta watch that temper.” “Bunch of bastards anyway. Spick got what he deserved,” the first policeman said. (Mohr, 229).

While Manuel’s parents could have sued the police department and the city for discrimination and abuse, the policemen manipulate Chucho and Manuel into not reporting them for a life-saving ride to the hospital. The cop felt no remorse or guilt and did not view what he did as wrong. It is later revealed in the novel that Manuel is blinded from the incident with the police. The policemen shifted the narrative of what happened when people asked questions and took the boys to the hospital without ever having to right their

wrongs. One can infer that they will continue to abuse and harass this neighborhood, and those alike, during routine patrols and their crimes will go unpunished.

This scene also casts a usually talkative Nilda as silent. In the three years since her incident with police harassing her community, this moment reifies that the police are abusive and seek to harm her community. She does not trust the police, which is why she would rather walk alone in the streets vulnerable to danger than be in the car with the policemen. It is as if she feels safer walking alone as a young girl than be escorted home by the police. Nilda does not trust authority figures or employees of the state, like school teachers and social aid workers, in her community since they have always treated her (and the people who look like her and speak like her) with hastiness, discriminatory behavior, and anger.⁴

Immediately after the physical altercation, Chucho begs the police officer to take his brother to the emergency room. Though the police officers committed a heinous discriminatory crime onto children, they also neglect to provide them with emergency medical care. The boys have to beg the police to be driven to the hospital while the officer one, as he is regarded in the book, only agrees in exchange for the boys' silence. Here, the boys do not know what they agreed to, or understand that they could have taken legal action. They are preteens, not men though they were apprehended and beat like adults.

This encounter is a defining moment in the novel that brings the Nilda's first interaction with the police at the beginning of the novel full circle. Nilda once again witnesses the police using their power to dominate and exercise it to terrorize brown and black communities. What does it mean for an act of violence at the hands of the state to go

⁴ I develop this idea later in this chapter.

unpunished? These men almost killed a boy and caused his blindness based on presumptions due to their own racial bias. At a young age Nilda understands that her community is not free and that she is not free. She is robbed of her jovial innocence of trusting the police and members of state institutions that are meant to help and serve their communities. Her proximity to violence (as well as her community's) make evident that she does not enjoy the freedoms that define this country.

Policing Puerto Rican Motherhood

In *Nilda* the protagonist recognizes that state employees, such as social workers and teachers, are discriminatory and speak to her mother with haste and judgement. While Nilda does not have the language or maturity to voice what is happening around her, readers understand that she knows these moments do not 'feel right.' For example, "In her first novel, *Nilda*, Mohr's heroine, an adolescent girl growing up during World War II, has difficulty connecting with the life outside her immediate family and friends. She faces hostility from policemen, teachers, and social workers – those who are supposed to protect and nurture her. For example, when a policeman calls her neighbors "a bunch of animals" for opening a fire hydrant during a hot summer day, Nilda feels frightened and insignificant" (Zarnowski, 101). While Nilda does not feel safe and is misunderstood by these representatives of the state, there are subtle moments where Nilda's mother is also dehumanized and her mothering practices are under scrutiny – these instances highlight Nilda's colonial subjectivity.

Though, as readers, we only have Nilda's perception of the moment, she notices that her mother is not treated with grace or dignity by social workers, for example, and it

affects her mood. Because this story is told through Nilda's point of view, readers can determine that Nilda's behaviors and appearance are a direct critique on Nilda's mother's childrearing based on how she is seen and evaluated. These moments occur at welfare offices, school, and in the home during visits from the social workers. Feeling that she is always watched and under scrutiny, Nilda notices various moments that make her feel low: "when a teacher insists that Nilda and her friends speak Castilian Spanish because it is better than their dialect, she feels alienated. And when a social worker remarks that her nails are dirty and asks her embarrassing questions about how often she bathes, she feels humiliated" (Zarnowski, 101). Miss Reilly, the teacher that forced her Latino students to speak Castilian Spanish, was a site of mockery for the students who ridiculed her lack of fluency in the Spanish language.⁵ It is ironic that she taught a language in which she did not have fluency, while her students were native speakers. In actuality, Miss Reilly represents how language politics stem from elitism, classism, and racism and do not account for the myriad dialects of Spanish spoken.⁶

On the other hand, Miss Langhorn had one rule that exposed her discrimination towards Spanish-speaking Latinos: "one of her most strict rules was that no Spanish was allowed in her classroom. "if you are ever going to be good Americans. You will never amount to anything worthwhile unless you learn English. You'll stay just like your parents.

⁵ Nilda laughs during this moment because it exposes the teacher's ignorance: "Very often one of the students would write profanities in Spanish on the blackboard, mostly about Miss. Reilly. She often wondered if Miss. Reilly knew what these dirty words meant. Maybe, Nilda said to herself, almost in disbelief, she don't really know they are words" (Mohr, 215). Miss. Reilly stresses her preconceived racist and elitist notions via language politics: "Remember, I want the correct accent on the words" (Mohr, 215).

⁶ In a later development of this project, I would expand on bilingualism and language politics among Latino children referencing Ana Celia Zentella's *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Zentella, Ana Celia. *Growing up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Blackwell, 1997.

Is that what you people want? Eh?'" (Mohr, 52). This teacher represents the assimilationist model most notably associated with the American dream, which is debunked in *Felita*. The aspiration to climb socio-economic status is many times an impossibility, where 'the dream' obscures success and its attainment for various people without considering coloniality and the neoliberal capitalist world-system that was constructed for so few to succeed on the labor of migrants and outsourced labor. With the almost impossible expectations to meet, to perceive Puerto Rican (and other migrant) parents as 'nobodys' is dismissive and problematic, and once again places judgement on these parents' childrearing practices.

Mohr's critique on the 'policing' of Puerto Rican women's mothering practices is most aptly represented through interactions between social workers. In *Nilda*, readers are introduced to this "tension" early on when Nilda and her mother go to an appointment at the welfare office to secure government assistance:

Finally, after a while, the woman lifted her head, nodded, and, still holding the pencil she had been writing with, asked, "Mrs. Lydia Ramirez?" Before her mother could answer, the social worker turned to Nilda and said, "My name is Miss Heinz. Does your mother understand or speak English?" Nilda turned to her mother with a look of confusion.

"I speak English," her mother replied quickly. "Maybe not so good, but I manage to get by all right."

"Well, that's a help. At least you can speak English. But then," pointing to Nilda she continued, "why is she here? Why isn't she in school. This is a school day, isn't it?"

Nilda could see her mother turning red. Her mother never liked to go to these places alone; she always brought Nilda with her (Mohr, 65-66).

As the conversation develops, the social worker examines Nilda's appearance and judges her hygiene as well as how her mother has raised her:

“Let me see your hands! Wake up, young lady! Let me see your hands!” Startled, Nilda saw that Miss Heinz was speaking to her. Extending her arms and spreading her fingers, she showed the woman her palms. “Turn your hands over. Over, turn them over. Let me see your nails.” Nilda slowly turned over her hands. “You have got filthy nails. Look at that, Mrs. Ramirez. She’s how old? Ten years old? Filthy. Impulsively, Nilda quickly pushed her hands behind her back and looked down at the floor.

“Why don’t you clean your nails, young lady?” Nilda kept silent. “How often do you bathe?” Still silent, Nilda looked at her mother. She wanted to tell her to make the woman stop, but she saw that her mother was not looking her way (Mohr, 68).

Miss Heinz gives Nilda a nail file and presumptuously asks if she’s seen one before because she thinks Nilda has never used one. This moment signals a misconception about Puerto Rican mothers unable to raise children ‘correctly’ that also generates a greater misrepresentation about Puerto Ricans. As the author, Mohr uses this moment to critique social workers as agents of the state that dehumanize (Puerto Rican) people when they are meant to assist lower-class communities progress and survive. The tensions between social workers and Nilda’s mother is a part of the underlying motif throughout the novel: Puerto Ricans are under assault by the state. It is fitting that the novel concludes the way it began – with violence and harassment by the police unto Puerto Rican communities.

Though I focus on the ways in which state employees discriminate against Puerto Rican mothers and children, there are examples in the text that highlight how this happens with workers in other institutions. For example, a nurse at summer camp implies that the young Latino girls have disgusting hygiene and questions, “didn’t your mother clean your hair?” while questioning how the mothers care for and raise their children (Mohr, 140). Similar treatment greets Nilda and her peers by nuns at summer camp who organize the dormitories and activities in a way that seeks to discipline and manage them. A Foucauldian

analysis of these disciplinary methods coupled with theories of racialized motherhood would be productive and helpful in a greater development of this chapter.

Felita: The Impossibility of Social Mobility and Freedom

Felita (1979) is a coming-of-age story centered on the titular character who enjoys living in her Latinx neighborhood and is resistant to her family's plan to move to a finer neighborhood which her mother describes as "[a] neighborhood with better schools" where she hopes her children will receive a better education (Mohr, 29). The short novel follows Felita, a preteen girl, who does not want to leave her Latino neighborhood. The back cover of the short novel *Felita* quotes "we're off to a better future" in a large font to describe the sentiment of the text and allude to a central motif – a family is attempting to have an improved life. It may even foreshadow that the family's desires, although central to this novel, may not be accomplished. Yet, most members of the family are met with violence or a form of verbal harassment, or both, in an attempt to force the family to relocate or go back to their old neighborhoods. These acts of violence alert the family to the fact that their neighbors want them to leave.

This novel conveys a simpler message: the cleaner, safer, and quieter neighborhood(s) are reserved for people who are white or look the part; when Puerto Ricans move in and threaten this homogenous community, the community bands together in violent ways to show them they are not welcome there. They protect the vision they have for their neighborhood and reserve the 'good schools' and 'safe environments' for themselves and their children leaving people of color and non-white folks to reside in unsafe, overcrowded neighborhoods with poor education. Essentially, the new neighbors

let the family know they do not belong in their community or their country. Myra Zarnowski writes about the attempt to maintain racial homogeneity and resources in her interview with Nicholasa Mohr:

Felita, Mohr's second novel, tells about a young girl who resembles Nilda in significant ways. Like Nilda, Felita has trouble connecting with the world outside her immediate community. When their family moves to what they believe is a "better" neighborhood, they experience devastating verbal and physical abuse from their new neighbors. Conditions deteriorate so rapidly that the family decides they have no option but to move back to their old neighborhood (Zarnowski, 101).

At a young age, Felita learns that there are spaces and places where people who look like her simply do not belong. Though her family had the means to 'get ahead' for the general betterment of the entire family's future, they were instantly cast out by their neighbors and landlord who reminded them that their community was not meant for Puerto Ricans. Though they returned to their previous community, Felita noticed that the neighborhood in which she was unwelcomed was unlike the one she called home.

Upon moving, Felita notices that her new neighborhood is indeed different from her previous residence: "There were hardly any small stores [...] the street was cleaner and quieter. There was not as many people or kids outside" (Mohr, 28). Initially the young girls are warm and inviting to Felita and play with her until their parents call them to go home. At this point all the young girls and their mothers gather together and the mothers warn their daughters about Felita's background, revealing their racism and how discriminatory behavior and hate language is taught transgenerationally:

The other girls huddled with the grown-ups. They all spoke in low voices. I waited. Were they coming back to play? They all stared silently at me. I smiled at them and waited, but there were no smiles for me. [...] Suddenly I felt frightened and all alone. I wanted to get home, upstairs where I would be safe with Mami. Now the adults and girls were standing in a group beside the stoop steps.

Thelma quickly stepped in front of me, blocking my way. “Why did you move here?”

“Yeah there’s no one of your kind here and we don’t want you.” As I tried to get by them the other girls ran up the stoop and formed a line across the building entrance.

I turned towards the grown-ups. Some were smiling. Others looked angry.

“She should stay in her own place, right, Mama?”

“Can’t you answer? No speak the English no more?” The grown-ups laughed.

“... so many colors in your family. What are you?”

“Her mother is black and her father is white.”

“They ain’t white... just trying to pass.”

“Ni****s.”

“Shh, don’t say that.”

“All right, spicks. God only knows what they are!”

“Go on back to your own country” (Mohr, 33-35).

As a Puerto Rican, the United States is also Felita’s country. These racial slurs clearly demonstrate cultural ignorance of the U.S. history of imperialism and domination, but also that this racial hate is indoctrinated at a young age. These girls are taught to believe in and perpetuate racial myths and ethnic stereotypes that maintain the idea that Puerto Ricans are Other in the United States, and therefore that Puerto Ricans do not belong in their imagined community that reflects their idealized vision of American identity and culture.⁷ In the previous interaction the young girls were playing with Felita and inviting her to their private club, and only changed their attitudes towards Felita when their mothers taught them that Felita was different. This difference denotes that Felita and her family are not human in the same way they are human and that their communities are founded on this difference. Furthermore, Felita’s parents were eager to get out of their neighborhood

⁷ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. Print.

The moment is reminiscent of 1950s/1960s highway expansion and suburbanization of the United States that kept people of color in cities through racist red-zoning laws while middle-class white Americans moved and left cities to crumble, and poorer neighborhoods in those cities to deteriorate and left those populations to fail.

because of its subpar resources. This is why Felita notices the cleaner and quieter streets while her mom recognizes the schools (education system) are far better than in their previous residence.

Following the verbal harassment, the incident became violent when Mary Beth and Thelma block the building's entrance and Felita tries to squeeze her way in by pushing the blockade. As she tried to make her way home, Felita was also confronted by violence: ““Watch it!” They pushed back, shoving me down a couple of steps. [...] I pushed again. I felt a sharp punch in my back and a fist hit the side of my face. Then a wall of arms came crashing down. I began to cry hard” (Mohr, 35). A couple of bystanders shouted to the girls to stop hitting Felita and one woman yelled, “Let her go... she knows now she's not wanted here. Girls, let her through” (Mohr, 35). If the woman who signaled for the girls to stop is the same woman in the huddle who ‘explained’ how Felita is different, then she instigated violence onto an adolescent girl. Even so, the other mothers and guardians did not tell their daughters to stop being violent, instead they promoted the physical violence and verbal harassment, because it was a practice, or norm, to let outsiders know they do not belong and force them out. But, what marks an outsider an outsider?

Nelson Maldonado-Torres shares that his understanding of the coloniality of Being is shaped by Frantz Fanon, who was one of the first to reflect on his experience as a black colonial subject. In *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon shares his experience on a train in Paris where a young child points out his blackness and difference. Quite the epiphanic moment, it led Fanon to coin his notion of triple consciousness:

In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the

evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea. . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors (84).

While Fanon and Felita experience moments that mark their otherness, I find Maldonado-Torres' notion of coloniality of Being helpful and productive in understanding the Puerto Rican experience in the United States.⁸ Maldonado-Torres defines the coloniality of Being by considering how the legacies of colonialism continue to impact formerly colonized persons and their descendants:

“The idea was that colonial relations of power left profound marks not only in the areas of authority, sexuality, knowledge and the economy, but on the general understanding of the being as well. And, while the coloniality of power referred to the interrelation among modern forms of exploitation and domination (power), and the coloniality of knowledge had to do with the impact of colonization on the different areas of knowledge production, coloniality of being would make primary reference to the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language” (242).

Maldonado-Torres furthers Walter Mignolo's notion of coloniality by adapting Fanon's relationship between colonialism and language where “language is a location where knowledge is inscribed” (243).

Sylvia Wynter disrupts what the Western conceptualization and overrepresentation of Man², the modern notion of human, that produces and normalizes “Human Otherness” and

“Would now come to function at all levels of the social order-- including that of class, gender, sexual orientation, superior/inferior ethnicities, and that of the Investor/Breadwinners versus the criminalized jobless poor and Welfare Moms antithesis, and most totally between the represented-to-be superior and inferior

⁸ Maldonado-Torres defines coloniality as ““Coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration” (242). The coloniality of Being is a concept that Maldonado-Torres develops considering the definitions provided by earlier theorists of coloniality like Quijano and Mignolo with Fanon's understanding of colonialism and colonial subjecthood.

racess and cultures-- that would come to function as the dually status-organizing and integrating principle of U.S. society” (323).⁹

Wynter expands Anibal Quijano’s notion of coloniality of power to her phrase “the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” and argues that “one cannot “unsettle” the “coloniality of power” without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation” (268). Wynter’s explanation of ‘human’ in contemporary American society help explain how Felita and her family are viewed differently, which is synonymous with the *other*-ing of the family. Felita and her family represent a derivative of human otherness that validates the young girls’ and their mothers’ desire for homogeneity in their community and thus their verbal harassment and violence onto Felita. This community gatekeeps their resources: cleaner streets, better schools, etc. and makes this socio-economic mobility an impossibility for Felita and her family. This community functions in ways that emulate state institutions and their use of biopower on the premise that Puerto Ricans are outsiders, non-human, different and unworthy of this socio-economic mobility, and by extension- freedom.

Because Felita’s parents desired a better future for their children, they moved to a neighborhood with better schools that would lead to a college degree or a good career. Inherently, Felita’s parents wanted their children to gain social and economic mobility – a privilege they do not have and cannot attain despite being able to afford to move to a ‘better’ apartment. Felita’s older brother is physically assaulted by neighbors, and water is

⁹ This Human Otherness is defined by “the interned Mad, the interned “Indian,” the enslaved “Negro” in which it had been earlier defined. Instead, the new descriptive statement of the human will [define] Human Otherness [as] a new category, one now comprised of the jobless and criminalized - of the “underdeveloped” – all as the category of the economically damned (Fanon, 1963), rather than, as before, of the politically condemned (Wynter, 321).

thrown at her mother, so the landlord eventually recommends the family move out.¹⁰ While the landlord was not involved in the heinous acts of violence, he functions as a systemic symbol who casts people of color away to maintain a pseudo-harmonious community.

Violence and Memory: The Lack of Archival Desires

Nicholasa Mohr's observant writing in *Felita* and *Nilda* is mimetic of an ethnographic study of Puerto Rican life in El Barrio during the nineteen-forties to the nineteen-eighties. At a time when so many Puerto Ricans were migrating to New York City, Mohr provides a necessary account of what a child saw happening to her family and community due to greater racial tensions towards Puerto Ricans and Latinos due to the onset of war and vast waves of migration.¹¹ In *Myth and Archive* Roberto González Echevarría writes about the Latin American tradition to write archival fictions in ways that reflect an understanding of the past and present. Echevarría defines the archival fictions in a Latin American context:

Archival fictions are narratives that still attempt to find the cipher of Latin American culture and identity, hence they fall within the mediation provided by anthropological discourse. In the same manner as current ethnography, these books no longer accept the institutional discourse of method as a given, accepting the literariness of all representations of the Other, even, or perhaps especially, if it is an Other Within, as is the case with the Latin American narrative. Archival fictions

¹⁰ Page 46, *Felita*

¹¹ By 1946, "more than 400,000 [Puerto Ricans] migrated from the Caribbean to New York City" though "a small Puerto Rican enclave had existed in the city since World War I, and that *colonia* grew to 135,00 by the end of World War II" (Gonzalez, 81). "By 1960, more than 1 million were in the country part of what sociologists dubbed "the greatest airborne migration in history" where air travel was so frequent that planes were named 'la guagua aérea' – the air bus. Currently 2.8 million Puerto Ricans [live on the island] while 3.8 million live in the U.S. mainland" (Gonzalez, 81). These numbers are set to increase dramatically in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria of 2017 displaced many Puerto Ricans on the island. Gonzalez, Juan. "Puerto Ricans: Citizens Yet Foreigners." *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*. New York, Penguin Groups: 2000. Print.

have not given up on the promise of anthropology, but they probe into anthropology itself, becoming a kind of ethnography of anthropology (Echevarría, 173).

Because of migration, diaspora, and modernity, Latin Americans are connected with Latinos in a myriad of ways that forge an intimate relationship between the two cultures. Following this logic, Mohr's young adult fiction can be considered archival fiction that attempts to find meaning and provide an understanding of Puerto Rican urban life during this time. At least this 'form' of archivization exists, since there is not archival desire to collect and archive Nicholasa Mohr's life's work.¹²

Though Nicholasa Mohr's fictional novels *Felita* and *Nilda* capture Puerto Rican urban life in an American city, her work and contributions are not archived at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies Archives at Hunter College in Harlem, New York City or the National Archives of Puerto Rico in San Juan, Puerto Rico.¹³ Two of the biggest national collections of Puerto Rican literature and history omit one of the greatest Puerto Rican writers of the twentieth century. Mohr's work illuminates the struggle for Puerto Rican freedom in the late twentieth century and has sort of been a warning for the twenty-first. She is also a writer whose work is accessible because it does not rely on esoteric ideas or language, though that may cause it to be wrongly labeled as only young children's literature. Barbara Roche Rico concedes:

In spite of Mohr's substantial literary production during the last thirty years, there is currently no critical biography or volume of criticism devoted solely to her work. Until just recently, not even the date of her birth (1938) has been correctly reported in many of the popular reference guides. Although in recent years there has been some scholarly analysis of Mohr's fiction in terms of the categories of "novels of

¹²Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. University of Chicago Press, 1996. Print.

¹³ I personally visited both archives and requested to see collections on or about Nicholasa Mohr and her work, and both Centro's and The Puerto Rican National Archives lacked a collection. Instead, at Centro Nicholasa Mohr's archival records exist as mere "clippings" in the sub-folders of other writers – mostly men.

development," bildungsroman, ethnobiography, or the fiction of immigrants, most of the critical appraisals and published reviews of her work during the last twenty years have classified it almost exclusively as "children's literature" - a label that the author herself has rejected" (Roche Rico, 160).

I am not the only voice advocating for Nicholasa Mohr's work to be archived, or 'collected' in some way. Roche Rico recognizes Mohr's contributions "within the canons of Latino/a literature, the literature of feminism, and the expanding literature of American culture" (Roche Rico, 161). As a self-proclaimed "daughter of the Puerto Rican diaspora," Mohr understands how her diasporic positionality is such that where she is subject to being "doubly colonized;" this colonial subjectivity is fictionalized within this geographic location in her writing (Roche Rico, 166). If we do not memorialize Mohr's memory now, then when? Will her work and books be forgotten generations to come? Not to archive Nicholasa Mohr's work is to enact archival violence as part of larger national memory projects and thus recognize the Nuyoricano Literary Movement as comprised mostly of male contributions. However, because I read Mohr's texts as archival ethnographies, they preserve the Puerto Rican diasporic experience in an authentic way that focuses on young girls, women, and mothers – these perspectives and stories, like Nicholasa Mohr's, are often omitted from national archives and cultural memory projects.

Furthermore, the themes of these novels, which were published in the nineteen-seventies, still resonate today. Puerto Ricans are not free in the United States of America proper or their own island. The state's biopolitical warfare onto Puerto Rico and the *othering* of Puerto Ricans violently excludes Puerto Ricans in an attempt to render them as an excess population. To be free, Puerto Ricans will not be deemed disposable nor be susceptible to violence and discrimination by the state. The opposite has been hyperbolized during the U.S. government's lackluster response to Hurricane Maria in 2017. The sitting

president arrived to the island weeks after the initial hit of the hurricane. A few weeks before Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, Hurricane Harvey hit Texas and the president rushed there with sympathy and aid. Although Puerto Rico was hit by a stronger hurricane with fewer less resources, the president arrived mocking Puerto Ricans by throwing paper towels at them and complaining that Puerto Ricans were lazy. Years after the event, the president continues to ridicule Puerto Ricans although they have been reconstructing their island through grassroots efforts and community organization despite the mediocre aid provided by the U.S. government.¹⁴

Nicholasa Mohr's writings of the mid-twentieth century point to the struggles Puerto Ricans faced in the U.S. as colonial subjects through institutions of the state and daily life. She points to the ways in which Puerto Ricans were treated as an excess population, a historical notion that promoted government projects: first through the designation of 'overpopulation' and 'culture of poverty' in Puerto Rican cities that propagated mass migration to the U.S. cities in the early twentieth century.¹⁵ Ironically, Puerto Ricans found themselves in crowded housing projects and in rough working

¹⁴ For instance, the president took weeks to visit the island after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria. When he did arrive, he threw paper towels at Puerto Ricans and mocked their plight. Moreover, many Puerto Ricans went months without water and electricity while general aid was scarce; and, years after the catastrophe FEMA has still not distributed previously allocated funds for recovery. A corruption scandal emerged in the summer of 2019 exposing the Puerto Rican government for mismanagement and grotesque language about constituents has resulted in the forced resignation of Governor Roselló. This corruption scandal has been used to further delay FEMA funds from being dispersed to the Puerto Rican people – almost 3 years after the hurricane.

“It Totally Belittled The Moment’: Many Look Back In Dismay At Trump’s Tossing Of Paper Towels In Puerto Rico”: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/it-totally-belittled-the-moment-many-look-back-in-anger-at-trumps-tossing-of-paper-towels-in-puerto-rico/2018/09/13/8a3647d2-b77e-11e8-a2c5-3187f427e253_story.html

“FEMA to Further Restrict Puerto Rico’s Access to Relief Funds”: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fema-says-it-will-further-restrict-puerto-ricos-access-to-relief-funds-11564094438>

¹⁵ Lewis, Oscar. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty--San Juan and New York*. Random House, 1966. Print.

conditions in New York City. These notions also deemed women responsible for “too many Puerto Ricans” and thus began the inhumane and immoral sterilization and birth control experimentation projects that left one third of Puerto Rican women of child-bearing age on the island sterilized and robbed of their reproductive freedom and choice to become mothers. In the following chapter I will analyze freedom and Puerto Rican motherhood within this historical context.

Chapter 3

Memory and Puerto Rican Motherhood: Race, Class, Gender and Freedom

Considering the notion of motherhood in Puerto Rico and its diaspora for cultural analysis is a delicate task which requires a historical assessment of how notions of gender, race, class, in addition to Puerto Rico's colonial status, impact how Puerto Rican women have chosen motherhood in their lives. The notion of choice here is conflated with self-determination and women's right to choose what happens to their bodies even as they were denied reproductive justice. While there are myriad, intersecting possibilities to analyze motherhood as a practice, a gendered construct and expectation, a scientific discourse, and as a biopolitical tool used to police Puerto Rican women's reproduction and sexuality, I offer the possibility of examining motherhood as a source of freedom while also considering how motherhood has been portrayed in Puerto Rican culture and mobilized throughout Puerto Rico's colonial history. What I aim to do here is provide a historical and social context of the evolving notions of motherhood while examining a novel written by an Afro-Puerto Rican woman in her effort to rewrite or revise Puerto Rican history.

Motherhood is essentially the responsibility of bearing and raising children as much as it is an idea that has been manipulated and changed. Given the socio-historical backdrop, motherhood is mobilized in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) in different ways that, I believe, highlight how Puerto Rican women from the most marginalized positions or sectors of society have carved pathways for liberation or freedom via motherhood. *Daughters of the Stone* follows five generations of daughters throughout Puerto Rican history from the 19th century to the 21st – from slavery under the Spanish empire, to abolition, U.S. occupation and circular migration to the mainland U.S. and back.

The overarching plot of the novel tracks the daughters coming into contact with the familial stone, and thus their gift, and using it to carve their agency and harness freedom. The women also learn their histories through the stone and through oral tradition share and revise their familial stories with the stone until the last daughter writes the story. Each mother births a daughter and contributes to the family tree: Fela, Mati, Concha, Elena, Carisa. The organization of the novel is constructed into parts for each mother's story and with it comes a change of space, place, and struggle for agency but what remains constant is the inheritance of the stone and how it helps each mother/daughter find their freedom using its gift. The stone, and the gift that comes with it, are key elements to each woman's maternal practices.

And, through the role as a maternal figure or mother of a household, community, or family, Afro-Puerto Rican women have also challenged what Puerto Rican culture is through the celebration of and practice of cultural traditions rooted in Africa and the African diaspora. While this novel demonstrates how Afro-diasporic religions (like Santería although not explicitly named in Llanos-Figueroa's novel) and their practitioners (curanderas) are often excluded from society, demoralized, and perceived to be non-human with markers of other/otherness, Afro-Puerto Rican mothers couple their healing practices with their mothering practices and reject Eurocentric hegemonic culture in Puerto Rico. In doing so, these mothers also emphasize that their mothering practices are deeply ingrained in their healing practices – essentially one does not exist without the other. While examining motherhood in *Daughters of the Stone*, I contemplate the role of the mother in the nation and consider the following questions: How has colonial violence rendered who is allowed to be a mother? How does this rendering construct an ideal of motherhood? The

answers to these questions are helpful in understanding how Puerto Rican cultural nationalism shapes how we determine what Puerto Rican motherhood is and how it is conflated with national identity.

Historical Context

In the early twentieth century Puerto Rican women were pioneering the suffragist movement and attempting to obtain more autonomy in their lives while questioning machismo and representation. One of the leading voices of this movement was Mercedes Solá who in 1922 published *Feminismo: Estudio sobre su aspecto Social, Económico y Político* – originally delivered as a lecture in 1921– that defined a true and free woman as a mother.¹ Solá connected women’s freedom with motherhood and dismissed the possibility that not every woman wanted to be a mother. Moreover, at the time of her lecture the role of homemaker and mother was deemed an expectation for women and not a role or path for liberation. Her vision of feminism maintained women at home and imposed motherhood on all women while also excluding poor and Black women from her greater vision of women’s freedom. This imposition assigns heteronormative values of the family and patriarchal visions of what the modern woman “should be” – at home raising children as good wives and mothers. In actuality, Solá’s vision helped maintain male dominance in Puerto Rican society:

Motherhood, in the logic of her discourse, was woman’s inalienable duty and right, and la feminista was by no means derelict in her duties. Above all, she was a responsible mother and wife who also participated in the public sphere. Consequently, Solá’s model of womanhood did little to promote the idea of

¹ Other suffragist leaders of this time, like Luisa Capetillo, dominated the conversation and defined Puerto Rican feminism. Capetillo, for example, fought for labor rights and women’s voting rights. However, Puerto Rican feminism of the early twentieth century ignored race and class, and thus excluded a majority of Puerto Rican women.

freedom of choice. It understood subjectivity, as bell hooks has written in a parallel context, as “mired [in] heterosexism, a narrative of selfhood contained within a paradigm of coupled relationships” (hooks, 18). There was no space in Solá’s discourse for the woman who did not desire to be a man’s wife or the mother of children. Feminism, she took pain to stress, did not need to be seen as alien to Puerto Rican reality. In no fundamental way would her feminist subject clash with societal expectations for women (Roy-Fequiere, 920).

While Solá does advocate for women’s education, she asserts that feminist women will not threaten or disrupt men or their agenda. Solá’s model for achieving advancements for women was constructed so it would not fracture patriarchal society in Puerto Rico. Her feminist agenda did not question gender roles, re-examine gender, or challenge patriarchy. Magali Roy-Fequiere analyzes how Solá’s feminist imagination confined women to motherhood and marriage and removed choice for women. What type of progress or liberation is possible without dismantling patriarchy and its byproducts like machismo?

Solá is an important figure because she represents feminism aligned with patriarchal ideology that deemed women as objects of the house and bearers of children – inscribing what Maria Lugones calls the “Light Side of the gender matrix”: “On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism” (2003). Lugones envisions herself on the dark side while white women are on the light side and highlights the disconnect between the experiences and feminist theorizations of women of color and white women. She argues that when white women theorize about feminism in regard to all women without acknowledging or “recognizing difference,” they do not include women of color or understand their experiences, thus are unable to contribute to their visions of liberation. In “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” (2010) Lugones claims “decolonizing gender is a necessarily praxical task. It is to enact a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as lived transformation of the social” (Lugones 2010, 746). Here,

Lugones lays out the intersectional oppressions that colonized women encounter in the modern, capitalist, global system of power and theorizes decolonial feminism as grassroots work resisting colonial difference as resisting intersubjectivity.² For Lugones, “the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender [is] “decolonial feminism” (Lugones 2010, 747).

While Solá does encourage women to gain economic freedom, she believes women should be educated and empowered so they can be better mothers and wives. This is reminiscent of the Pedro Albizu Campos’ words that women bear the responsibility of “mothering the nation” – are there no other roles for Puerto Rican women in society?³ Solá’s depiction of motherhood does not offer substantial freedoms or liberation for Puerto Rican women; and, because her feminism is constructed for white, elite Puerto Rican women, the women that were poor, uneducated, and/or black are further marginalized. Because she was a dominant figure in the suffragist movement, her restrictive views on

² Lugones builds upon Anibal Quijano’s notion of coloniality understood as “coloniality of power” in which he analyzes how capitalism and modernity are global systems of power and exploitation that originate from colonization and thrive today. What Lugones achieves in her extension of the term is an analysis of gender that does not solely focus on sexual exploitation. She writes “I complicate his understanding of the capitalist global system of power, but I also critique his own understanding of gender as only in terms of sexual access to women. In using the term *coloniality* I mean to name not just a classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender, but also the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings” (Lugones 2010, 745). Lugones defines resistance as “the tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity, that minimal sense of agency required for the oppression ← → resisting relation being an active one, without appeal to the maximal sense of agency of the modern subject” (Lugones 2010, 746). This is where Lugones imagines a “spring of liberation” (Lugones 2010, 746).

³ Pedro Albizu Campos was a leader of the independence movement in Puerto Rico. His notion of independence conflated with women’s reproduction and motherhood and perpetuated patriarchal notions of gender and gender roles on the island. The dominance of “mothering the nation” trope in Caribbean literature is explained in Simone A. James Alexander’s “M/othering the Nation: Women’s Bodies as Nationalist Trope in Edwidge Danticat’s “Breath, Eyes, Memory.”

motherhood dominated the cultural discourse for quite some time. While the idea of a ‘forced’ motherhood was stressed by Solá, the American government and corporations negated women their motherhood and, for the most part, their right to choose to become a mother in the early and mid-twentieth century.⁴ I provide a historical and social evolving discourse of motherhood in Puerto Rico to suggest how the writers utilize motherhood in their texts differently and in a way that equates motherhood with liberation, although it has been mobilized to further trap women in gender roles or to advance a racist and sexist cultural discourse in the United States.

The scientific discourse of the early twentieth century concerning women’s bodies placed the blame for Puerto Rico’s problems on overpopulation and the culture of poverty on poor Puerto Rican women.⁵ This stereotype was based on U.S. cultural ideas that were created as validation for the U.S. to intervene and help Puerto Rico with their national problems. While the focus and study on other factors like the economy, displacement, forced migration, and unemployment could offer insight as to why poverty and overpopulation was so rampant in Puerto Rico, the cultural discourse turned to women and reproduction. The scientific and sociological rhetoric formed around Puerto Rican women claimed they had great sexual appetites and overly reproductive bodies. These ideas (about overpopulation, the culture of poverty, and overly reproductive women) invented by the

⁴ Briggs, Laura. *Reproducing Empire Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. University of California Press, 2002. Print.

⁵ Oscar Lewis was a sociologist who, in his book *La Vida*, validated racist notions that Puerto Ricans were undeniably at fault for their poverty and it was rooted in their nature and culture. Without examining how legacies of colonialism and modernity affect Puerto Ricans, the diaspora, and the island of Puerto Rico, Lewis contributes to a negative mythology of Puerto Ricans that permeates in the present. Lewis, Oscar. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty--San Juan and New York*. Random House, 1966. Print.

United States dominated the cultural discourse about Puerto Rico and faulted Puerto Rican women's bodies for the island's supposed population 'problem'.

This 'marketing' scheme was used in part to develop U.S. imperialist projects in the island and validated birth control experimentation and sterilization on Puerto Rican women. Laura Briggs' *Reproducing Empire* (2002) provides a cultural analysis to "locate the historical, political work done by scientific and social scientific ideas about family, reproduction, and sexuality in Puerto Rico" and provide a history of the sterilization project in Puerto Rico (Briggs, 9). This colonization over women's bodies demonstrates how the U.S. was threatened by brown and black maternal bodies and used biopolitical tools to carry out a grotesque imperial project. The notion of choice in Puerto Rican women's reproductive health was problematized during this time period when the industrialization of Puerto Rico also ruptured the island's environment, economy, and autonomy. Puerto Rican women had to confront negative stereotypes about their reproduction and sexuality while also combatting notions of choice. The film *La Operación* (1982) documents how Puerto Rican women, mostly women of color or poor, were recruited to sterilize themselves or use experimental birth control through recorded interviews that serve the purpose of testimony. This film is critical because it portrays how the notion of choice is fuzzy – many women were misinformed, did not understand the documents because of medical jargon or language barriers and were pushed to agree to sterilize themselves. Sterilization was so rampant in the island that approximately one-third of all women of childbearing age were sterilized and the procedure was colloquially referred to as 'la operación' in Puerto Rico. This grotesque history clearly demonstrates how Puerto Rican women were denied the choice to accept or decline motherhood on their own terms.

In a more radical and different approach to motherhood, Irene Vilar reflects on the notion of choice and reproductive freedom in her memoir *Impossible Motherhood: Testimonies of an Abortion Addict* (2009). *Impossible Motherhood* is a trans-generational account of an island-born Puerto Rican woman (and her family) who moves to New York to attend a university and falls in love with her professor. Throughout their abusive relationship, Vilar navigates the notion of choice – her freedom to choose what happens to her body – while it may not be fully her. She battles with mental illness and emotional abuse by her partner and endures fifteen abortions. Every time she has an abortion she reflects on her reproductive freedoms and thinks about how women back home (in Puerto Rico) were denied their right to decide what happens with their bodies in terms of reproductive healthcare and contraception. Vilar echoes how Puerto Rican motherhood was an experience and right denied to many Puerto Rican women throughout history. This is perhaps why Vilar frames her memoir with the historical violence on Puerto Rican women's bodies, Puerto Rican women's subjectivity, and the struggle for Puerto Rico's freedom and its colonial condition. Given the framework of her memoir, her choice to have fifteen abortions may be depicted as a form of resistance to her husband, her colonizer, Puerto Rico's state of coloniality, and her colonial subjectivity.⁶ Given the contextualization of how the discourse on motherhood has changed dramatically within

⁶ Laura Halperin analyzes the “multigenerational, matrilineal legacies of mental illness, abandonment, and abuse in Vilar's memoirs and positions these alongside Puerto Rico's history of colonization” (Halperin 17). In Halperin's reading of Vilar's memoirs, she connects both the struggle for Puerto Rican independence as well as Puerto Rican women's freedoms of their bodies to the struggle for the land's independence. She claims Vilar's works are “social commentaries about the damage inflicted on Puerto Rican women and Puerto Rican land that extend beyond the life story of one individual and highlight broader patterns of psychological, physical, and geopolitical harm” (Halperin 25).

Puerto Rico's history, I argue *Daughters of The Stone* uses motherhood as a motif for freedom that is linked with revisionist writing and healing practices.

Freedom Through Representation: (Re)writing The Past Through Fiction

The nucleus of Llanos-Figueroa's novel is the practice of storytelling via mother-daughter relationships that begins with Fela, the first mother, who is captured in Africa and forcibly taken to Puerto Rico to be a slave. While this is a novel, Llanos-Figueroa frames Puerto Rican history as black history through the depiction of the island's economic growth and dependence on slavery and the plantation system. And, she alludes to the trauma, violence, and pain suffered by slaves while also suggesting how gendered violence led to pregnancies, children, and abuses unique to female slaves. This storytelling is essentially a way the women keep their stories alive and educate their children on their family's (and the island's) history. In a way the stone that is bequeathed to every daughter is an archive of family secrets, legacies, and a dispatch into an afro-futuristic past that allows the women to speak to their ancestors. It is through this stone that Mati is able to communicate with her mother and see her face, since Fela died after childbirth. While the oral history is a family tradition and an act of preserving memory and healing practices, it eventually transforms into a written tradition that Fela's great-great-granddaughter struggles to write in part because of institutional and cultural bias. Moreover, the tradition kept alive through five generations of women is an act of resistance and a testament to their survival.

Motherhood and writing are both elements in the novel that signal Puerto Rican culture and politics and seek to answer the question of how women have been displaced by men. I argue that the complexities and realities Llanos-Figueroa pens in her book as an

author is similar to the the struggle Carisa, a diasporic Afro-Puerto Rican woman, encounters and attempts to overcome in the novel. Carisa resists institutional racism symbolized by university professors in Puerto Rico and rejects the cultural and political discourses in the island that exclude her from the Puerto Rican imaginary because she is black and has an afro. Writing her family's stories not only provides an account of Afro-Puerto Rican history and culture, but she rewrites Puerto Rican history and redefines Puerto Rican nationhood to include Black history and women's history through the focus on generational mothering practices. It is also much more compelling, yet less studied, than Rosario Ferré's magnum-opus *The House on the Lagoon*.⁷

I contextualize Llanos-Figueroa's decision as author to include the novel-within-a-novel "tool" and theme of motherhood as a primary motif in her text. This is important because context is key and proves why and how the author's feminist politics or agenda resonates with their characters who are writing texts "Carisa" and the overall integrity of their novels. The novel-within-a-novel plot is productive because it reveals to readers what the characters, and by extension the authors, deem is important and vital to the rewriting of Puerto Rican history. Whose perspective matters and needs to be told? Considering the important question of what revisionist work is and whose otherwise excluded voices must be included (now), many authors fall short. Llanos-Figueroa, however, carefully pens a novel that follows five generations of Afro-Puerto Rican women since slavery to the present day in the diaspora, the island, and back to Africa. In "Flipping the Script" (2017),

⁷ In her 'rewrite' of Puerto Rican history, Ferré perpetuates Puerto Rican racism and sexism that stems from the island's project to whiten itself and its colonial history. Instead, she offers one Afro-Puerto Rican female character, Petra, and casts her to the side, or the bottom of the house in the basement. Yet, this novel is praised for its feminist politics and female agency though it relies on the progress of elite, white Puerto Rican women advancing on the backs of poor, black women's labor and oppression.

C. Christina Lam writes, “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” (Lam, 1). More importantly, through the *archiving* of these women’s histories I argue that Llanos-Figueroa accomplishes two tasks: 1. She challenges which discourses of knowledge and knowledge production by positing Carisa as the storyteller of black women’s history and black cultural traditions in Puerto Rico’s history and, 2. She preserves the memory of these histories via a stone which functions as an archive and source of afro-diasporic religious powers that are quintessential to Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood.

The Stone: Alternative Archive and Epistemologies

In “Between Routine and Rupture: The Archive as Field Event” (2012) Tristan Platt ascertains that archives were first created in Italy and mentions that the United States revolutionized the manner in which files were stored with the file cabinet of the mid-nineteenth century (Platt, 3).⁸ However, these conceptualizations of when the system of archivization was created and of the archive itself focus predominantly on definitions from the West and negate the existence of other types of archives from other places in the world. This rhetoric follows the lines of thought that civilization began with Greek democracy or the Roman empire while ignoring the populations of African and Indigenous populations that lived with political and cultural systems in complex, sophisticated, and organized

⁸ In his book chapter, Platt confirms that “Archives existed in the ancient world, but the early modern drive to centralize diplomatic papers in chanceries came from Italy: ‘A new world of paper had come into existence some fifty years before Columbus’ encounter with the New World.’ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many remaindered government files were being centralized, organized and sometimes published by historians, as part of efforts to inspire new national and political histories. The discovery and classification of archives revolutionized the business of history making, turning it into the creation of well-sourced narrative charters purporting to show the ‘formation’ of nation-States” (Platt, 4).

ways. Because of the way this mechanization of the archive is glued to our conceptualizations of archives, Greek and Roman conceptualizations of archives and archiving practices have been normalized through the Western imagination.

Platt “dream[s] of a total Archive” and claims this dream is impossible (Platt, 2). If total archives are archives in which multiple forms of knowledge and histories are shared, documented, and safeguarded, then I disagree. The problem is that we are fixated on the traditional forms of archives that exist in files – either on paper or digital documents – that are stored in prestigious buildings or inaccessible websites. While digital archives have revolutionized the ways in which documents are stored and made accessible to the public, I am asking that we stretch our imaginations in imagining that archives do not exist (to us); they are simply unavailable to us because they are not meant for us. Because of these definitions, we also render these archives non-existent or real. While Platt does address that there were (and are) archives that existed before colonial invasions, I urge that there is a necessity to reimagining archives while recognizing that there are myriad abstractions for archives. These archives may be purposefully out of reach because they preserve memories and document stories in ways that transcend our norm. If these archives are out of reach because we do not understand them, then we inherently misunderstand or gloss over discourses of knowledge production and ways of knowing that are also out of reach.

Rodney G.S. Carter’s “Of Things Said and Unsaid” (2006) examines “the “gaps,” “blanks,” “void regions,” or silences in archives. He claims “even in a “total archives” environment [...] where state-sponsored institutions are responsible for the records created by governments as well as by individuals and organizations, which are charged with the role of being the keepers of memory and identity for an entire nation, it is impossible for

archives to reflect all aspects and elements of society” (Carter, 216). Because not all groups can be accounted for, some people will incontrovertibly be excluded from national memory; therefore, archives are manifestations of power. These are the silences and power structures Carter studies. He analyzes “archival silences, including how they are manifested, the implications of silence for the groups that are excluded, and the impact on societal memory in general. If records are destroyed, manipulated, or excluded, the narratives of the groups cannot be transmitted across time. Their stories will not be heard and they may ultimately disappear from history” (Carter, 216). This is why Llanos-Figueroa’s book is so special – it is a reflection on different ways of knowing, producing knowledge, and documenting stories that defy traditional discourses of epistemologies and how marginalized groups inherently exist outside of their exclusion. In this text, Afro-Puerto Rican women, most of whom are descendants of slavery, create archives to store their histories because their voices are excluded from the dominant narrative by ‘the powerful.’ They also create their archive in a stone that is only accessible to family members and is otherwise perceived as non-existent. I believe this is an act of safeguarding their stories, their perspectives, and power.

Platt’s notion of the living and dead archives helps me think about the archive brought to us in *Daughters of The Stone* where I argue the titular stone is an archive.⁹ While Llanos-Figueroa writes the stone as a central motif of the novel, it incorporates storytelling as a thematic act of resistance and necessary generational ‘passing down’ of knowledge. This practice of storytelling is a responsibility that, in this novel, falls on the

⁹ Tristan Platt writes “systems of file in current use may be thought of as ‘living’ archives. But an archive, is the set of remaindered files and documents which have been selected as worth preserving, although no longer current, and therefore, in some sense, de-personalized and ‘dead’” and states dead archives are like “entombed mummies” in the “central archive of the State” (Platt, 3).

shoulders of women and mothers. While I have argued that healing practices are intuitive with mothering practices, in *Daughters of the Stone*, the knowledge(s) of healing practices and histories that descend from Africa and Fela's capture are preserved and safeguarded in the stone.

Although the stone does not replace the tradition of oral history and storytelling, it allows for Fela to "tell" Mati, her daughter, her stories even after she dies (which happens shortly after giving birth to her). Fela willingly sacrifices her life to become a mother, but also smuggles the stone at the time of her capture. Fela stores and preserves her story, along with that of her ancestors, in this stone and archives histories that are traditionally documented by the oppressors. The stone also provides a metaphysical connection to the ancestral lands, communication with the ancestors, and visitation with Mother Oshun. This archive is the only way for Fela's descendants to learn their history, practice(s) of healing, and communicate with their predecessors. This archive may be considered a 'dead' archive because it was created by Fela for her family and is of no use to outsiders and invaders. She willingly chooses to harbor her family secrets and bequeath them to her daughter. By remaining 'dead' and inaccessible to the general public, Fela and her daughters are the archivists of their familial histories and choose to utilize and foster a 'dead' archive to protect their ways of knowing depicted in their family's epistemologies and maternal practices.

Llanos-Figueroa writes that these women are daughters of this stone because in a way they would not be Fela's daughters without it. Not only does Fela die postpartum, but her tongue had been grotesquely removed by her first enslaver. The stone symbolically represents the necessity for this archive when Fela is literally and figuratively silenced in

the novel by her slave masters. This moment also represents the gendered and racial violence on the plantation that erased and objectified women of Afro-descent: “The decision to cut out Fela’s tongue is symbolic: hindered from describing [her experience with sexual] 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” (Hurtado, 5). However, Fela’s story, and that of her relationship with Imo and her village in Africa does not end, instead it is retold and recorded in the stone. Without her archive, Fela’s story would have disappeared. It is because Fela is able to communicate with Mati in metaphysical spaces via Afro-diasporic religious practices that she introduces Mati to her ‘real’ father and Mother Oshun. I argue that Fela carves the initial pathway to liberation and freedom for herself and her daughters through this archive because it provides her descendants with a recorded history that would otherwise be omitted and ignored in the plantation records. And, in those records, Fela would be depicted as an object and stripped of her dignity, humanity, and livelihood in memory. Furthermore,

“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 endeavors. Fela’s depictions 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 only exist via a master-slave dialectic, or more importantly, that their identities are only the trauma of enslavement (Hurtado, 6).

She ‘documents’ herself in the way she wants to be remembered that honors her life before her capture and enslavement, and also as an empowered mother who births Mati who shares her story.

In her book *Dispossessed Lives* (2016), Marisa Fuentes reads against archive records and attempts to contextualize the stories of enslaved women and free women of color who are consistently objectified as itemized property and seen as nothing more than property. She writes,

Enslaved women appear as historical subjects through the form and content of archival documents in the manner in which they lived: spectacularly violated, objectified, disposable, hypersexualized, and silenced. The violence is transferred from the enslaved bodies to the documents that count, condemn, assess, and evoke them, and we receive them in this condition. Epistemic violence originates from the knowledge produced about enslaved women by white men and women in this society, and that knowledge is what survives in archival form (Fuentes, 5).

The construction of this archive depicts how Fela found agency for herself and provided a source of liberation for her daughters – Mati eventually legally frees herself and her community with the powers she gains from the stone. Fela’s archivization of her story is not only a moment of autonomy or ‘freedom’ within enslavement, it outrightly challenges the narrative about slaves, especially as a woman who are subject to sexual violence.¹⁰ This story of enslavement, freedom, capture, struggle, and Afro-Puerto Rican life will eventually cease to be solely a folkloric tale when Carisa decides to write it. The archive is then manifested into a written document that cannot be erased and literally tells the story that Fela could not.

If the stone is a “dead” archive, as Tristan Platt would argue, then it is because there are histories and knowledges that are unavailable to mainstream society. The family is not accepted in traditional society although their ailments and ‘secrets’ are sought after in moments of desperation. The stone represents a hidden archive that descends from Africa and documents capture, the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and the construction of

¹⁰ In the novel, Llanos-Figueroa writes about the frequency of sexual violence enacted onto slaves by slave owners.

modern society through the labor and exploitation of slaves. It is through this stone that the family stories and their knowledge is shared and reproduced. It also rejects the western discourses of knowledge and religious practices that were imposed on slaves and their families, but instead documents how this family has continued those practices. And, this fixation on a “Western” archive does not consider other renditions outside of this definition as archives, so they are deemed non-existent and are rendered invisible or illegitimate. This begs the question: are all archives meant to be seen, entered, and accessible? Given the forces of colonization and imperialism, is gatekeeping archives for Indigenous and other non-white/Western peoples a way to keep their archives safe?

Rodney G.S. Carter writes about how power is related to archival production and the curation of archives by starting with simple questions: Whose stories belong in the archives; what histories are archivable? He claims that archives begin with powerful people and institutions:

The powerful in society are typically aligned with the state and its apparatus, such as the military and the police. Powerful groups in society include certain racial, ethnic and religious groups, the wealthy, and the educated. The powerful can be, and are, defined by their gender and sexuality. They are not necessarily a part of the majority in society but rather can exert an influence that outweighs their numbers. These powerful groups create the records that will eventually enter the archives and use their power to define the shape an archive takes (Carter, 217).

Essentially, these powerful people have a great task of deciding who and what gets remembered, and while not everything will make it into an archive, there are many omissions of certain groups and their perspectives. By choosing who and what gets remembered through archivization, these people also get to choose how, and, therefore dominate the narrative’s perspective, story, and impact and overall influence on national

culture and society. These decisions are not random but purposeful and groups or people who are excluded must document their own histories – and they do. Therefore, Carter argues that silences also occur because the knowledge production of the powerful in society does not always follow or adhere to the same format or ways of knowing of different populations or groups. It is nearly impossible to accurately represent and archive people's stories when their ways of knowing and 'productions' are not understood or recognized. Aside from outrightly excluding certain groups from archives and erasing their stories, a different form of silencing transpires: "silencing also occurs when an individual speaks but they have no authority behind them.¹¹ This results in the speech act not being acknowledged and hence the words are not able to achieve their desired effect or fulfill their purpose. Due to a lack of power, the statements are not heeded, they are not recognized as speech acts or as records and are denied a place in the archives" (Carter, 218). These silences originate in ignorance and racism, but they also stem from the 'silenced' people using silence to their advantage in ways that protect their histories, cultures, and lives.

For the Felas of the world, their different ways of producing and archiving knowledge – and remaining silent – are how they exploited this silence to their advantage. Carter explains this as he differentiates archival silences by categorizing them into natural and unnatural silences:

¹¹ Carter also explains these archival erasures as violence: "where groups have their own record-keeping traditions that differ from the literary tradition upon which European and North American archives are based, such as the oral traditions employed by Native North American groups, the silencing is compounded. The speech acts, that is, the documents that are produced, are not recognized as records by the archives. South African archivist Verne Harris states that there is a dire problem of non-responsiveness in the archives to the marginal or "indigenous" epistemologies. The marginal voices that do not conform, that do not adopt the "powerful Western frame of reference" of the dominant group, are ignored. These voices are silenced – if not actively, then through ignorance and chauvinism" (Carter, 219).

According to feminist rhetorical theory, there is a difference between natural and unnatural silences: natural silences are those entered into by choice, often to allow for reflection and personal growth. Unnatural silences occur when the individual or group is silenced, through the use of power, both overt and covert. Those silenced by power “are not people with nothing to say but are people without a public voice and space in which to say it.” Unnatural silences must be combated by the archivist, but natural silences, those where the marginalized can assert their own power, must be respected. The natural silence of the marginal, however, is a different thing than a deliberate silence inserted into the documents by the powerful in order to mask wrongdoing. The silences created to avoid culpability, so that it is impossible to hold the powerful accountable for their actions – like those unnatural silences of the marginal – must be combated by the archivist. (Carter, 228)

Using a feminist theoretical framework, I perceive the stone in *Daughters of the Stone* to be a form of natural silence that has survived unnatural silences, violence, oppression, and injustice. It is Fela and her daughter’s choice to ‘remain silent’ if it means reproducing their cultural histories and maternal practices and telling their family’s histories. It is their choice to be silent rather than be silenced by those in power. Though this practice is an attempt to reconcile with exclusion, it is in no way a conformity for unnatural silencing and other archival violence like erasure.

In *Dispossessed Lives* Fuentes looks beyond the silencing and objectification of enslaved women to reread the archive and its documents and produce new meanings about enslaved women’s lives. She notes, “the work of this book is to make plain how and why this knowledge was created and reproduced, and to employ new methodologies that disrupt this process in order to illuminate subjugated, “marginalized and fugitive knowledge [and perspectives] from,” enslaved women” (Fuentes, 6). Fela leaves Mati with an archive that resists western epistemologies and discourse while also offering the story of her life and ancestors that contribute to the ways in which memory has new meaning. This stone, which functions as an archive and a communicator to another world, is Mati’s inheritance. Fela’s

memories of her homeland and her life along with the history of her community are stored in this stone for Mati to use and bequeath to her children, too. The narrator explains Mati's first encounter with the archive that transports her to another dimension where the noises around her are almost mute and "the wall was gone and she was no longer where she had been" and is now surrounded by "*yerba buena, menta* and other plants of healing" so that she is no longer on the plantation (Llanos-Figueroa, 68). The narrator describes her experience:

She knew nothing of the world flashing before her and yet she knew everything about it. Here were her ancestors, long-ago Africans, the world the Lady [Oshun] had spoken about in her dreams. But here also were people she hadn't met yet. Here was Tia Josefa, old and tired and ready to go rest [...] she saw her children and grandchildren being born, maturing, and passing on from the world [...] then there were dozens, then hundreds of floating faces in a sea of red- sinking, struggling, and screaming [...] She opened her eyes and she was back. She sat, mesmerized, unable to pull herself away. Was this the legacy left by her mother? (Llanos-Figueroa, 69-70).

Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa invites us to reimagine what archives look like, what they are supposed to be, and begs the question: how is the archive constructed in spaces of limited agency? Furthermore, how do archives exist and take shape outside of the western, hegemonic imaginary? Is the Afrofuturistic archive fictionalized by Llanos-Figueroa illuminating something greater than a storytelling tradition?

The metaphor of the stone as archive functions doubly in this text: by providing a fictive account (this is the story Carisa eventually writes and shares with us as the narrator) that highlights how slave mothers and their descendants lived their lives through the storytelling tradition, and the preservation of history that is not existent or obscured in productions of knowledge institutionally or in literature. Because the stone provides power, knowledge(s) of healing and her family history, and metaphysical communication with her

family, Carisa is able to write her family's story of survival, resistance, motherhood, and religious traditions. This titular stone, which is smuggled to Puerto Rico by Fela during her capture in Africa, is deemed important for ceremonies, tradition, 'meeting' kin in metaphysical ways, and communicating with the ancestors and ancestral lands. It is through this stone which a tongue-less Fela is able to communicate with her children and in a way overcome the colonial violence she has experienced. This stone is an archive that preserves and shields the memories of the women in this story and remains an alternative archive that demonstrates autonomy and agency within liminal spaces. It is with this stone – either through its powers or knowledge – that each woman is able to carve her own pathway and achieve a modicum of freedom. However, these women create and continue to fortify their own archive which is materialized in the stone.

Carisa: Archivist and Storyteller

Though Carisa is not a mother in the story, her role is critical to the development to the story because she is the archivist, the author, and the final daughter. In fact, the manuscript she attempts to write in the novel is materialized as *Daughters of the Stone* – the novel we read. If we want to think of Carisa in relation to motherhood, we can think of her birthing the novel and the written archive. In the "Postscript" the author reveals herself: "My name is Carisa Ortíz and I am the teller of stories. It is what I do. It is who I am. I have collected many stories. They have been given to me freely. And now, I give them to you. All I ask is that you listen with your heart and, if you have a mind to, that you pass them on" (Llanos-Figueroa, 317). Additionally, at the end of the novel Carisa explains she is the collector of stories and suggests there are many stories that she stores, thus

demarcating her the archivist of this (familial) history that represents Black history and women's history as important 'pieces' of Puerto Rican history though not necessarily included in the archive, popular culture, or other spaces where national histories are shared like museums and universities.

In the novel-within-a-novel subplot, Llanos-Figueroa highlights the struggle Carisa faces to write her story by first changing the oral history tradition into the written word. Carisa fights to tell her stories despite institutional disenfranchisement, embarrassment, and rejection from university professors. When Carisa tries to enroll in an advanced writing class, she approaches the table of Professor Stevens and he assumes she is looking for the "Composition 101" registration table upon first seeing her, a Black woman with an afro, though she is an advanced writer and the class was waived. He did not give her a chance to explain her credentials. He saw a Black body and believed she could not be in his class. He told her "I rarely accept freshmen into my classes anyway. Maybe this is a waste of your time and mine" and mocked her journal (Llanos-Figueroa, 264). After a quick look through Carisa's journal Professor Stevens offered her advice: "You need to start reading before you attempt to write. Read everything. Read the masters. Read everything in every genre. Study the canon. Steep yourself in the great themes of Western Thought" (Llanos-Figueroa, 264). The professor's racial bias is once again revealed especially since he only deems Western discourses and literature as worthy of attention and study. Professor Stevens is extremely close-minded and unable to recognize that other forms of knowledge as well as alternative ways of being and writing exist outside of his expertise. In addition, Professor Stevens disregards Carisa's writing as mythic nonsense and she is disheartened:

"As to this" – he pointed to my journal – "this is a mass of superstitious nonsense, cliched ghosts and goblins. You must understand that I'm interested in high-quality

literary work. This... is just not it. This type of marginal material has no place in belle lettres [...] You might have flare. There are some nicely turned phrases. Maybe one of the children's fantasy magazines. Their editors are always looking for stories for their Halloween issues."

I heard nothing more. I left his office, his words trailing behind me. I slipped my journal into my coat and hugged it all the way back to the dorm [...] I felt it needed my protection and yet I felt so wounded and in need of protection myself (Llanos-Figueroa, 264-5).

The professor is a symbol of the institutional protection of and investment in whiteness at the university level which is representative of the nation. Furthermore, this moment represents the lack of diversity in the voices that are given institutional support to write or develop ideas concerning the nation. Yet, Carisa writes her story anyway and no longer seeks institutional validation or approval, and thus also rejects the Puerto Rican literary canon that is made up the writings by mostly elite, white men.

Through Carisa's experience, Llanos-Figueroa is making the argument that these stories, which represent the history of Puerto Rico since the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, told by Black women subvert power dynamics and carve a pathway towards liberation. Llanos-Figueroa resists the silencing and erasure of Afro-Latinas in these narratives and the "denigration of African lineage on the island" and "reclaim[s] this identity from colonial narratives requires countering a coloniality of power and its mechanisms, as well as complicating the histories that coloniality bequeaths" (Hurtado, 2). Writers and thinkers, most of whom were white men of the upper class, began defining Puerto Rican identity, culture, and nationhood in the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. For example, Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo: An Insight into the Puerto Rican Character* (1912) sought to define Puerto Rican identity and culture with Spanish and Eurocentric ancestry coupled with Taino roots, thus ignoring and eradicating any

African heritage. Jorge Duany's "Making Indians out of Blacks" (2001) demonstrates how this anti-Black rhetoric that defined Puerto Rican nationalism and identity that prioritizes an ethnic identity more akin to indigenous heritage still pervades the present.¹² Because *Daughters of the Stone* is a historical fiction that attempts to rewrite the nation's history in a way that honors and respects the African diaspora and its roots in Puerto Rico, she rejects the power structures that seek to obliterate the Carisas of the world and uses writing as a liberatory tool.

Roberta Hurtado turns to Xhercis Méndez's "Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology" (2015) to explain how seeking validation and acknowledgement within the categories and value systems set by those in power who are responsible for systemic violence, erasure, will not liberate you. Instead, it furthers your dehumanization: "Attempting to gain acknowledgement as humans via the categories provided within a coloniality will only perpetuate the systemic dehumanization that founds such categories. Indeed, those who are oppressed by coloniality do not gain liberation from domination by achieving category-inclusion, but instead become more insidiously imbedded into its mechanisms of control" (Hurtado, 3).

¹² Duany, Jorge. "Making Indians Out of Blacks: The Revitalization of Taino Identity in Contemporary Puerto Rico" *Taino Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*. Haslip-Viera, Gabriel and Arlene Dávila, ed. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001. Print.

Jose Luis Gonzalez's foundational text, *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country and other Essays* (1990), rejects the writings of Pedreira and other writers of this generation and traces a historical genealogy of Puerto Rico's culture and identity in a way that includes African, European, and Indigenous roots but adds that the U.S. colonization of the island is the '4th story.'

Juan Flores' *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (1993) examines Puerto Rican culture and identity in a way that includes all of Puerto Ricans' cultural and racial roots while also incorporating the diaspora.

Jorge Duany also interprets the various evolutions of Puerto Rican identity and includes the diasporic influence on the Puerto Rican identity and culture in his well-known text *Nation on the Move*.

Duany, Jorge. *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move Identities on the Island & in the United States*. University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Print.

Moreover, Carisa continues to dismantle colonial and modern ideas of literature and bigger notions of knowledge and knowledge production by writing her family's epistemologies and 'ways of knowing' through maternal and healing practices. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Carisa finishes the manuscript after she visits Puerto Rico and Africa – her ancestral lands. Because she is a diasporic subject who accesses the memories of her mothers, including her great-great grandmother Fela, both Puerto Rico and Africa are deemed motherlands. Fela is taken from West Africa and forcibly brought to Puerto Rico against her will which is why three generations of mothers are born in Puerto Rico. Because Carisa is born in the United States, she is pulled to Puerto Rico to find the answers to her questions. Upon arriving in Puerto Rico and feeling alienated in the university and society, she learns from her mentor that she should return to Africa and includes this diasporic history and cultural exchange in the manuscript.

As the author, Carisa uses the prologue to introduce the novel as a collection of stories that belong to the women in her family because she is the archivist and author. These stories constructed her identity and span five generations of mothers, but they also represent a larger history of Afro-Puerto Rican women in the island: "These are the stories. My stories, their stories – just as they were told to my mother and her mother and hers. They were given to me for safekeeping, and now I give them to you [...] These are the 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, and deposited me on the morning of today. They are the stories of how I came to be who I am, where I am" (Llanos-Figueroa, x). More importantly, because Fela is literally and figuratively silenced in the novel via a grotesque tongue removal, we need Carisa to document and share these stories

as a way to subvert the lasting colonial power. Through the character of Carisa, the author who provides the manuscript, “[Llanos-Figueroa’s] novel *Daughters of the Stone* is a literary intervention to re-claim the Afro-Latinx subject and to give witness to the past” (Lam, 1). And, Hurtado writes, *Daughters of the Stone* “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” in *Daughters of the Stone* (Hurtado, 1). Carisa’s role is critical as the author and archivist because this book emerges as a project of memory and recovery work.

Lugones writes “the decolonial feminist’s task begins by her seeing the colonial difference, emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it” (Lugones 2010, 753). In *Daughters of the Stone* Llanos-Figueroa mobilizes the character of Carisa to ‘rewrite’ Puerto Rican history in a way that includes Black women’s history as inclusive of Puerto Rican history and also demonstrating how different ways of knowing (and being and writing) led to this book. This story encompasses discourses of thought and motherhood that negate and challenge hegemonic epistemologies of knowing, producing knowledge, and archiving. Lugones also writes:

One does not resist the coloniality of gender alone. One resists it from within a way of understanding the world and living in it that is shared and that can understand one’s actions, thus providing recognition. Communities rather than individuals enable the doing; one does with someone else, not an individualist isolation. The passing from mouth to mouth, from hand to hand of lived practices, values, beliefs, ontologies, space-times, and cosmologies constitutes one. But it is important that these ways are not just different... These ways of being, valuing, and believing have persisted in the resistant response to coloniality (Lugones 2010, 754).

Alternatively, I offer that Carisa is an incarnation of how Llanos-Figueroa sees and understands herself and uses her body politics and feminist politics to challenge knowledge

production, including literature, mothering practices, and alternatives to medicine for healing, and archivization. While Carisa's writing, which is a stand-in for Llanos-Figueroa's writing, was initially rejected as 'mythic nonsense' she writes anyway and puts her family's stories on paper where they are no longer omitted or erased. Llanos-Figueroa's novel is a representation of Afro-Puerto Rican (and Afro-Caribbean) feminist decolonial work.

Alternative Stories, Histories, and Power

The stone is not only an archive of Fela's stories but a safekeeping of epistemologies that challenge the Western hegemonic discourse and the forceful and violent imposition of colonial religion, science, language, and ways of thinking onto indigenous and enslaved populations. This tension between the indoctrination of Western knowledge and *other* epistemologies is highlighted various times in the novel through the ways different mothers approach the educational system.

Mati and her partner Cheo discuss their daughter Concha's upbringing and debate whether or not she should attend school. Mati refuses to ameliorate her epistemologies and ways of being and with that of the local school, which is a theoretical and concrete symbol of her own oppression in society. The people who created these schools were violent to her mother (removing Fela's tongue) and have also shunned her for being different. While Cheo thinks Concha should have a holistic upbringing that encompasses both her natural gifts and public-school education, Mati affirms that Concha knows what she needs to know. When Cheo introduces the idea of Concha enrolling in school Mati responds,

But, Cheo, I never went to that school and neither did you and we have a good life. Please, the child is happy. She has all she needs here. She's free and safe here. Let

her be. Out there, what is there for her but misery? Those people don't understand us. They never will. What did living in town do for you? You're back here now. You're happier than you ever were there. Why should she be any different? She has us--- (Llanos-Figueroa, 134).

While Mati alludes that freedom and being at home signifies safety and happiness, she also reasserts that systemic oppression and dehumanization makeup the society they live in and she is trying to shield her daughter from feeling how she has felt. She also reminds Cheo that his freedom and happiness depend on space and place; when he chased the idea of freedom that he prescribes to, he was not neither free nor happy. Mati provided that for herself and her community without relying on or participating in the school system(s), religious institution(s), or trade that the folks in the city or outside of her plantation adhere to or follow. She used her other knowledge/ power to regain her inheritance and wealth and proves that the epistemologies of the school system are not more valuable than the ones she was taught in Africa. It is because of this that she and Cheo are free. Cheo refutes,

“And when you and I are gone, Mati? [...] how will we protect her? What will we have given her to help her make her own way through life? She needs to learn the new ways”

“She has the stories, the stone, the gift. Those are all she needs.”

Cheo threw his hands up in disgust. “And what will that ‘gift’ do for her? It can't buy anything, it can't help her read or write and figure numbers. It can't---”

“Don't you dare dismiss what you don't understand, Cheo”

“School will show her her place in the world, give her strength, guide her through the pain and the suffering and the struggle. It will set her feet on the right path, pave the way, give her direction, and strengthen her.”

“Show her *her* place? These books, they are the things of the *blanquitos del capital*. Are you telling me they were thinking of us when they made these books? I've seen them. There's never a picture of anybody who looks like you or me or her. What place can they show her? In whose world? What path will they lead her to? The books will make her weak and twist her thinking until she doesn't know our ways or theirs. And then she'll be really lost [...] No, Cheo, this is really a bad idea” (Llanos-Figueroa, 134-5).

Although Mati is illiterate, she did not need to learn how to decode a will or prove her rights to land with a document to be free or happy. She has always relied on her gift and

her stone and affirms that that is all Concha will ever need. The stone is the family's archive that contains the epistemologies that are necessary for her survival, freedom, and healing. However, this conversation Cheo represents the way society functions and perceives knowledges that are "foreign" to them, so when Mati tells Cheo that he does not understand their ways of *being* or *knowing* she is also asserting that society, and its representatives, are ignorant of their truths as well.

Mati knows she cannot be free or live her life the way she wants in a system that constantly views her and her way of being as other. Mati does not want her daughter conforming to societal norms and adhere to society's beliefs of what they deem is 'correct' or 'true'. Because it is these systems that ostracize Mati and Concha's gifts and healing practices, and by extension their mothering practices. Mati references the erasure of Afro-Puerto Ricans and "curanderos" in these books that are taught in the school and supposedly represent the Puerto Rican nation and its history while omitting black history and women's history. Because of this erasure, Mati is sure Concha will learn a biased version of history that completely eliminates and silences people who look like her. In her power as the author of this novel, Llanos-Figueroa writes a book that centers Afro-Puerto Ricans and examines their livelihoods since coming into contact with this island via the slave trade. She does not shy away from highlighting the tension and friction between the two knowledge discourses and why Mati, who represents Afro-Puerto Rican women, (former) slaves, who cannot trust the cultural and logic systems that have caused so much harm to her, her family, and the people who look like her.

It is this system that demoralizes their way of being and deems them other through the dehumanizing term “bruja”. Cheo calms Mati and convinces her to send Concha to school by assuring her that Concha could benefit from mastering both epistemologies:

“Mati, the world is changing too quickly and getting more and more complicated. Concha needs to learn more things than we can teach her. [...] Look, you can help her so she doesn’t lose sight of her gift. She’ll have two ways of knowing and two ways of living, all right? Mati, that’s why we’re here-- we can help her find a way of walking both paths” (Llanos-Figueroa, 135).

Mati eventually concedes despite her fear and Concha attends school. Throughout the novel, the word bruja is prohibited to be spoken at home for the harm it has brought the family. It is not a surprise that Concha feels like she does not belong in the local school and returns home humiliated and ostracized because of an incident with the stone. After being deemed a bruja, Concha does not want to bare her feet – they are the source of her gift and provide power – and completely alienates herself from her culture and Mati’s practices until she becomes an adult and teaches her daughter her family’s traditions.

While Mati seems to be right, is Cheo right, too? Should Concha balance both traditions of knowing and develop hybridization of both, or simply choose which ‘pieces’ to keep from both that honor her family but also better her life? Cheo reiterates the necessity of literacy in his and his family’s lives, and Mati affirms that society has erased her (and what she represents) from books – vital sources of knowledge. Is this why the novel ends with Carisa, Mati’s great-granddaughter, literally writing her family’s story? Perhaps Llanos-Figueroa employs the character of Carisa to suggest the importance of marginalized folks telling and writing their own stories and livelihoods in an effort to combat erasure.

When Cheo initially reunited with Mati after seven years of living in the capital, he shares with Mati how his life has been since he has found his freedom: learning to read and write. He offers this source of freedom as a “gift” to Mati.¹³ She is not persuaded:

Listening to all his stories, Mati had been introduced to a new world. She was carried along on his excitement, on his flights of discovery. But this last sentence brought her to a complete halt. “I don’t need to learn reading and writing. Why would I? It is a thing of *los blancos*.” ... “Mati, they write everything down everything that is important on their papers. They write down when somebody’s born, when they die, when they get married. They write down what they buy and sell and whom they want to leave things to when they die. They write down their past and present. They write down their lives. They write down their messages to each other that we don’t know anything about. Many of their own, their poor ones, can’t read or make a mark on their paper. Some of their women can’t, either. Only a few, the ones with the power, can do this thing. No wonder they kept it for themselves, like their jewels and their money and their land. Just the fact that they don’t want us to have it tells me that we *must* learn to do this.”

Ultimately, Cheo leaves for the capital and Mati is unconvinced that she should become literate and change herself with a skill she associates with the people who enslaved her and her mother. While Cheo tried to impose his own notion of freedom unto Mati, she did not associate freedom with assimilation and she eventually provides Cheo with complete freedom where he has the agency to sell his woodwork and receive full compensation. However, he was not completely wrong about writing one’s story... which is why Carisa’s mission to write the family’s story is how the novel ends. Because in some regard, Cheo was right – writing is a source of power that was purposefully reserved for a few to narrate which stories, and by extension- people, matter and deserve to be remembered. Still, the stone harbors the family’s secrets and ways of being in a way that cannot be touched or invaded. The stone functions as an archive and a reminder that alternative epistemologies

¹³ In the text, Cheo refers to literacy as his second gift for Mati after he presented her with earrings (84).

are crucial to disrupt the suffocating indoctrination of colonial culture and ways of being and thinking. It also provides the trans-generational history that Carisa eventually writes.

Motherhood is an overarching theme of the text that examines the cultural and political structures of society – who gets to mother and what types of mothering practices are considered valuable. In *Daughters of the Stone* Carisa pushes back against the institutionalized ideas about what is real knowledge and which stories matter. If the novel we are reading is the novel Carisa writes, then she also highlights how healing is quintessential to Afro-Puerto Rican womanhood and motherhood, which is how these women resist and construct pathways for freedom. This tradition functions as motif and act of recovery throughout the text. And, the women Carisa, and inherently Llanos-Figueroa, write about are women who push their sisters and community upward.

The affirmation of Black motherhood in *Daughters of the Stone*, captures how Puerto Rican women who are black, descendants of slaves, and practitioners of African religions defy hegemonic views of motherhood and Puerto Rican identity. In this text blackness is represented via syncretic Afro-diasporic religions that are not Christian, though Christianity is the dominant faith of Puerto Rico. Through this, readers are forced to question what type of knowledges and discourses do we know to be true? trust? and respect? The representation of healing as a knowledge and a discourse is deemed foreign or other by outsiders, but in *Daughters of the Stone* it is written in the form of recovery. Furthermore, the healing practices of the Afro-Puerto Rican women, mostly mothers, demonstrate that even a modicum of freedom can be achieved through this power/gift due to its unquestionable aspect of empowered mothering.

Empowered Mothering, Blackness, and Freedom

In *Daughters of the Stone*, Afro-Puerto Rican novelist, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa rewrites Puerto Rican history by centering Black womanhood and motherhood through the stories of five generations of Afro-Puerto Rican women. The novel begins with Fela, a slave who is forcibly brought to Puerto Rico from West Africa, who smuggles a powerful stone with her in her vagina foreshadowing that power stems from birth and motherhood in this story. What Llanos-Figueroa accomplishes in this book is nothing short of extraordinary given the canonization of Puerto Rican literature is heavily white and male and it's been that way since its earliest conception.

Through the stories of Fela and the daughters that follow (Mati, Concha, Elena, Carisa), Llanos-Figueroa highlights how afro-diasporic religions are natural and an important part of Puerto Rican history, women's history, and black history. While some daughters have more difficulty embracing their religious and cultural lineage, the negotiation processes they undergo demonstrates how Puerto Rican society shuns their religious and cultural practices. That is why Concha, for example, temporarily denounces her special gift when she is called a bruja at school.¹⁴ Ultimately, the women's decisions to embrace their healing abilities and utilize them as part of their mothering practices rejects the hegemonic cultural discourse in Puerto Rico and proclaims blackness and Afro-Puerto Rican culture as natural and beautiful. Considering the violent history associated with forced sterilization and birth control experimentation dictating poor women of color in

¹⁴ Bruja is the Spanish translation for witch. In the novel Llanos-Figueroa constantly refers to brujas as a taboo term that the women dislike and deem dehumanizing.

Puerto Rico could not be mothers, as a site of resistance but also perhaps a site of freedom and liberation as well.

Despite the grotesque history and violence associated with Puerto Rican motherhood, or negated motherhood, I view Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood as a site for liberation or freedom. Here freedom is directly tied to Puerto Rican women's empowered mothering that disrupts Western cultural hegemony.¹⁵ I aim to explain how notions of motherhood are interconnected with the imagination of freedom in Puerto Rican literature, and in doing so I investigate how the representation of Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood is crucial to the history of the island through the analyses of Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's historically fictive novel: *Daughters of the Stone*. A historical trope in Caribbean literature is relating a nation or land to a woman or her body. When Pedro Albizu Campos fought for Puerto Rican independence, he used language that gendered the Puerto Rican nation as a woman stating 'she must be freed.'¹⁶

In examining Black motherhood, the ideas of race, class, and gender intersect to provide a holistic sense of the Afro-Puerto Rican mother on the island of Puerto Rico. I build on Erica Beatson's concept of empowered motherhood, which is an act of resistance to hegemonic and patriarchal ideas of mothering that showcases a reification of Black,

¹⁵ I explain later in this section how Erica Beatson defines empowered mothering and employs this idea in her work.

¹⁶ In *Reproducing Empire*, Laura Briggs cites a brief excerpt from one of Pedro Albizu Campos' speeches as a preface to her chapter "Debating Reproduction" as a way to signal how Nationalist politics regulate Puerto Rican women's reproduction and sexuality: "The brazenness of the Yankee invaders has reached the extreme of trying to profane Puerto Rican motherhood; of trying to invade the very insides of nationality" (74). This excerpt reveals that Albizu Campos couples Puerto Rican reproduction with motherhood and signals it is the responsibility of women. He also condemns North American imperialism that threatens Puerto Rican nationalism by trying to regulate Puerto Rican women's reproduction.

Diaspora culture. Empowered Mothering “is recognized as an alternate location for resistance to occur” and through this mothering there are decisions made to preserve culture that rejects hegemonic, patriarchal white culture (Beatson, 74). In “Engaging Empowered Mothering: Black Caribbean Diasporic (M)othering Under Patriarchal Motherhood” (2013), Erica Beatson analyzes Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* with a feminist mothering theoretical lens. Beatson argues that the mothering practices of black diasporic women in Smith’s novel are in direct opposition to patriarchal ideas of motherhood and culture in Britain, and therefore their mothering practices are acts of resistance. This mothering is displayed by African slave mothers in Puerto Rico and the descendants of those mothers. Because “western representations of motherhood shape what we perceive as normative or appropriate through social and culture institutions,” a cultural text that explores and celebrates black motherhood inherently defies and resists hegemonic notions of motherhood (Beatson, 74). While these depictions of motherhood are fictive, they relay important ideals of society and how diasporic subjects in this society are racialized and othered.¹⁷

Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s novel is a meditation of Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood that challenges the normalization of patriarchal, white culture in Puerto Rico and reclaims blackness. I read the Afro-Puerto Rican mothers’ mothering practices in line with empowered motherhood, so that their mothering methods, decisions, and practice(s) are intuitively rejecting white, patriarchal, Christian hegemonic culture. Not only is this resistance, but because the mothers couple their mothering practice with healing practices, they are also creating pathways towards freedom. Through the close reading of Afro-Puerto

¹⁷ Beatson’s study is on Afro-diasporic Caribbean subjects in British society while this chapter examines Afro-diasporic relations in this novel depicting both American and Puerto Rican societies.

Rican motherhood, I offer this modality as a way to consider how Puerto Rican women have imagined Afro-Puerto Rican women, and women from marginal positions in society, have constructed pathways to freedom from liminal autonomous positions.

Llanos-Figueroa alludes to the necessity of recovery work here, and her book which completely focuses on Afro-Puerto Rican mothers dating back to the history of slavery in Puerto Rico to contemporary society is one of the texts that focuses on a gendered and racial perspective of Puerto Rican history. It is the historically fictive novel and voice the Puerto Rican canon has needed for quite some time because the elite white men of the island established the literary canon and it has been dominated by men since its conceptualization. The intersection of race, gender, and class in Llanos-Figueroa's text is imperative to understanding Afro-Puerto Rican women's lives in the island and diaspora, while also centering the stories of women from the margins of society and history.¹⁸

Positioning the idea of empowered motherhood as my theoretical framework, I argue that the practice of healing is not only an act of resistance but a site of liberation or freedom for Afro-Puerto Rican mothers. Despite moments of constraint and limited autonomy, Afro-Puerto Rican mothers in both texts reify their blackness and use afro-diasporic religions as a source of power, liberation, and healing.

Black Mothers and their Powers

Through the power or ability to heal Afro-Puerto Rican mothers not only celebrate and honor their blackness and African roots, but they define motherhood with their healing

¹⁸ Ferré's novel does not do this - her novel figuratively and quite literally leaves Afro-Puerto Rican women at the margins by maintaining Petra in the basement throughout the entire text and prioritizing Isabel's story as the only aspect of supposed recovery work.

capabilities. What is extremely important is that their religious practices and power to heal are rooted in African traditions. Through its story, the novel calls for a revision to the canonization of Puerto Rican history and literature that has historically excluded and demoralized black culture. In “Decolonial Resilience: Resistance and Healing in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s Fiction” (2017) Roberta Hurtado argues that “the artist-as-curandera is one who constructs a decolonial praxis of resilience via creative projects of empowerment that enable community healing from wounds wrought by coloniality” (Hurtado, 1).

In this text some characters reject the healing practices and religious ceremonies performed by the Afro-Puerto Rican mothers, but ultimately seek them at times of desperation. *Daughters of the Stone* is written from a third-person omniscient narrator that focuses on the lives of the Afro-Puerto Rican mothers; Llanos-Figueroa reclaims the voice of the marginalized and otherwise silenced members of this slave (while Fela’s story is shared) and post-slave society (the stories of Fela’s descendants).

Mother Oshun and Fela

In *Daughters of the Stone*, the first maternal figure we are introduced to is not a human but the appearance of a deity in Fela’s dreams. Readers are introduced to Mother Oshun, the goddess of fertility and motherhood, in the first few pages of the novel after Fela is taken from Africa and enslaved in Puerto Rico. Fela reminisces about her time with Imo, her husband in Africa, who now “sits with the ancestors” and she recounts in a dream she had of Mother Oshun (Llanos-Figueroa, 10). The narrator describes this maternal figure in the beginning of the second chapter:

Mother Oshun, goddess of the river, patron of women, of motherhood, of fertility, had come to her in that dream, leaving strange images, sharp, piercing Fela’s brain-

the river flowing backward, the skies opening and crying down on the flaming forest, sparks alighting the village, aimless spears broken and hanging midair, and over everything a heavy, deadly silence. The images had stayed with Fela as she came out of her dream (Llanos-Figueroa, 10).

Fela recounts the memory of a birthing ritual she performed with Imo prior to her enslavement as a dream. While this memory brought her pain of losing Imo, the burning of her village, her inability to conceive, and her capture, she held tightly to her stone, “the only thing left of her old life,” (Llanos-Figueroa, 11). Fela holds onto the last memory of her homeland and signals that these memories, her history and her family’s stories, will remain alive, which we see throughout the book. The pathway to become a mother is difficult for Fela but is also her source of power and freedom. The ritual is completed with the necessary ‘childstone,’ a reference to the title of the text: *Daughters of the Stone*, which transmitted each women’s power from generation to generation. This is why Fela’s descendants can “visit” their ancestors and learn their histories.

The history of the stone is taught to readers in the third chapter, “Remembrances,” where Fela has a sexual ceremony with Imo and seals the ceremony with the stone in her vagina, the source of birth and motherhood:

When it was over, he reached for the nearby stone, the childstone they had selected so carefully... Imo used the stone to stroke her face, her breasts, her belly, her thighs. He worked slowly, drawing symbols, secret messages for their child on her skin...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, bathing in the best of each of them until it would be placed in the altar of the ancestors, where it would be welcomed by them. That would seal the ceremony (Llanos-Figueroa, 22).

By placing the stone in her vagina immediately after the ceremony, Fela symbolizes that motherhood will be a central motif in the text and a source of profound power. Following the ceremony, Fela fell asleep in Imo’s arms and heard Mother Oshun’s angry voice in the

river but she naively hoped the goddess would be understanding. Fela desperately wanted to be a mother and risked angering Mother Oshun, who forced Fela to serve a penance.

While Fela understands that she may upset the goddess of fertility, her desire to be a mother outweighs those risks. In fact, to become a mother, she gives up her life— Fela dies after childbirth next to a river, an element that represents Lady Oshun, Fela performs the ultimate maternal sacrifice and finds liberation from her life as a slave in motherhood. Fela dies birthing Mati, her daughter. Because the stone is bequeathed to her daughter, her story becomes memory and Fela actively decides about her future. Although she sacrificed her life for her daughter's, her decision is an act of empowered mothering and is therefore, an act of liberation. The novel begins with Fela's forced journey to Puerto Rico and her transition to life as a slave using her memories of Africa and Imo to demonstrate her desire to be a mother and signals that motherhood for Fela began with a choice. The idea of choices and agency in regard to motherhood relates to the idea of empowered motherhood that frames my notion of freedom.

Why is it significant for Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa to introduce her novel about motherhood with an African deity that also functions as a maternal figure? Mother Oshun's introduction to the story demonstrates that motherhood and fertility are quintessential themes in the text, while also suggesting how the coupling of motherhood and African religions are powerful and serve as a testament to their survival despite being outlawed during the colonial period. Llanos-Figueroa strategically creates a relationship between motherhood and African religious traditions, like healing, that is the ultimate power each Afro-Puerto Rican mother possess and eventually use to liberate themselves and others. Mother Oshun is the overarching mother, or maternal figure, of the novel because she

represents how the coupling of motherhood with afro-diasporic religion is the most powerful force these women have. All of the women are visited by Mother Oshun as a spiritual guide and maternal figure even when they don't necessarily want her there.¹⁹ Although her function in the text is primarily to guide, she executes her role as a mother by punishing, too. This is why Fela sacrifices her life for Mati to be born as a consequence to disobeying Mother Oshun. Throughout the text each mother negotiates her feelings and openness to inheriting a 'power' and being a part of their family's tradition of healing. Nevertheless, Mother Oshun is a part of their lives even if it has to be from a distance.

In her role as mother, Mother Oshun's first task is forcing Fela to serve her penance.

Fela sacrifices her life for her daughter to be born:²⁰

Her dreams brought her less and less the atrocities of her past and more and more the hope for redemption in the world to come. There was nothing in this world of slaves and masters for her. But Oshun was an unforgiving Mother. Fela risked everything and everyone to bring a baby into her old world and now she would only be granted release when she brought one into this new world (Llanos-Figueroa, 35).

There are two things going on here: (1) Llanos-Figueroa demonstrates how Fela manages to find agency in her positionality as a slave through her decision to be a mother and practices the notion of empowered mothering – being a mother on her own terms – and births her daughter; while also (2) noting that Mother Oshun is the maternal figure, or presence, Fela must obey. Although Fela knew the consequences of her ceremony, she

¹⁹ In some parts of the text she is referred to as Lady Oshun perhaps because some of the women in the text view her as a mother, though that is not her primary.

²⁰ The notion of maternal sacrifices is rooted in Puerto Rican history and literature. For example, Irene Vilar writes about the ultimate sacrifice her grandmother, Lolita Lebron sacrificed herself for Puerto Rico's freedom during the congressional attack of 1954. She also took sole responsibility and exonerated the three other men a part of the fight. Jossiana Arroyo considers that maternal sacrifices contribute to Puerto Rican women's supposed death drive in analyzing Vilar's work and Lebron's life. She states that Vilar "wonders if the death drive is an inherited "condition" – a biologically or socially induced one" (140).

serves her penance because there is nothing left for her in this world, and so she finds freedom in the duality of birth (Mati's) and death (her own). In a way, Mother Oshun replaces Fela as the mother to her daughter, Mati, and her descendants – she is who they turn to in moments of desperation. Mother Oshun also signals to readers that manifestations of Afro-diasporic religions have existed and continue to persist in Puerto Rico (and throughout the Caribbean) despite the ridicule and erasure of blackness and black culture.

Mati

When Mati was eleven years old, she used her *gift* to rescue a dying piglet. Mati's friend watched her heal the piglet without touching it; Mati was using her concentration. Word spread throughout the village and Las Agujas, the workplace, about Mati's powers. Concerned about Mati, Tía Josefa, who befriended Fela when she first arrived to the hacienda, looked after her, raised her, and taught her important life lessons.²¹ She warned Mati that her gift had to be utilized wisely and must not interfere with the powers that give life and take it away: "The same power that gives you the gift gives all of us life. When that power takes life back, you cannot interfere. Even with your gift. That would be wrong and it would bring much suffering. So you must learn to listen... the same power that gave you that gift will let you know how to use it" (Llanos-Figueroa, 66). Mati was confused and disheartened about the responsibility that came with her gift but realized Tía Josefa was right... the piglet died two days later.

²¹ Tía Josefa is another maternal figure in this text. However, I do not focus on her role as a mother because she never exercises the power to heal that the main characters possess, which is a point of departure for this chapter. In a longer project, analyzing her role as a pseudo-mother due to gendered violence would be critical to understanding different forms of kinship within the plantation system.

Needless to say, Mati eventually embraced her gift and healing powers and used it to free herself and her community.²² Utilizing her special powers, Mati regains the rights to her inheritance – the plantation house and land bequeathed to her by Don Tomás, her biological father, which was ultimately stolen by the white aristocrats who were intimidated at the idea of a black woman with wealth, property, and status. Because he understood the power and value associated with his property and he had no other heirs, Don Tomás tells Mati she is the rightful heir to his property and wealth: “But you’re here...and you’re all I have. So it’ll be yours you know- the house, land, animals, everything. You’ll be a rich woman. You’ll be free to do what you want, go where you want. Don Tomás arranged for his papers to be prepared and signed with witnesses present: lawyers and a priest, all men of power, who tried to convince Don Tomás otherwise” (Llanos-Figueroa, 90).²³ What is particularly interesting in this moment is Don Tomás’ speech to Mati that bequeathing his property and estate to her was not his plan at all, rather she is his last resort because if he had sons or any other children at all she would not be inheriting this property. This subtle moment speaks volumes to the way power functions

²² In Chapter 7, Cheo, formerly known as Cheito, Mati’s partner, offers to buy her freedom by working in the capital and asks her to go with him. She refuses to go and stays in Las Mercedes, and in this point in the text there is an allusion that Mati will gain her own freedom in her own terms. Cheo finds freedom in the city as an indentured laborer who is grossly underpaid and overworked, though he believes this is a better alternative to being enslaved on the plantation (86).

²³ “Tomás had little regard for these men. Their hypocrisy dripped from them. Their public faces hid the lechery and cruelty he witnessed in them in more private arenas. They sported a veneer of civility that shielded greed and absolute self-interest. But he needed men who would not be challenged. And there was the law. He looked at the circle of faces around his bed and hoped that all would go as planned” (Llanos-Figueroa, 90). In this part of the text it is revealed that Don Tomas’ peers tried to convince him to not leave anything for Mati because they were afraid of a Black woman having power, money, and land.

in race and gender hierarchies – white men sit at the top while black women are at the bottom; Mati is portrayed as a last resort.

Despite Don Tomás' efforts to bequeath all of his property and money to Mati, she knew that her illiteracy was unimportant because the men in power were never going to let her have access to her wealth. Even though Mati had legal proof, "She remembered Cheo's words...She couldn't read the papers, no, but she knew well enough the words of the *patrón*, too. In the end, those papers meant nothing. The hacendados were about to take it all away.²⁴ The papers were no protection after all. She would have to find another way" (Llanos-Figueroa, 91). Given the symbolic and literal power at stake, the wealthy aristocrats denied Mati her rights and sold the property to the highest bidders. Still, Mati knew that she could not attempt to gain her freedom within the legal system that enslaved her, her mother, and other slaves in Puerto Rico. If she was going to be free, she needed to employ her special gift, her healing powers, which were inaccessible to the hacendado class. As an author, Llanos-Figueroa signals to readers that the discourses of knowledge, knowledge production, and systems and institutions of law and order exist to control bodies, ideologies, culture, and women.²⁵ Mati would never gain her freedom or her inheritance in a system created by the white, male elite to benefit the white, male elite, and she knew this:

But in the end, it did not matter what Don Tomás had written down. Papers could burn and so they did. Lawyer, doctor, and priest, all of whom were slave owners themselves had too much to lose with the disruption of order that Tomás' plans would wreak upon them. As soon as they left his room with the signed papers, they

²⁴ Translation: landowners.

²⁵ This is a reference to the first section of the chapter in which the modes of storytelling challenge dominant discourses of knowledge and history while also refusing to be "accepted" by the oppressors.

agreed that Tomás' will, drafted during his prolonged illness, was the work of a man touched by madness. When he finally died, it was reported that there was no will found among his belongings (Llanos-Figueroa, 91).

Mati watched as the hacendados sold Las Mercedes: the land, cattle, and tools, of the plantation and felt dispossessed once again.²⁶ This land would not only provide her wealth and freedom; she would be recovering her mother who rested on that land and who was dispossessed in the system- her voice, her body, and her human rights were taken from her.²⁷ Mati entered the rectory where the priest received her was hastiness.

The priest finally held out a pile of papers across the desk, more papers she couldn't read. "You are a free woman. The others have their freedom as well. The house is yours It says so, right here." He shook the papers at her as if she hadn't seen them. "They're yours." [...] "Take them." He threw the papers on the table as though they held some contamination[...] "This is what you all want, isn't it?" She kept her eyes on him while she stooped to pick up the papers. She was still watching him as she made her way to the door.[...] She had to think about what happened in town, of the priest's words. How could she trust in the words of these people who had always lied to her? She felt for the paper she carried in her pocket, the ones that, she was told, would give her the house, that would give all of them their freedom and a home. But were these papers as useless as the ones the *patrón* had given her? How could she trust such a thing? What to tell the others? What to believe? Where to go? (Llanos-Figueroa, 95).

While the priest is rude and angry about Mati's desire for her future, the act of throwing papers at her and taunting her for wanting to be free once is an act of dehumanization. What is also interesting during this scene is that Mati, like her family, descends from Afro-diasporic religions and traditions which inherently clashes with Christianity and the Catholic Church- this scene represents how these two religious traditions and ideologies clash in Puerto Rican society and how the priest, who represents

²⁶ Here there are a few things going on – Mati is denied the right to speak much like her mother was prohibited from speaking when her tongue was cut off. Mati feels her dispossession and her mother's when these men take her body, her land, her voice, etc.

²⁷ Mati thought about her mother and how the land that she rests on was taken from her in a similar way to how her mother's voice and body were taken, too.: "When they auctioned off Las Mercedes, they took her body, her words, and her lullabies - the land where her mother rested" (92) "and her voice" (93).

Christianity, will never respect or accept non-Western Christian religious practices. Yet, Mati's stillness and silence, which makes the priest uncomfortable and anxious, highlights her power – she does not need or rely on the acceptance of the priest or the system he represents. This is why Mati knows she cannot be free within the judicial or religious systems of her slave owners and becomes free through the mobilization of the power from her Afro-descendancy.

Shortly after this scene, Tía Josefa, the consistent maternal figure in Mati's life, dies and Mati reunites with Cheo at her funeral. Cheo, Mati's brief partner at this time in the novel, tells Mati he has found freedom in the capital. While he was not a slave, he was not quite free either. Cheo describes the *libertos* as people who work for the elite and receive miniscule pay for their labor. Because Cheo is an extremely talented wood carver, his pieces are highly sought after and expensive. Though his contractor charges exorbitant prices, he gives Cheo a modicum of the profit. While he is no longer a slave, Cheo is in a labor system that is abusive and underpays him, which is a system of neoslavery. Because Cheo does not receive a decent wage for his labor and must live secluded in housing reserved for the lower class of this society, Cheo is not truly free. While he offers Mati his version of freedom – life off the plantation and working for himself – he cannot give Mati what she seeks because he does not have it himself.

Cheo describes his plan to save money and buy a house so he could build a life for him and Mati – an opportunity he felt was unlikely in Las Mercedes. This is not the first time Cheo has offered Mati his life of 'freedom,' but it was also not the "type" of freedom Mati imagined for herself or required. To be free, Mati needed to be free of the ruling class that sold her needlework for profits she never benefited from. She also needed her

community to be free, which is also why she could not accept Cheo's proposal: "Come with you? Cheito...Cheo, it all sounds wonderful and I love you for thinking and planning it, but I...I can never leave here. I have plans, too..." (Llanos-Figueroa, 102). Cheo is skeptical that Mati will achieve freedom but she refutes,

But I will get it back- for me, for you, for the rest of us. They took us away from our Home Place. So we must build a new home. They will give it back. [...] Look at me Cheo, ... You know that I have ways of getting things done. There are things I know I can't change. But if I say I'll get my land back, it *will* be mine again. I'll do whatever I have to, to make sure of it (Llanos-Figueroa, 102).

Cheo went back to the capital and Mati stayed in Las Mercedes prepared to fight. It is important that as a black woman Mati defined what freedom meant to her and that she provided it for herself. Cheo's offer to live with him in the capital during this reunion and the gift of literacy, as stated earlier in the prior reunion, were constructions of freedom that Cheo imagined would be enough for Mati because it was enough for him. But Mati denies his offers, or gifts as he deems them, knowing that her special gift from her mother was unique and far more powerful than any skill 'los blancos' could offer her. As a woman, she does not let a man shape her freedom or "give it to her," which also reinforces the feminist ideology throughout the novel – there are strong women who help themselves and each other without depending on men or waiting to be rescued by a man.

Mati is patient and calculated – she waits for the perfect opportunity to regain her possessions and wealth. First, Mati becomes the community healer and replaces the former curandera. As the community healer she is sought after by members outside of her community when the "white doctors fail" and therefore she also performs the role of the

community mother (Llanos-Figueroa, 106).²⁸ Mati not only fills a void necessary for her community, but also demonstrates how her healing practices challenge western medicinal practices and the discourse on what is considered medicine. While Mati did not choose this path, she demonstrates how *curanderas*, or healers, are naturally woven into the fabric of diasporic communities:

Mati didn't choose to become a healer. It was not something she *could* choose, but rather something that chose her. The old *curandera* had healed the black people on the plantation for more years than anyone remembered. When she died, people simply began appearing at Mati's door. They brought her their warts, broken hearts and broken bones, breathing ailments, jealousy, unrequited love, grippe, infidelity, nightmares, spasms, fears, infertility, sleeping sickness - on and on. She could see into the hearts and bodies of people and was able to heal the hidden hurts (Llanos-Figueroa, 106).

Because she provides her community with care, nurture, and healing, she is essentially performing the role of the community's mother via her role as the community healer. Mati's deliberate nature to accept this role as community healer is to also accept the role of a mother for the community. Not only do her neighbors seek her for health reasons, but they also seek her for advice on life and love and to answer the questions a mother knows the answers to. Given this assessment of her dual role in the community, Mati conducts rituals and ceremonies stemming from a tabooed religion within her society, more so because she is a black woman – a person systematically treated as lesser than in her society – thus reinforcing the notion that her (body) politics and religious practices cut against the grain in Puerto Rico. Therefore, her healing practice, which is essentially her mothering practice, rejects the hegemonic western cultural norms and patriarchy in Puerto

²⁸ Here, I am referring to the text where it is written: “ In critical situations, when their white doctors in their white hospitals could not solve their problems, even hacendados who had heard of her knowledge of herbs and remedies sought out her skills” (Llanos-Figueroa, 105). This text furthers my emphasis on Mati's role as the community healer and mother while also highlighting how she challenges the discourse of western medicine and practice.

Rico. She is a powerful woman who has learned the meaning of her gift – when to let someone live or die. It is through her role as community healer and mother that she finally meets the men that stole her inheritance and determines their fate.

While Mati is met with contempt by Don Próspero's wife, she is finally let in through the front door because her days of entering secretly through the back are over.²⁹ This moment metaphorically represents that Mati, her descendants, and her community will no longer enter a space through the back or places in the dark that are meant to hide and further symbolize their marginalization. Mati is entering through the front door or no door at all – she proclaims her power and demands respect by refusing the other(ed) entrance that merely represents exclusion. Therefore, when she meets Don Próspero on his death bed with his cure in her hand she demands respect because the days of entering through the backdoor and being scrutinized are over:

“Finally! Where is my *remedio*?” [...] “*qué quieres*” he asked.

“What do *I* want? We'll get to that later. I believe it is you who are in need.”

“All right. *Mi remedio*, how much?” His hands snaked out of the linen folds and disappeared into a box that sat on the bedside table. She heard metallic shifting and then the click of coins as they were thrown at her feet. “There that should be more than enough for your efforts.”

[...] She looked down at the *reales* and wondered at what price he valued his life. He misunderstood her hesitation. His hands did more searching and three more

²⁹ Here I am explaining how Mati's actions were intentional. She decided she was free and was no longer subject to anyone's ridicule. It begins with her visit to Don Próspero's house – she is there to cure him and was called and instructed by his wife, Doña Sara, to arrive at night. She ignores Doña Sara's instructions and is firm about the negotiation because it is Mati who has the power now: “Mati had been summoned under the secrecy of night. She had responded in her own time, in the light of midday. She stood before the gate, hands in her skirt pockets, the *remedio* she had been asked to bring clutched in her left hand. Pucha, the young girl who had been sent to get the *curandera* a few nights before, was sweeping the wide steps as Mati walked up. “*Buenos días*, Mati. Doña Sara *dice que por atrás*.” “*Buenos días*, Pucha.” Mati smiled and returned the greeting but remained where she stood, ignoring the instructions she had just been given. Her days of going to the back door were over” (Llanos-Figueroa, 106). While Pucha shows concern for Mati's well-being saying ““You mustn't. The *patrona* will be furious,”” Mati responds, ““But I have no *patrona*, not anymore. And never again.” She stood motionless as Pucha watched her, openmouthed” (Llanos-Figueroa, 106). After a bit of contention from Doña Sara, Mati walked away refusing to enter through the back door or relinquish the vial because she was no longer under the whim of the white ruling class. “Only when Doña Sara unlatched the gate and held it open did Mati walk back up the manicured path to the front of the house and through the open gate” and remind her that she is not a slave (Llanos-Figueroa, 108).

coins fell at her feet. “And not another *centavo*! Now give me my *remedio* and you can go.”

[...] Still she did not move. “It is not a question of money.”

“Not money?... Well what do you want, then?”

“I only want what is mine.”

[...] “*Pero qué diablos?*”

“I think you know. Your mind has not left you yet. You have something of mine that I want back [...] I want my land back. I need my home intact. That, and only that is my price.”

“*Nunca!* I will never...*your land*...? That is my lad. *Presumida!* Where do you get the nerve to...?”

“We both know whose land it was.”

“I bought it legally with my own money. And I am protected by the law.”

“There is your law and then there is justice. Can your law protect you from illness, from death? (Llanos-Figueroa, 111-112).

Though Don Próspero is stubborn, Mati contorts his body into submission. She exerts physical pain until he finally cedes, “*No mas! Esta bien!* [...] you’ll get ... your land” to which she responds “Don’t even consider cheating me. If you do, I won’t be back when you sicken again, and you *will* sicken again. Then there will be no more discussion of this matter. You understand me?” and hands over the vial (Llanos-Figueroa, 114). Of great importance here is Mati’s control of the situation and how she evokes her power and strength. She does not plead; instead, she demands her rights which eventually lead to her freedom. The ending of this chapter reveals that all the men who participated in the theft of Mati’s inheritance and the rights to her land were suddenly sick and in need of a vial that only Mati could supply. In this moment Mati uses her gift to take what is rightfully hers:

One after the other, the neighboring plantation owners who had taken her land developed ailments for which doctors could find no explanation or remedy. Each man began to waste away. [...] 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. [...] It would be years before anyone noticed that none of these *patrones* fathered any children after their mysterious illness. (Llanos-Figueroa, 115).

It is through this positionality that Mati encounters the hacendados again and when they are the most vulnerable to achieve what she wants – recovery and freedom. Here, recovery has a dual purpose – one defined by the author’s conscious choice of recapturing Afro-Puerto Rican culture vis-à-vis Mati’s role and also her legitimate recovery of the land, estate, and wealth. It is only through the coupling of her motherhood and healing practices that she can achieve her freedom as well as her community’s. Because of this, Mati frees the enslaved at Las Mercedes and they live lives of agency, autonomy, and economic freedom:

It took two years, but Mati finally got all her land back. The people at Las Mercedes prospered. They pooled their resources and worked the land for themselves. They sold their crops as a collective to ensure best prices. Of course, the best markets were closed to them by the organized *hacendados* who held lucrative contracts with overseas buyers. So the Colectiva Las Mercedes started its own local markets in nearby towns and sold to townspeople who had forgotten how to plant, sow, and reap and had traded land for city life. They worked hard and lived modestly but better than they ever had as slaves. They worked their own land, lived in their own homes, and answered to no one but each other (Llanos-Figueroa, 115-6).

With her power, Mati regains her property and provides a home and land for economic development for her and the former slaves, whom she instantly frees from economic bondage. Mati liberates herself and provides herself financial stability using powers provided to her via a taboo religion; the men that stripped Mati from her inheritance were Catholic priests who represent the patriarchal and hegemonic culture in Puerto Rican society, which Mati resists through this act. With this inheritance Mati frees herself and her community from bondage and helps them cultivate a sustainable economic system. Interestingly, Cheo would not be free without Mati; when she frees herself and her community, he lives with her and also reaps the benefits of freedom – a freedom that he would otherwise be unable to enjoy. Mati’s long road to freedom is directly tied to her role

as (community) mother and healer – it is through these practices that she realizes the tools to become free were already with her.

While Mati liberates herself and her people from neoslavery or sickness, she is also preserving the memory of her ancestors: Members of the community “approached her with a respeto tinged with a fear of the unknown.³⁰ They were driven by their needs. Many of her people carried with them an unspoken or half-forgotten memory of the old African religions. But the old ones who knew, the ones who were brought in ships, were almost all gone now” (Llanos-Figueroa, 106). The thematic plot showcases that recovery is not only defined with regaining her inheritance but also restoring a sense of history among her people. Mati’s role as the community healer and mother thus enables her to preserve her cultural traditions and the memory of her people through the act of storytelling.

Recovery work is undeniably important for a myriad of reasons, but does it also necessitate the written word? There is a cliché phrase that tells people “you can’t know where you’re going unless you know where you’ve been” and it forces one to ponder their familial, land, national, and cultural history to deem what is truly important. Perhaps the tradition of oral history may suffice, or maybe the permanence of written word is equally important. Because Mati’s preservation of her culture is embedded in her mothering practice, successive generations benefit from their heritage.

Conclusion

³⁰ Translation: Respect.

In my close reading of Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of The Stone*, I evaluate how a nation's history is retold and what decisions and elements factor into this *new* story. Given the historical fiction genre of the novel, I consider the author's political background and the elements she employs in her writing to construct notions of liberation around rewriting and storytelling.

The practice of healing, as depicted in the text, is an opportunity to preserve afro-diasporic religions and celebrate black cultural traditions in Puerto Rico. Because *Daughters of the Stone* defines healing with black motherhood, these traits are deemed essential in liberation, survival, mothering, care, etc. when they are coupled together. These notions of Blackness – rooted in motherhood, womanhood, and culture – are then subverted to mean something more. While the relationship between healing and black motherhood are Puerto Rican or a part of Puerto Rican culture is absent from most Puerto Rican novels and texts, it is stitched into Llanos-Figueroa's text. Therefore, *Daughters of the Stone* is the text that the Puerto Rican literary canon needs. The same can be said about (Afro) Latinx Studies, American Studies, and Caribbean Studies.

I examine Llanos-Figueroa's prose and how she perceives generational storytelling not only preserves memory, but also serves as a site of freedom for the characters in the novels. Through the analyses of the various mothers in the novel, I not only associate freedom and liberation in the novels with the Afro-Puerto Rican mothers' abilities to heal and practice their afro-diasporic religions. I also highlight the importance of these characters not only in the text, but in the greater conversation about Puerto Rican studies and feminist studies that often exclude and marginalize black women's stories and livelihoods.

Coda: Boricua Memory

This dissertation reflects on literary projects produced by Puerto Rican Women and their conceptualizations of freedom, feminism, agency, and memory in different ways that pose greater questions and meditations about the relationship between stories and preservation. While this dissertation traverses different time periods, spaces, and seas (through migratory movement) by focusing on the life works of Julia de Burgos, Nicholasa Mohr, and Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, who are either exile or diasporic subjects, it seeks to examine memory projects and the various ways they manifest for the authors and the characters in their literary works. While this study demonstrates how Puerto Rican women have been erased, silenced, or misrepresented in institutions that document national history, it also shows how these women are resilient and have resisted institutional practices of remembering and memorializing that has excluded certain events and people.

Writing Freedom is rooted in diasporic theory that views the Caribbean diaspora as a site of copious cultural transformation where various contact zones generate metamorphoses in facets of culture like language, food, art, music, and literature. This project examines Caribbean diasporic literatures and cultural memory projects to challenge how archives, and processes of archivization, capture the livelihoods of Puerto Rican communities in diaspora and exile. Cultural memory projects are imperative to preserving and documenting histories, but they have to be challenged and questioned. While erasure exists in many fields, this project specifically focused on studying authors and their literary works which raise significant questions about the intersections of race, class, and gender in the Puerto Rican experience on the island and in the diaspora. If we relied solely on the stories told to us by museums, textbooks, and archives, then our conceptualization of the

Puerto Rican experience would most likely be altered. Furthermore, because many times these projects are curated or designed by people who do not include diverse voices that truly represent Puerto Ricanness, the narratives we are given instead reproduce racist, sexist, or classist representations of Puerto Rican identity. Similarly, U.S. national memory projects usually do not include Puerto Ricans in relation to American history or culture, thus revealing their second-class citizenship status. This reiterates the need to be more inclusive. Memory projects must also document and preserve experiences and histories authentically in ways that represent the populations they seek to represent. However, as I have showcased in this dissertation, alternative ways of knowing and remembering are used by numerous communities to reconcile with erasure and marginalization. Are these archives sufficient? I am motivated to investigate alternative archives and memory projects that exist outside of mainstream conceptualizations of archivization.

Therefore, in an extension of this study I would like to explore cultural productions in the wake of Hurricane Maria that defy traditional modes of archivization. During this moment, the media was mostly absent and was not a reliable source of coverage about what happened, or was happening, in various neighborhoods throughout the island. The modicum of news coverage did not capture how the hurricane impacted the entire island. Because of this, many people in the mainland U.S., who relied on news outlets, believed what transpired in Puerto Rico was not as catastrophic or damaging as it was. Those of us who have family on the island knew there were different stories not being told. A lot of artists and activists produced material out of this time and ‘archived’ their stories in myriad ways that reflect diverse narratives and challenge what survival looked like. I am particularly interested in how artists who resist normalization and societal standards

document their experiences and their communities as well. These are alternative archives that exist outside popular modes of archivization. For instance, Bad Bunny, a Reggaeton and Latin Trap artist, released his song “Estamos Bien¹” as a message of hope or reassurance. He was also active in helping mobilize his fans during the summer of 2019 to call for the removal of a corrupt governor. It is worthwhile to examine Bad Bunny’s works, and other artists alike, since Hurricane Maria and how he’s responded in creative ways to these moments. Moreover, an extension of this study will interrogate how Puerto Ricans were deemed disposable while focusing on how writers and artists have responded to that in ways that supersede victimhood. In the wake of Hurricane Maria academics have begun exploring the ideas of disposability and dispensability so it will be interesting to study other material productions out of this moment.

I began the chapter “Gendered Exile,” framed with the ongoing mythologies around Julia de Burgos’s life. My main purpose was to highlight how Burgos has been ghosted in Western discourse and archives by being remembered as a migrant instead of an exile. Burgos defined herself as an exile and the refusal to define her as she saw herself erases the political depth and original meaning of her work produced in exile and also denies her control of her legacy. Additionally, it is dismissive of the fight she endured for her nation’s freedom and her own freedom as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman and an author. I complicate how she perceived freedom in her poetry most notably through the representation of birds with wings and in flight though the avian metaphor changes and showcases her colonial subjectivity in the U.S. via broken wings or wingless birds. Her poetry is a meditation on her experiences in exile as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman in poverty.

¹ Translation: We are good.

I end the chapter with a synopsis of Virginia Sánchez-Korrol's novel, *The Season of Rebels and Roses*, as a general motif for comprehending gendered exile. The novel is a fictional account of how women's organizations in the exile community contributed to the Puerto Rican nationalist cause in ways that are absent from the archive. In the novel, the lost scrapbook is the missing archive that does not exist in the present. The reasons are mostly speculation about not respecting women's intellectual work as important enough to preserve or archive and provides another meaning to gendered exile as a metaphor for the other lost archives or works by women. Are they waiting to be found or are they lost forever?

In the second chapter "Humanizing Poverty," I examine Puerto Rican communities in New York City and their susceptibility to violence by the state and its operatives like the police, social workers, teachers, and health care workers. Though these state employees are meant to serve and protect their constituents, Mohr proves otherwise. While I analyze these moments in Nicholasa Mohr's novels, *Nilda* and *Felita*, I argue that this proximity to random violence and harassment signals Puerto Ricans are not truly free in the U.S. In addition, I read Mohr's novels as archival fictions that utilize an ethnographic prose style to capture life in New York City for Puerto Ricans in a way that overcomes archival erasure. This erasure is two-fold: Mohr and her works are not archived in U.S. or Puerto Rican national archives.

Though there are not copious amounts of scholarship examining the impact of Mohr's work, the existing work celebrates how Mohr combats misrepresentation and dehumanization by documenting the experiences of Puerto Ricans in poverty. Mohr writes about Puerto Rican communities while also drawing from her experience as a second-

generation Puerto Rican woman whose family was a part of the mass migrations of the 1940s and 1950s. It is the migrants and their children, the second generation, that mostly live in poverty and in the communities which she writes about in her novels.

In “Memory and Puerto Rican Motherhood” I read Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of The Stone* to evaluate how she rewrites Puerto Rican history and what is revised. In this text, healing practices are embedded in afro-diasporic religions and celebrate black cultural traditions in Puerto Rico that mark Puerto Rican identity with its African roots. Afro-Puerto Rican motherhood thus subverts the role and meaning of motherhood as a restrictive ‘gender role’ to a pathway toward freedom when coupled with healing practices. While many texts purposefully omit Afro-Puerto Rican culture, it is stitched in *Daughters of the Stone* in a way that celebrates Puerto Rican women and mothers who are Black. The healing practices are derived from the titular stone that is smuggled from West Africa by Fela before she is captured and enslaved in Puerto Rico.

In this chapter I argue that the stone is also an alternative archive that harbors and protects the family’s histories and secures that each mother can bequeath their familial knowledge(s) to their children. While this chapter is anchored on the different ways of knowing and being that disrupts Western epistemologies and knowledge production that are present in the novel, it highlights the impossibility of retaining this knowledge without the stone – the archive. Considering the importance of the stone then demonstrates the importance of rewriting Puerto Rican history to include alternative ways of knowing, being, and remembering that challenge how Puerto Rican history has been recounted and shared.

Because the authors I analyze in this dissertation are writing freedom(s) in their own terms, they are actively writing against a colonial empire and its ideas of patriarchy, masculinity, and colonialism among other ideologies. This dissertation utilizes a women of color feminist framework and proposes new ways of imagining Puerto Rican motherhood, memory, and national archives in relation to freedom that aims to change American Studies, Latinx Studies, and Caribbean Studies scholarship. Literary imaginations of freedom and memory projects help us understand the present struggles for national and gender liberation for (Afro) Puerto Ricans and (Afro) Latinxs.

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