

“I want you to soar. I want you to go out and find your path and create your own story. I envy you your courage. I will be anxious to read your work, see Africa through the eyes of youth. Abuela’s words have become legend. Yours will have the ring of today’s truth.”

—Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, *Daughters of the Stone*

## “UNDESIRABLE WOMEN?” Afro–Puerto Rican Mother–Daughter Relationships and Puerto Rican Heritage in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of the Stone*

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*This article provides an analysis of Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s 2009 novel, Daughters of the Stone, a text that traces five generations of Afro–Puerto Rican women living on the island and in New York City. I situate the novel within the context of creative non-fiction essays posed on Afro-Latinas, which argue that this group of women is unable to combat racism and sexism within Latino communities and U.S. mainstream society. Because of the Latino cultural taboo associated with claiming African heritage, scholars and writers have constructed Afro-Latinas as perpetual victims of racism and sexism. While certainly this claim can be supported, the novel shapes Afro–Puerto Rican women as empowered agents. I argue that the novel contests writings on Afro-Latinas, suggesting that strong bonds between Afro–Puerto Rican mothers and daughters function as a mode of empowerment and subjectification. Unlike works supporting the racial, sexual “undesirability” of Afro-Latinas, Daughters of the Stone challenges this view by instead constructing Afro–Puerto Rican mothers as subjects who empower their daughters by sharing and creating maternal family stories that serve as a re-writing and re-telling of Puerto Rican cultural heritage.*

The epigraph quoted from Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s 2009 novel, *Daughters of the Stone*, captures much of the beauty of this fictional work. We not only glimpse its poetic craft, but what is also revealed to readers is the empowering element of storytelling between Afro–Puerto Rican mothers and daughters. In this passage from a letter written by the character Elena to her daughter Carisa, an aspiring writer, the mother encourages the daughter to create words and images that will bring truth and justice for the descendants of the first Africans brought to Puerto Rico as enslaved people. As we learn in the novel, the maternal stories are not only told orally from mother to daughter; the presence of a family stone originally brought from Africa by Fela, the great-great grandmother of the novel, also symbolizes the necessity of protecting and holding on to stories that may be forgotten or untold. Stories may be revised or even erased and denied, but the stone, as an African maternal legacy, remains solid, an eternal reminder of a maternal history. Elena writes in her letter that she will “bring the stone with me. It’s fitting that it go back with you. After all, it all began with the stone. You should take it home” (322). Carisa’s possession of the stone and her obligation to “take it home” is an enactment of maternal and daughterly agency, as the act of returning the stone to Africa, the original maternal home space apart from the institution of slavery, connects past maternal generations to present and future, ensuring the longevity of the family line. For Elena, it is paramount that Carisa’s writing not only weaves in her Abuela’s imagery, but also that she conveys her own, unique eyes of youth. Elena instructs her daughter-writer to continue where their foremothers have left off, and it is the mother’s responsibility to pass on to her daughter the stories held within the stone that will enable her to soar and create. As an Afro–Puerto Rican mother who has experienced racism and sexism, Elena invokes a maternal feminism that empowers her daughter Carisa to unearth, revise, and construct the history of their family.

While the novel offers insight into the empowering potential of Afro–Puerto Rican mother-daughter bonds, I insist on the importance of reading this work within the context of personal essays and scholarship on Afro–Puerto Rican women and Afro-Latinas. Since at least the mid-1980s, Afro–Puerto Rican women scholars such as Angela Jorge have critiqued the marginalized treatment of Latinegras, or Latinas who can claim African lineage (Cruz-Janzen 2001; Jorge 1986). Later scholars, such as Lillian Comas-Díaz and Marta Cruz-Janzen, have expanded Jorge’s original analysis, arguing that the second-class treatment of Latinegras continues to exist even today, despite what is perceived as a change in cultural politics (Comas-Díaz 1996; Cruz-Janzen). In creative nonfiction essays published in anthologies such as *Little Havana Blues*, *Boricuas*, and *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, for example, writers share their personal struggles in claiming and constructing identities within hostile climates of racism, sexism, and classism. By privileging creative, personal essays as a backdrop in which to read and discuss Llanos-Figueroa’s novel, I examine the ways in which the novel converses with these essays’ themes of isolation and negative self-esteem resulting from living in Latina/o and mainstream communities that depict African heritage as something of which to be ashamed, denied, or kept hidden. These essays mainly ground their discussions according to the Afro-Latina experience in the United States, which some may argue, is limiting; however, the novel’s narrator Carisa is U.S.-born, and her contemporary struggles to construct a self-identity amidst racism and sexism are tied not only to her family’s enslaved past, but the present-day socio-cultural meanings that are ascribed to this African heritage.<sup>1</sup> I believe these creative essays speak more authentically to the novel’s goal. Like the novel, these essays, although describing the emotional toil of racism and sexism, privilege the *I*, thereby attempting to overturn their historical and social silence. That is, by constructing the self through both novel and

essay form, these Afro-Latinas work to undo invisibility and undesirability, even as they grapple with the realities of sexism and racism with which the speakers have intimate knowledge and experience. In addition, Carisa’s role as a creative writer demonstrates the ways in which writing from the *I* and claiming a voice for herself may function as a resistance to undesirability and invisibility. Much as Carisa, the novel’s narrator, writes her maternal herstory down on paper to contest the exclusion of her maternal family line from Puerto Rican history, so, too are the Afro-Latinas in these creative essays continuing to negotiate their identities within communities that encourage them to buy into racist logics.

The publication of the 2010 collection of essays, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, edited by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, was an important addition to a scholarly conversation that is in need of more attention: the social, cultural experiences of Afro-Latinas/os living in the United States. The editors’ contention, the necessity of providing a space to discuss the complexities of Afro-Latina/o lived experiences and history, is particularly noteworthy and crucial to current scholarship. Although this collection is significant and a needed first step in undoing the cultural taboo of addressing African heritage among contemporary Latinas/os, racism and sexism among Latina/o communities in the United States continue to pervade (Jiménez Román and Flores). To date, the arguments posed by writers such as Jorge, Cruz-Janzen, and Comas-Díaz remain critical in discussing racial and gender politics as they pertain to Latinegras living in the United States. Consider, for example, that *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* contains two of the essays I cite, those written by Jorge and Cruz-Janzen, and newer essays by Spring Redd, Yvette Modestín, and Vielka Cecilia Hoy, among others, also reinforce those arguments posed by the earlier writers. Only one essay within the Afro-Latinas section problematizes the perceived “undesirability” (Jiménez

Román and Flores 268) of Afro-Latina women: the brilliant analysis by Ana M. Lara, “Uncovering Mirrors: Afro-Latina Lesbian Subjects.” In this essay, though she speaks of the difficulties of “uncovering” writings by and about Afro-Latina lesbians, Lara also insists on examining “the radical potential of being queer” (301). While her essay is a valuable component of this collection, the overarching theme of the Afro-Latinas section suggests that racism and sexism continue to define and shape the experiences of Afro-Latinas. It is this decades-old issue regarding the status of *Latinegras* that I seek to address, using the Afro–Puerto Rican writer Llanos-Figueroa’s novel as the foundation in which to ground my analysis.

In her essay, “*Latinegras: Desired Women: Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Wives*,” Cruz-Janzen critiques U.S. Latina/o racism for denying the existence of African heritage within Latina/o cultures. According to the author, this denial of African heritage has led to the complete erasure of the *Latinegra* experience within racialized and gendered accounts of Latin American heritage and culture. *Latinegras*, because of a combination of skin color, gender, and social class, exist along the fringes of Latin American and Latina/o cultures and have been constructed as a desired or sexualized class of women, as racially undesirable, rather than as active contributors or members of these cultural groups (168). As Cruz-Janzen states, “*Latinegras* are women who cannot escape the many layers of racism, sexism, and inhumanity that have marked their existence” (168). In this light, the *Latinegra* remains trapped within such narrow definitions of *Latinidad* that marginalize Latinas/os of African descent. Given that Cruz-Janzen’s argument continues where her predecessors Jorge and Comas-Díaz left off, it becomes increasingly evident that this raced and gendered undesirability of *Latinegras* is an issue yet to be resolved. While I acknowledge the works of these writers as significant for raising awareness of this racial and gender

politics problematic, I also take aim at their arguments, as my own reading and analysis of Llanos-Figueroa’s novel demonstrates.

*Daughters of the Stone* may be read as a response to this approximately twenty-five-year long discussion of the Latinegra’s marginalization within Latina/o and U.S. mainstream society. This text may be called a matrilineal novel, as it traces five generations of Afro–Puerto Rican women, starting with Fela, an African woman shipped to a sugar plantation in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico to serve as an enslaved seamstress for the wife of the plantation master; followed by her daughter Mati, a curandera; Mati’s daughter Concha, who denies her mother’s African traditions in favor of Spanish–Puerto Rican culture; Concha’s daughter Elena, who inherits her grandmother’s gift with herbs; and finally, Carisa, Elena’s daughter, the family’s storyteller and narrator of the novel, who is raised in New York City and best represents the contemporary racial identity struggle faced by Latinegras. Llanos-Figueroa’s novel presents us with one side of Puerto Rico that has rarely been portrayed in fiction, that is, where the Afro–Puerto Rican woman is given a voice and a legitimate role in the shaping of Puerto Rican cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> By tracing five generations of a maternal line and focalizing the complexity of Afro–Puerto Rican mothers and daughters who must live within a racist, sexist, and classist society that aspires to uphold a de-Africanized version of Puerto Rican heritage, I argue that Llanos-Figueroa successfully writes against a gendered, racialized history of Puerto Rico that has erased the presence of Afro–Puerto Rican women. This matrilineal and maternal subjectivity, according to Yi-Lin Yu (2005), is particularly relevant to the novel’s purpose:

The themes of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships as cultivated in the works of diasporic women writers become the groundwork for germinating strategies of survival and resistance

against sexism, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism as apparatus of patriarchal dominance. Significantly, the figure of the mother or even the grandmother in diasporic literature by women occupies a pivotal position in maintaining and transmitting the values of one's particular racial and cultural heritages against erasure by the dominance of colonial discourse. (131)

As Yu's analysis underscores, the matrilineal focus of much diasporic women's literature functions as a strategic counter-discourse, and *Daughters of the Stone* is no exception. Because women, and particularly mothers, have been negatively constructed through a racist, sexist, colonial discourse, it comes as no surprise that diasporic women writers would insist on re-defining motherhood. The mother figure is a significant literary and historical figure, as her transmission of this counter-history may potentially undo the original script (Hochberg 2003). Thus, Llanos-Figueroa's novel must be included in this feminist narrative strategy, as the text makes Afro-Puerto Rican mothers and daughters subjects and speakers/writers of their own stories, unlike the historical construction of them as racially undesirable women; and in doing so, the author counters official histories of Puerto Ricans that not only deny African origin, but prevent Latinegras the right to claim Latina heritage. By passing on stories, history, and memory held within the stone, I argue that Afro-Puerto Rican mothers in the novel arm their daughters with an empowered, feminist, and therefore alternative vision distinct from negative socio-historical constructions of African-descent women.

Before I offer a reading of the novel, I provide a discussion of the treatment of Latinegras within Latina/o and U.S. mainstream society, using the arguments posed by Cruz-Janzen, Comas-Díaz, and Jorge as a foundation. I want to place *Daughters of the Stone* within the context of current writing on the Latinegra

experience voiced by these women to demonstrate how, as Belinda Edmondson (1993) observes of Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff’s novels, Llanos-Figueroa also attempts to “insert a wedge in the historical narrative” (88) and how the novel fits within the current landscape of the Afro-Caribbean woman writer who has “shed light on the often obscured and more disturbing human and social dimensions of her experience” (Williams 2000, 95). The privileging of Afro–Puerto Rican women’s voices, notably mothers and daughters, contests their exclusion and absence from this historical/cultural script.

Finally, I argue that the novel also problematizes the assertions made by these writers and scholars that the *Latinegra* is always already a tragic figure who is unable to resist and critique the dueling forces of racism and sexism. Indeed, the very fact that Cruz-Janzen publishes an article fifteen years after the publication of Jorge’s essay, and the inclusion of these two essays in such a recent collection as *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* would suggest, at the very least, that the notion of undesirability is still of personal and political relevance to Afro-Latina writers; and while this may be true, the novel, however, also insists on complicating these writers and scholars’ arguments. The women characters in the novel do suffer from the colonial effects of slavery, racism, and sexism, but they also resist such limiting views of themselves as perpetual victims rather than as active, empowered agents who construct matriarchal spaces in which to survive and share their maternal herstories. I do not wish to undermine their writings on the *Latinegra* experience; at the same time, it must be noted that the novel, in fact, contests this rather doomed picture of powerless, ultimately static women by instead constructing empowered Afro–Puerto Rican mother-daughter relationships and their maternal storytelling, represented within the stone passed down from mother to daughter, as a mode in which to resist invisibility, to create and maintain an Afro–Puerto Rican maternal herstory that colonial racial and sexual politics attempt to erase and

silence. Indeed, it is evident in the novel that the maternal stories passed down from one generation to the next are significant; yet the stone, as a safekeeper of the stories, as a physical object that is touched, held, and protected by each woman in the maternal line, is equally relevant as a maternally-empowered symbol that contains the surviving (her)stories of African-descent women living in the diaspora.

As these writers argue, since at least 1986 little has been written on the unique experiences faced by Latinas of visible African origin. The scant literature available on Afro-Latinas attests, then, to the significance of Llanos-Figueroa's novel, which places Puerto Rican women of African origin at the forefront of Puerto Rican culture and history. Although certainly *Daughters of the Stone* is not unique in its use of historical fiction to revise Puerto Rican history and culture, what is significant is how the novel re-incorporates African diaspora to do this. Llanos-Figueroa's novel insists on constructing Puerto Rican history from the perspective of African-descent women who have been silenced and erased by patriarchal, colonial discourse. In contrast, for example, Esmeralda Santiago's recent novel, *Conquistadora* (2011), also engages in historical fiction to paint a history of Puerto Rico. However, the novel privileges the narrative voice of the Spanish conquistadora of the title, Ana Larragoity Cubillas, an ambitious young woman who enriches herself through the labor performed by slaves. While Ana's identity as a woman is intriguing, her very status as privileged Spanish landowner/slaveholder nevertheless presents a version of Puerto Rico that is shaped largely from the perspective of colonizer. Thus, this article adds to an area of scholarship that leaves much to be desired. In fact, what Chicana historian Emma Pérez (1999) has said of the need to re-insert the Chicana into a *history* that denies her existence, also applies to the novel: "I am more concerned with taking the 'his' out of the 'story,' the story that often becomes the universalist

narrative in which women’s experience is negated” (Pérez xiv). Indeed, Llanos-Figueroa does succeed in not only “taking the ‘his’ out of the ‘story,’” but by also removing the cloak of whiteness that has been the basis of so-called official Puerto Rican culture and heritage, the author constructs a voice and subjectivity for Afro–Puerto Rican mothers and daughters who have been silenced for far too long.

**Racialized and Gendered Puerto Rican Culture and Heritage,  
or, the Erasure of Afro–Puerto Rican Women**

By the time Spanish conquistadores landed on Caribbean shores in the sixteenth century, enslaved Africans were a part of the cargo. African slaves arrived with the Spanish to Puerto Rico in 1510, and slavery was authorized by the Spanish crown in 1513 (Vega 1999). Slaves accompanied the Spanish during their expeditions throughout the Americas in the sixteenth century and were a vital economic component of the Spanish empire (Klein and Vinson 2007). After 1650, the stream of slaves gradually moved away from the mainland Spanish empire to the Caribbean islands, which became “the great slave holders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Klein and Vinson 42). Additionally, the Caribbean region became known for its production of a highly desirable crop: sugar. The production of sugar was in effect in the West Indies by the seventeenth century and with this came the need to supply a source of labor that would ensure the success of this crop; the cultivation of sugar in the Americas largely relied on slave labor (Morrissey 1989). As Luis Figueroa (2005) states in his study on sugar and slavery in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, the island was only second behind Cuba in the world’s sugar production by the mid-nineteenth century. Puerto Rico saw its peak in slave numbers in the late 1840s.

The number of slaves was drastically reduced by the end of the 1840s, as this decade began to see more international treaties that attempted to eliminate

the slave trade (Figueroa). The end of the slave trade in Puerto Rico also marked the eventual decline of the once powerful Spanish empire; by the mid-nineteenth century, the only remaining Spanish colonies were Cuba and Puerto Rico (Figueroa). Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico in 1873, but additionally, the abolition of slavery all but ended the plantation society that had defined the island's economic structure for the greater part of the nineteenth century (Klein and Vinson). Because the production of sugar relied upon the labor of enslaved Africans (including their Puerto Rican-born offspring), Puerto Rican sugar planters were faced with great difficulty in maintaining this way of life (Figueroa).

Despite what the history has shown us—namely that Puerto Rico would not have experienced economic success in the sugar industry had it not been for the labor provided by enslaved Africans—Puerto Rican historiography prior to the 1970s, according to Figueroa, tended to discount the role that slaves had on the shaping of contemporary Puerto Rican culture and society. As Arlene Dávila (1997) comments in her groundbreaking study on Puerto Rican cultural politics, Puerto Rico, while acknowledging the contributions of the indigenous Taino group in the island's cultural makeup, tends to undermine African influences:

The dominant explanation of Puerto Rican culture, which reduces the African contribution in relation to that of the two other components [Taino and Spanish], coincides with a persistent racism and the continuous idealization of the Spanish heritage, part and parcel of the presentation of Puerto Rican society as undifferentiated. (73)

Dávila's assessment of contemporary Puerto Rican society unveils the myth of racial equality and inclusion. In this negation of African contributions,

written history has a tendency of examining the presence of Afro–Puerto Ricans only in their roles as enslaved workers on island plantations during the nineteenth century (Stark 2007). Certainly, historians must study the presence of slavery in Puerto Rico but we have much to learn about Afro–Puerto Ricans beyond the institution of slavery. As Figueroa concurs, “[T]he mythical figure of a white male *jibaro* [peasant] living in the interior mountains emerges as the essence of Puerto Ricanhood.... The history of these black and mulatto Puerto Ricans needs to be rescued from its prolonged neglect” (3). Scholars have attested to the necessity of filling in the missing gaps of Puerto Rican history that have neglected to account for the influence Afro–Puerto Ricans have had on Puerto Rican culture. Marta Moreno Vega (1999) adds that Puerto Rican historians have whitened history by overlooking African lineage: “African contributions present in all aspects of Puerto Rican life are generally not highlighted by Puerto Rican society” (333). Suzanne Bost (2000), in her study of *mestizaje* in Puerto Rican–American literature, has also commented on this process of whitening Puerto Rican history (196). As Silvio Torres-Saillant (1997) states pointedly, “[O]ften intellectuals have invoked pre-Columbian roots precisely to obscure the overwhelming reality of the African presence” (48). It is this pattern of upholding whiteness at the expense of blackness in Puerto Rican history and culture that is challenged by contemporary historians and novelists, including Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa.

What also remains heavily missing from history and criticism, as evidenced by several contemporary studies of Puerto Rican and Caribbean history, is an investigation of both enslaved and free African women living in the Caribbean diaspora. Figueroa’s argument above and his call for historians of Puerto Rico to “re-think our African heritage” (63) are indeed valid and long overdue; however, even his own detailed study of slavery in nineteenth-

century Puerto Rico cannot account for the experiences faced by enslaved, free, and contemporary African and Afro–Puerto Rican women. In addition to being subjected to the same exploitative working conditions faced by enslaved men, enslaved women throughout the Americas also experienced sexual violation by slaveholders, resulting in the birth of mixed-race children (Morrissey). The regulation of enslaved women’s labor coincided with the control of their sexuality by slaveholders (Socolow 2000). In slave-holding societies throughout the Americas, the bodies of enslaved African women were defined by European/Anglo dominant culture as the inferior other, and they were imagined to be over-sexualized and corrupt (Griffin 1996, 520). This gendered, raced, and classed construction, of course, served to justify slavery and the supposed superior status of European whites. According to the racist, sexist, and colonial imagination, the “darker-hued black female body suggests a ‘natural’ propensity for exotic sexual labor” (Francis 2010, 59). In this light, sexual and physical violation of the black woman is legitimized; her gender, race, and her status as slave property all serve to deny her humanity and the control of her own body.

Claudette Williams’s exemplary book, *Charcoal and Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature* (2000), thoroughly examines the role that race and color combined with gender has on the construction of female sexuality in fiction and poetry by nineteenth and twentieth-century Spanish Caribbean writers. In nineteenth-century fictional works, for example, black women were often depicted as “sensationally sexual creature[s]” (13). This construction of black women “confirm[s] that race and sexuality have been widely accepted as prime contexts for the representation of these women. [This] indicate[s] that race determines both the general sexualization of dark-skinned women and the differentiated sexualization of black and mulatto women” (1). “Popular perception of the status, role, and destiny of three of

the racial categories of women in the ex-colonies of Latin America and the Caribbean,” adds Williams, “is condensed in the well-known saying ‘the white woman for marriage, the mulatto woman for a good time, and the black woman for work’” (1). This common expression essentially justifies the unequal treatment of women according to skin color, and in effect serves to alienate African-featured women. Such sexist and racist representations of Afro-Caribbean women may have begun in the nineteenth century, but as Williams explains, cultural and social attitudes on race, color, and gender remain firmly intact even today:

Although appearances and common official claims may suggest the contrary, a radical change in racial perceptions has not accompanied the improvements in the legal and social status of Afro-Caribbean people in postcolonial times.... Vestiges of the original white racial bias persist today in the construction of light skin and “white” Caucasian features as the ideal of female beauty. Caribbean racial politics therefore excludes many Negroid women, who, because they also subscribe to the alien ideal, fail to develop positive self-images. (Williams 17–18)

Racial and gender politics, then, have excluded the voices of African women (Hochberg 2003). As Belinda Edmondson (1993) concurs, “In the Caribbean, whose ‘conclusion’ was one of slavery, colonization and consequent ‘Third World’ status, the historical narrative has functioned to contain or erase other histories by reading the region solely in terms of how it served to construct the realities of Europe or America” (186). That is, Caribbean history has been written and constructed in a manner that invalidates the very groups of people who have been directly or indirectly affected by colonization. In writing history of the Caribbean solely from the perspective of its relationship

to colonial powers, what results is not only a lopsided, inaccurate view of this part of the world, but a gross neglect of Afro-Caribbean women's stories of which we still know little.

**Latinegras: Victims? Agents?**

It is this racial and gender legacy with which the contemporary Latinegra must contend, according to scholars Cruz-Janzen, Comas-Díaz, and Jorge. For the Latinegra, combating racism and sexism from her own respective Latina/o community and outside dominant culture has become an overwhelming reality; in other words, she is a "minority within a minority" (Comas-Díaz 169). The Latinegra is not allowed to claim Latina identity, as the denial of African ancestry is pervasive (Cruz-Janzen). Many Latinas/os internalize racism, including Latinas/os with African ties, as a way to negate blackness that supposedly does not exist (Comas-Díaz). In fact, both Comas-Díaz and Cruz-Janzen cite examples of a common statement exclaimed to Afro-Latinas: "You don't look Latina!" (Comas-Díaz 168; Cruz-Janzen 172). This statement, which is meant as a question of authenticity, is not only a racist epithet; it serves as a constant reminder that Latina/o identity remains construed as white or even indigenous, but definitely non-black. Equally problematic are the questions raised by "you don't look Latina:" What does it mean to look Latina? Who decides what Latina looks like? These questions reveal the extent to which notions such as looking or not looking Latina must be interrogated, and they underscore the social-constructedness of race in relation to skin color and culture (Bettez 2010).

The denial of blackness and the inability to authentically claim a Latina identity because of internalized racism alienates the Latinegra within multiple communities and often causes a sense of psychological trauma (Comas-Díaz; Jorge). Claudette Williams agrees with this argument, claiming that a sense of

insecurity and internalized hatred is common among people of African ancestry because of their historical construction. According to Williams, women of African ancestry especially have been unable to construct an authentic identity because of the rampant racism and sexism that seek to define this group of women by narrow, stereotypical terms. Further, the “omission or absence of literature addressing her needs,” combined with her virtual erasure from Puerto Rican history, have made the Afro–Puerto Rican woman, and certainly all Afro-Latinas, marginalized figures (Jorge 183). In particular, notes Cruz-Janzen, it is the *Latinegra madre* who is further erased from Latina/o identity and cultural history:

In Spanish, country of origin becomes *madre patria*, combining female and male symbolism. Literally, *madre patria* becomes mother of the fatherland and ultimately, mother of the nation. In this context, nationalism and patriotism, without diminishing national patriarchy, legitimize women as bearers and nurturers of powerful men and nations. A complete national identity requires a mother. However, this powerful national icon cannot be the black/African woman. The *Latinegra* cannot be the representative of the national icon of motherhood because of what she historically represents to the nation—slavery and misogyny. (177)

Within this highly patriarchal and racist nationalist discourse, even motherhood is denied to the *Latinegra*. Of course, the denial of motherhood via the taking away of one’s children was certainly a reality for many enslaved women. Enslaved women could not claim their own bodies, much less their own children. As Cruz-Janzen’s statement affirms, to reinforce nationalist pride of the *madre patria*, to uphold the white maleness of Puerto Rican history and heritage, the *Latinegra* mother must be hidden and buried; the symbol of the nation could not have black skin.

It is this burial of the Latinegra mother within Puerto Rican culture, her supposed undesirability to which Llanos-Figueroa's novel responds. By delving into five generations of mothers and daughters, I argue that Llanos-Figueroa unearths a revised vision of Puerto Rican heritage and lineage, in which Afro-Puerto Rican women take a central, not marginalized, role. The Latinegra has not only been subsumed through a one-sided historical script but by a racial, gendered construction as unworthy and inferior, yet the novel raises questions concerning her racial, cultural identity: Must her existence be so tragic, as Cruz-Janzen, Comas-Díaz, and Jorge suggest? How have Latinegras challenged, resisted, and critiqued such negative representations of them as undesirable women? Moreover, can they create an alternative vision of themselves that removes the undesirable *and* victim labels? Indeed, I do not intend to overlook the real, historical victimization of Afro-Puerto Rican women (nor does the novel). Yet, while acknowledging Afro-Puerto Rican women's suffering in the past and in the present, the novel does not comfortably accept existing Latinegra writings that, although perhaps not intentional, reduce this group of women's status to victim. As Suzanne Bost reminds us, "racial, cultural, sexual, and national mixtures... challenge universalizing notions of selfhood and highlight the complexities of subjectivity" (2003, 6). The Afro-Puerto Rican women characters of Llanos-Figueroa's novel insist on creating their own identities and claiming their own voices in order to revise and even undo the historical construction shaped by negative racial and gender politics. Although this may be a site of conflict, it can also be a source of fluidity and empowerment.

### *Daughters of the Stone*

Tell me and let me tell my hearers what I have heard from you who heard it from your mother and your grandmother, so that what is

said may be guarded and unfailingly transmitted to the women of tomorrow, who will be our children and the children of our children.  
—Trinh T. Minh-ha (Qtd. in Yu, 20)

Although Minh-ha’s quote does not address Llanos-Figueroa’s novel directly, it nevertheless captures the text’s underlying theme: the survival of stories passed down from one generation of women to the next and the need for these stories to withstand the brutalities of colonialism. Family stories exist precisely because of the telling and listening done by the maternal line. For Minh-ha, transmitting stories from mother to daughter not only ensures the longevity of these narratives, but also asserts that they are crucial in reinforcing the survival and empowerment of the women whose voices are often threatened and silenced by patriarchal, colonial powers. To further illustrate the significance of maternal relationships and storytelling, the novel places little importance on the father figures in the text. I do not believe this is Llanos-Figueroa’s dismissal of paternity, but rather the novelist’s mode of re-inscribing Puerto Rican history and heritage as a herstory that privileges African maternal origin and women’s voices. This narrative tactic, while it risks painting a romanticized view of mother-daughter relationships, is significant for its insistence on placing Afro–Puerto Rican mothers at the center of shaping Puerto Rican heritage. *Daughters of the Stone* begins with a prologue by Carisa Ortiz, the fifth-generation daughter who becomes her family’s storyteller, and in so doing provides a voice for her family’s cultural legacies and herstory. To better appreciate Carisa’s role in the novel, I quote the prologue in its entirety:

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.

They may be visions that shimmered on the horizon at sunset, on the banks of the River Niger. They may have ridden in the evening song of the *coqui* in a long-ago Puerto Rico when rich men feasted on the sweetness of sugarcane, the bitterness of coffee, and the hearts of other men.

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. These are the stories of how I came to be who I am, where I am. (3)

Carisa's prologue sets the stage for her family's narrative, which is matrilineal in origin. Carisa places herself directly in the maternal line, claiming her family's narrative as both "my stories, their stories." In claiming these stories as hers and her family's, she also effectively positions herself as both narrator and listener, thereby privileging the significance of these two roles. She deconstructs the notion of time by suggesting that although these original stories were created and shaped by the women of her past, her survival in the present will ensure their re-telling. Moreover, Carisa's experiences ("my stories") are woven within her family's narrative through her own dreams and maternal memory. That is, her own dreams and memories occur only because of the preservation of her family's stories. According to Yi-Lin Yu's study of matrilineal narratives, matrilinealism becomes "the lifeline and the family line that sustain and safeguard the continuation of marginalized, endangered cultures or subcultures" (3). Carisa's role as storyteller, then, serves as a mode

by which to write and tell her maternal herstory, thus keeping it alive. By indicating that she is passing on stories that have been told to her by the women in her family, Carisa reveals the oral traditions of African cultures that “reclaim the values of the ancestors” (Davis 1998, 74). She pays homage to her family’s oral tradition that has survived despite the institution of slavery’s efforts to erase African ties to the past and maternal homeland.

Although Carisa states that her family’s stories are of a “time lost to flesh and bones, a time that lives only in dreams and memory,” her task as storyteller is to unearth these tales, to write from a racial memory that will allow her to preserve what has been threatened by slavery and the past, as well as contemporary racism and sexism. Racial memory encompasses memories held by a group of people that are transmitted orally from one generation to the next (Allen 1999). In regard to her novel, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has stated that slavery must not be forgotten, no matter how painful it is to remember; similarly, readers of *Daughters of the Stone* acknowledge a largely unwritten chapter of Puerto Rican history, the origins and experiences of Afro–Puerto Rican women who first arrived as slaves (Michaels 1996). To write from memory, especially when it is infused with a past trauma such as slavery, is wrought with complexity: “Afro-Caribbean writers, in particular, need to confront multiple layers of traumatic memories and among them, the ‘original trauma’ of the Middle Passage in which their diasporic identity is rooted,” yet “instead of surrendering to historical stasis, [Afro-Caribbean writers] opt for a creative synthesis of available perspectives, thereby opening a gateway to a possible rebirth of imagination and sensibility” (Feng 2002, 149–150). Indeed, as Tiffany Ana López argues, speaking out, or “telling” stories functions to de-normalize such violent, traumatic events (López 2000, 59). Significantly, although Carisa enacts “dreams and memory,” she also engages in the act of recalling this past throughout the narrative. This act of recalling suggests

the narrative's mode of testifying to the untold, buried experiences of Afro-Puerto Rican women, similar to what Theresa Delgadillo (2011) describes of the testimonio in Latin American and Latina women's fiction (46).<sup>3</sup> For Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, writing about slavery and women's struggle to survive amidst racism, classism, and sexism entails trauma, yet the novelist constructs a family story of women who survive and thrive, a story that is grounded by the unwavering love between mothers and daughters; and the fiercely loving maternal relationships, I suggest, represent a mode by which to revise history, what Pin-chia Feng describes as a "gateway to a possible rebirth of imagination and sensibility" (150). Further, by choosing to draw attention to the empowering possibilities of maternal storytelling instead of traumatic brutalities, the novel encourages a reading that centers on these relationships between women. Certainly the novel does not erase or attempt to undermine the realities of what enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico survived, but it does probe into other facets of daily life, including female relationships.

If "history...can give us memories not only...of our 'own' lives but of 'other lives lived long ago,'" (Michaels 1996, 3) what, then, is the responsibility of a writer such as Llanos-Figueroa, when history constructs memories that erase the very presence of a group of people? With contemporary writers engaged in historical fiction, much of which invokes trauma, their works

raise the question of what history is, who is represented and by whom, recognizing that much of traumatic history, particularly that which affects the socially marginal, has remained repressed, unwritten.... These authors engage their imaginations and fictional techniques in order to fill in gaps left by official histories...."  
(Vickroy 2002, 167)

As narrator and storyteller, Carisa views the act of inscribing maternal herstory not only as a way to construct a voice for her family, but also to provide herself with a context for understanding and even resisting the identity struggles she faces as a contemporary Afro–Puerto Rican woman. Can revising, re-imagining, and finally, re-inserting Afro–Puerto Rican women into history serve as a possible “alternative for racial healing,” as Feng suggests much Afro-Caribbean literature sets out to do (150)? The novel indicates this to be so, for as painful as her family’s story is, it is also powerful, moving, and uplifting. Further, although current writings on Afro-Latinas tend to reinforce the marginality of this group of women, the novel offers an alternate scenario for Afro–Puerto Rican women.

When speaking of novels such as *Daughters of the Stone*, we should acknowledge that “the argument over racial memory has indeed become political. It has become a struggle for the political power to speak what counts as the truth in particular historical and cultural contexts and in particular modes of discourse” (Allen 110). What remains problematic, as I have discussed earlier, is how history is presented and by whom and how these versions of history continue to withstand. Patrick L. O’Connell’s 2001 study of the use of memory to narrate history in Chilean fiction rings true:

The interplay between history, fiction, and memory is at the heart of any literary work that purports to recover or re-create the past. . . . If we can speak of memories, recollections, histories, and similar notions so multiplied, why may we not speak of ‘pasts’? It is the evocation of pasts, of richly layered, sometimes congruent yet more often conflicting pasts, that turn memory (or memories) into literature. (181)

For the character Carisa, her life experiences as an Afro–Puerto Rican woman contradict the way the Puerto Rican past is written as white and male. The novel, then, follows the tradition of writers that challenge history, not necessarily by negating what has happened in the past, but by instead examining the myriad ways in which this past affects contemporary times (O’Connell 2001). Llanos-Figueroa’s novel does not claim to be the only truth of Puerto Rican heritage, yet the creation of Afro–Puerto Rican women’s stories implies the author’s critique of existing Puerto Rican cultural narrative and its need of revision; indeed, the novel also responds to current writings on *Latinegras* that underscore this group’s powerlessness, rather than the unique ways they have empowered their lives and those of their daughters. As the novel suggests, oral stories passed down from mother to daughter serve as a source of maternal empowerment and pride in their racial heritage, which counters my earlier discussion of writings on *Latinegras*. The oral nature of Carisa’s family’s history, combined with her written account of the story, enables her to bridge past and present generations of Afro–Puerto Ricans who struggle to shape a cultural identity. As we discover at the end of the novel, Carisa returns to the homeland, Nigeria, the original source of “who I am, where I am” (3). Returning to Africa, the continent of her great-great grandmother Fela’s birth will provide Carisa the means to shape and construct a maternal, empowered Afro–Puerto Rican herstory that thus far remains untold.

As the first family member to land on Puerto Rican soil, Fela’s life on the island is marred by memories of her kidnapping from Africa and of her husband, Imo, with whom she did not have children, but with whom she performed a childbearing ritual prior to her kidnapping. In this ceremony, Fela and Imo offer a stone, a “childstone, guardian of their unborn baby’s soul,” which is to be “placed on the altar of the ancestors, where it would be welcomed by them. That would seal the ceremony” (22). This ceremony is intended to be used as

an offering and promise to the African goddess Oshun, goddess of fertility and motherhood. Such rituals, according to Marta Moreno Vega, reflect how even while living through the exploitation of slavery and post-slavery, people of African descent, including those in Puerto Rico, have maintained their African forms of worship. Fela brings this stone with her to Puerto Rico, and it remains “the only thing left of her old life” (11). This African stone, which reminds her of the unfinished task of having a child with Imo, of a debt owed to Oshun for not fulfilling this obligation to the deity, is a symbol of her past that she cannot and should not forget. Held within the stone, as Vega explains, is a collective racial, cultural memory that is reinforced through the practice of old traditions that have withstood time and colonization. The stone, as a physical, tangible object that is passed down through the generations, is significant in its role as a reminder of Carisa’s family legacy.

While certainly the maternal stories are symbolic, the stone is solid, a tangible object that has been carried from one continent to another by Fela, who refuses to discard a piece of her former life. Originating from within Africa’s earth and traveling along through the diaspora, the stone not only signifies the family tree, but also (forced) migration, mobility, and movement. It is this forced travel, the kidnapping of African women and men to the diaspora, that the stone represents; indeed, the stone connects past, present, and future generations who must take this history of kidnapping to shape identities and maternal herstories within their new environment. In Puerto Rico, Fela is relegated to enslaved property, unable to claim possession of even herself, yet the stone remains hers, and her ability to keep a prized personal possession and her refusal to discard it suggests a psychological complexity, a self-respect and dignity that slavery attempts to strip from her. Fela’s sense of desirability, of her entitlement to this self-preservation, is symbolized by her possession of an African stone, and this self-love and desirability are inscribed within

the stone that will later be passed down to her daughter. Further, the stone embodies oral history, a symbol of a family story that needs to be told.

Because Fela has been rendered voiceless, the stone acts as a symbolic voice, her own slave narrative.<sup>4</sup> Although the stone is a living reminder of her past life with Imo, from whom the brutality of slavery has separated her, Fela must choose to continue her family legacy as a way of fulfilling her obligation to the mother goddess and as a mode by which to symbolically imprint herself on Puerto Rican soil, to make herself a part of this island's history.

Bearing a child in Puerto Rico will "seal the ceremony" (22), yet in addition to continuing her family line, Fela must learn the importance of community among the other enslaved women that will ensure the group's survival. As a seamstress, Fela works alongside the plantation's other seamstresses apart from the rest of the slaves, and in their everyday conversations and laughter with each other, Fela "wondered how these women could live like this. How could they forget who they were and where they came from?" (16). Fela interprets the women's conversations, their daily acts of survival, as forgetting the past and homeland, but as the eldest of the women, Tía Josefa explains to her, "This is your new village and we are your people. Here, too, we work together. We all have stories. . . . You're not alone in your pain, never have been. We're all part of each other's pain and can be a part of each other's healing, too" (19). In order to create a woman-centered community outside the ancestral land, the women must adopt a "new village," as Josefa says, but this new village is in no way intended to replace the homeland; rather, they must adapt to this new environment and create a network of women that will sustain their cultural traditions. As Josefa tells Fela, working alongside each other may heal, though it will not, and should not, erase the past. For the seamstresses, these daily conversations, gossip, teasing, and laughter function as tools for survival in their enslaved state. Further, this camaraderie enables the women to shape

an Afro–Puerto Rican women’s community and space for their artistic skill. Undoubtedly, the women’s labor “provided *la patrona* a great deal of pride, as well as a good deal of personal wealth” (15), yet their highly-skilled craft grants them an outlet in which to create art. The women’s art is significant in its connection to an African diaspora, in addition to its creation of self-identity and self-desirability.

Sewing is an art form passed down from mother to daughter, and quilting or sewing within African women’s slave communities was a mode employed by enslaved women to subtly resist racial and gender oppression and communicate their family histories (Cash 1995; Davis 1998). Not only does sewing function as a mode of artistic expression; its subtle, nonverbal means of articulating history, pain, and family is equally significant. Further, this labor performed by the enslaved women, although completed in a state of bondage, demonstrates that work, if done in a community of sharing and friendship, can be a source of empowerment. Although it could be argued that Llanos-Figueroa sentimentalizes this aspect of work performed because the actual enslaved state of the women is not dwelled upon, I would suggest that this example of a women’s sewing community offers a glimpse into the potential strategies employed by enslaved women to resist powerlessness and invisibility. For the women on this plantation, survival depends on forming close relationships with each other, and friendships work to create community and family despite slavery’s attempts to cut off family ties. Fela, in her “ordinary humble dress, no different from that of any slave, except that she had covered the bodice and hem with yellow embroidery” (40), uses her skill to set herself apart from the other enslaved women, to challenge her status that dictates her submission and otherwise invisibility within Puerto Rican society. Fela refuses to be rendered as less than human, holding herself as her own subject, rather than as an objectified piece of property.

Fela's sense of inner dignity and pride, do in fact, distinguish her to the extent that she is openly admired and even wooed by the plantation owner, Don Tomás, who is "out of place...in his world of violent men" (44). As *patrón* of the plantation, Don Tomás recognizes that his class, gender, and race entitle him to use Fela as he wishes, yet his wooing by way of giving her gifts and kind salutations contradicts his status: "This *patron* was so different from the other white men she had encountered, offering rather than taking" (46). By studying Don Tomás's character, Fela discovers that it is he who will help her fulfill her promise to Oshun of bearing a daughter, and in doing so will "release her soul" (48). Perhaps most significant in these passages is how the novel represents this sexual contact between Fela and Don Tomás. The novel suggests that Fela's actions, her study of Don Tomás's character, is a religious ritual rather than a sexual act. By omitting details of rape, the novel presents this act as Fela's choice. This ironic perspective, considering the history of rape committed upon the bodies of indigenous and African women living in the Americas, raises problematic questions. Historically speaking, would Fela have had any real choice in the matter? Why would the novel represent a sexual act so uncritically? By suggesting choice rather than rape, does the novel attempt to separate Fela from traumatic events? Does the text attempt to construct a version of Puerto Rican history not rooted in sexual violence against enslaved African women? By suggesting that it is Fela herself who chooses to have sexual relations with Don Tomás and is not taken against her will, but instead engaged in sex with a gentle lover, the novel attempts to undo the binary of conqueror/conquered, which as my questions suggest, is problematic (47). Unlike essays written by Latinegras that argue that they are dehumanized through a negative construction of sexuality, Llanos-Figueroa works to remove Afro-Puerto Rican women from sexual violation. While we may question the reality of an enslaved African woman's choice to have sex with a white Spaniard, what is important to note, however, is how the novel does not represent Fela as lustful

or hypersexualized, as was the common stereotype of African women. This attempt to empower Fela's sexuality functions as the author's critique of what Frances Negrón-Muntaner (1997) calls the “racialization” of Latina bodies, particularly Afro-Latinas (185). Fela is not reduced to a willing body of sexual excess and indulgence. Sexuality is removed from the act of conception; Mati's birth, rather, fulfills an obligation to Oshun.

Remembering takes on different forms, as Josefa instructs Fela earlier, and for Fela, one way of remembering Imo, her past, and homeland is to give birth to a daughter, one who will tell and share stories to the next generation. Although giving birth to a daughter will sacrifice her own life, in accordance with her obligation to Oshun, Fela's daughter becomes a link between African and Afro–Puerto Rican generations. Carisa narrates the birth of Mati and Fela's subsequent death:

Afraid to touch her daughter, Fela looked longingly at her. At last, she placed fine netting over the box to keep insects away. When she was convinced she had done all that was necessary, she lay down on the soil and curled her body as close as she could around the box. She looked up at the night sky, knowing she was done here. Then she closed her eyes.

They found her there the next morning. She left behind a box of trinkets, some threads, a few old pieces of silk, a yellow and white embroidered dress, and my great-grandmother Mati clutching a little black stone in her newborn hand. (59)

This passage highlights Fela's immediate love for her baby daughter, her longing for the child to whom she has just given birth. Fela's affection toward her daughter counters slavery's efforts to prevent family from creating strong bonds of attachment. Fela's love for her daughter transmits self-love and

desirability, internalized by Mati as she grows up. Fela's death, though it leaves Mati motherless, does not signal a cutting off of the past; rather, Fela leaves her daughter with gifts that symbolize a continuation of family traditions. The threads and silk will enable Mati to voice her family's story through her sewing, and the stone is a remnant of Africa, a gift that ensures the survival of traditions (Cash). Moreover, Mati will be raised among a community of Afro–Puerto Rican women, seamstresses in particular, who will teach her the meanings of family bonds and how to preserve tradition through sewing.

From the moment of Mati's birth, the other enslaved women and Tía Josefa in particular, who is mostly responsible for Mati's care, sense that the girl has "odd ways" (65). As we learn, Mati develops not only her mother's talented embroidery skills, but also a deep knowledge of herbs, African healing rituals, and dreams of her ancestors and of Oshun: "Here were her ancestors, the long-ago Africans, the world the Lady had spoken about in her dreams.... She sat, mesmerized, unable to pull herself away. She remembered her dream. Was this the legacy left by her mother?" (70). As this passage reveals, Fela's absence from Mati's life does not necessarily mean that Mati is motherless. Although Fela is dead, she successfully passes down to Mati these ancestral, maternal memories and dreams held within the stone that make survival and empowerment possible. Moreover, mother and daughter can connect through memory and dreams, thereby transcending Fela's absence from the earth. The stone passed down from Fela to Mati provides the daughter with the means to remember the past, to visualize her mother's homeland and origins. In a society that would otherwise render Mati invisible, although she is the patrón's offspring, the stone supplies her with the power of memories and the will to heal her community of slaves with the knowledge of African cultural remedies. Fela's legacy will live on through the daughter's healing practices. In addition,

reclaiming ancestral knowledge serves as a rejection of racism that aims to construct African customs as undesirable or superstitious.

However, Mati's gift with herbs also enables her to channel her energy to undo the wounds suffered by her mother and fellow slaves. Don Tomás frees his slaves and leaves the hacienda to Mati upon his death, “but in the end, it did not matter what Don Tomás had written down. Papers could burn and so they did” (90). Having her lands stolen by hacendados who render Don Tomás's will invalid, Mati vows to recover what is rightfully hers. Significantly, Mati understands that her status as a mulatta and daughter of a slave designates her as unworthy of being a landowner. In other words, according to the neighboring hacendados, she will always be a slave and therefore is not really human. Mati, however, refuses to be dehumanized and made powerless by white men, including Don Próspero, who takes over the land. Perhaps most significant to Mati's strength as a curandera is her insistence of her own humanity, a self-love and self-desirability that counters a legacy of slavery that subordinates African-descent people, and it is this self-empowerment, according to the novel, that is transmitted from mother to daughter. Seeking justice and the reclamation of her lands, Mati denies a dying Don Próspero a life-saving remedy until he returns the property to her; she later recovers the plantation and subsequently her own and the plantation slaves' freedom.

Renaming the property Caridad (Charity), Mati inscribes a new meaning onto the plantation while still acknowledging the past of slavery, of her mother's life on the plantation, and her birth: “It was a private world into which outsiders were seldom invited, not in an attempt to hide the ugliness of its previous life but rather to preserve the spirit of community that now lived there” (118). Undoubtedly the reality of this plantation's ties to slavery cannot

be denied, but Mati's decision to create family on this very land that enslaved her mother suggests that history can be re-written. Mati's land recalls the past traumas associated with slavery, but she insists on re-defining this land on her own terms. Re-naming the plantation serves as an act of reclaiming her autonomy, a freedom never known by her mother while she lived in Puerto Rico. Once she marries Cheo, a longtime friend and lover, her decision to live on this land raises tensions concerning its past history as a slave plantation. While Cheo "can't understand how you can live here, in the house of the *patrones*, among their things" (122), Mati views her choice to remain on the property as a way to connect with her mother and the surrounding community; rather than leave the plantation because of its past ties to slavery, Mati chooses to inscribe a new identity onto the land, one that acknowledges her enslaved past, while simultaneously allowing her to create new memories based on African traditions. Of course, Cheo is correct to imply that what was originally among the things of this house were the slaves themselves, who were relegated to property. With Mati as mistress of herself and her own home, however, a new meaning is planted onto home, one of equality, humanity, and compassion.

Mati refuses to leave the plantation, for it is this land that is fused with her mother's memories that she now tells as oral and woven stories: "Although she couldn't read or write and didn't do a lot of talking, she was a great storyteller. Her stories flowed from her needles. The people who populated her dreams came to life in the pieces she hung on her walls" (119). Mati's artistry with the needle, which serves as a tool for storytelling, directly pays homage to the legacy of oral tales left behind by Africans throughout the diaspora. The sewing needle, used to make textiles, is connected to the text of this maternal herstory that is later voiced and written by her great-granddaughter Carisa.<sup>5</sup> It is only by living on the land once inhabited by her mother that Mati can

connect with her. In this passage, we see that Mati communicates her mother’s memories through her sewing, a talent she inherited from Fela. Although my reading of the novel does not privilege sewing, it should be noted that oral and woven communication are prevalent throughout the text as gifts passed down from mother to daughter. To remain on the land where her mother was brought, where Mati herself was conceived, serves to counter the property’s original association with pain, trauma, and slavery. Mati chooses to weave life, laughter, charity, and kindness into a land that was once the site of a harsh reality. The process of sewing and communicating her maternal herstory functions as an embodied process, that is, a connection to the land through the memories of those bodies that once inhabited the property.

Mati’s desire to remain on the land later compromises her relationship with her husband Cheo and their daughter Concha. While Mati teaches her daughter “the stories, the stone, the gift” of her maternal line (136), Cheo wishes to offer Concha a traditional Puerto Rican education, to which Mati is opposed:

These books, they are the things of the *blanquitos de la 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? They will teach her to be what they want her to be. They will teach her how to be a slave again, teach her to be less than what she is. They will destroy the beauty she sees in herself and her world. (136)

Much as the novel offers a new interpretation of labor as a form of empowerment, visible in the sewing community of women to which her mother Fela belonged, here we also see Mati’s unique version of education. While

typically the term education denotes information learned in a formal classroom setting, Mati instead defines it as knowledge gained from the communication of family stories passed down from the maternal line. Education taught from maternal stories, from the stone, according to Mati, will empower and instill pride, unlike the teachings from formal schools that she believes will teach Concha to internalize racism and bear contempt for all things African. Unlike maternal stories, which subjectify African women, a formal education, according to Mati, will dehumanize her daughter, making her a passive slave rather than an autonomous person. Mati critiques the education Concha will learn through state-run schooling, recognizing that traditional Puerto Rican schools will only teach one side of history, a version that paints an idealized, one-sided past. Although Cheo believes that a traditional education is the best form of learning, Mati challenges the idea that this is the superior means of gaining knowledge. Additionally, Mati believes that a traditional education will teach Concha to forget and deny her past, her cultural memories that Mati instills in her. What Mati inherently knows to be true is that the educational system is representative of the whole island's power structure, a hegemonic discourse that reinforces white maleness as the root of its culture and history. Mati's fears, namely that formal schooling will not only deracinate Concha but will alienate mother and daughter, are correct, for Concha not only later aspires to "be like everyone else," but she also attempts to repress her unique gift of feeling and learning about her surroundings through her feet (155). While early in her childhood Concha relishes her bare feet and their capacity to feel things within the soil that others do not, her school-taught education encourages a covering-up of her feet to essentially hide or repress her connection to an earthly, sensual knowledge, what her teachers view as primitive or backward.

It is this clash over forms of knowledge, of who defines the constitution of knowledge that informs the mother-daughter tension between Mati and

Concha. Although the novel is invested in mother-daughter empowerment through the stone and stories, the relationship between Mati and her daughter Concha is damaged precisely because of Concha's initial refusal to pass down her maternal herstory to her own daughter, Elena. The novel, then, problematizes mother-daughter relationships by exposing the tensions that can arise when an Afro–Puerto Rican woman attempts to assimilate into whiteness. Rather than narrate mother-daughter relationships uncritically throughout the novel, the tense relationship between Mati and Concha adds a layer of psychological complexity absent up to this point. For Concha, assimilation comes at the expense of maternal bonding. Once Concha marries and becomes a mother to Elena, she attempts to limit Mati's influence over Elena, telling Mati, “She doesn't need to hear all that stuff about magic stones and fairy godmothers. You can keep all that nonsense to yourself” (164). For Concha, who has become assimilated via a Puerto Rican education, her mother's stories are silly tales of magic and make-believe, rather than rich, family legacies that have made it possible to withstand the traumas of kidnapping and slavery. Concha merely dismisses these maternal stories as superstitions, failing to admit what can be learned from them. Mati views the passing on of these stories as a remembrance, “so that they wouldn't forget” what teachers and history books erase or do not tell (163). While the novel does not argue against formal schooling, it does, however, insist on recognizing an epistemology of learning that may be gained by oral maternal stories rarely taught in schools; in addition, the novel critiques educational institutions' methods of molding minds into believing that oral family histories are “*brujerías*” (166), that women who practice old healing customs are simply brujas or witches. La bruja's knowledge has long been considered threatening for a powerful, patriarchal institution such as the Catholic Church (Lara 2005). As such, her power had to be suppressed by Western, Christian patriarchs to uphold binary views of the dark bruja as

evil and Catholicism as good and the root of salvation (Lara 14–15). In the novel, then, Concha's casting off of her mother as a bruja is part and parcel of an extensive history of the exploitation of African and indigenous women in the Americas by way of subversion of their herbal and healing knowledge. In order to maintain and reinforce racial, gender, and class supremacy, Concha's schooling succeeds in repressing memories that shape her family's cultural herstory. Moreover, by rejecting her mother's knowledge, Concha risks rupturing a maternal line; that is, Concha's order in her family places her between her mother and daughter, and although she tries in vain to shield Elena from her mother's "stuff" (164), Elena nevertheless inherits her grandmother's stories and devotion to African deities, customs, and traditions.

Elena's preservation of her grandmother's earthly knowledge empowers her to save and heal Concha after her mother suffers an emotional trauma following Mati's death. When Mati dies, Concha reverts to an emotionally isolated, silenced state as a result of her feelings of guilt and even responsibility over her mother's death. Concha is hospitalized for a total of five years under the care of Dra. Montalvo, who is unable to successfully treat Concha without Elena's help:

The *doctora* wanted to know more about the business of the feet. Elena said that her grandmother Mati had told her once that all the women in their family were born with a special gift. The grandmother had explained that Concha's feet were her special way of knowing the world around her. But then something happened, because as Concha grew up, she made sure her feet were never uncovered. (185)

The doctora realizes that modern psychiatric care does nothing to cure Concha's trauma, but rather it is the act of compassionate listening to her

patient, combined with Elena's weekly visits with her family's stone, that succeeds in healing Concha. The doctora discovers that treating Concha entails learning about her family history, which is intricately tied to her emotional state. In a twist of irony, what proves to be the source of healing for Concha are the very things she had earlier rejected and repressed, namely the gift of her feet and the family's stories symbolized by the stone. Modern education, what Concha is taught in school to view as the superior form of learning, only serves to further traumatize her in the hospital, at least until the doctor acknowledges that her medical training does not have all the answers. Concha's illness is a direct result of shunning her mother's knowledge and denying her own special gift, as she later tells her husband, "Dra. Montalvo says I'll only truly be well again when I confront the past. She says it was the running away from it that made me sick. Do you believe that? Sometimes I think she sounds just like Mamá" (191). Concha's psychological damage, the novel suggests, is almost a punishment for her failure to treat the maternal stone as a symbolic source of empowerment. Further, Dra. Montalvo enacts a surrogate maternity by encouraging Concha to look to the past rather than escape it. Elena serves as the link between her mother and grandmother, urging her mother to see the strength that the past, memories, and Mati's knowledge can provide.

The past, although it shapes the women's present and future lives, must also be negotiated. Spending five years caring for her mother in the hospital, Elena loses much of her childhood and adolescence by teaching her mother to remember the past, while time rapidly moves ahead of them. Later, as a married woman with two young children and a nurse's education, Elena is at a loss over how to cope with her own problems, namely her marital tension caused in part by her jealous mother-in-law, Zenobia. However, Concha encourages her daughter to move away in order to break free from past

experiences that have stunted her ability to achieve complete happiness in the present: “I’ve had a lot of time to think, to put myself in your shoes. First the hurricane, then my illness, and now Zenobia. We’ve all taken too much from you” (208). Arming Elena with the stone, Concha realizes that there is a place for the past within one’s life, but the present must be attended to. As a woman with firsthand knowledge of pain and loss as a result of denying her obligation to keep her maternal herstory alive, Concha attempts to spare her daughter this psychological trauma. Concha, who has re-learned her mother’s knowledge, reclaims the stone that she initially rejected. As a newly-healed woman, Concha now understands the true value of maternal objects such as the stone. Elena has lost time, so to speak, in caring for a mother who has a complicated relationship with the past, and Concha fears that Elena will suffer for this as she once did. Elena leaves to New York for a fresh start, and although her relationship with her mother has been compromised because of role reversal, with Elena as caretaker and Concha as the cared for, it is Concha, in her desire to “*be a mother again*,” who inspires Elena to create new memories that respect the past, but are not disabled by it (208).

It is their shared experience with loss that also connects Elena to Concha, for soon after her arrival to New York, Elena’s toddler son Dani dies. Initially repeating Concha’s pattern of retreating into herself and relying on her young daughter for survival, Elena learns that she must heal herself through her mothering of Carisa, by sharing stories she herself learned as a child, as she discloses in her diary: “The telling made me stronger. Sometimes I think it was more for me than for her. The telling was a healing. It helped me find my way, just as it had helped those before me find theirs” (246). Elena learns the healing power of sharing and telling stories, which overturns the silence of trauma (López). She discovers that communicating maternal memories with her daughter can empower, much as the oral tales strengthened the

generations of women before her, and she further gathers courage by linking herself to “those before me” (246). Elena suffers the trauma of her son’s death, and although it is tragic, what is important is that she is capable of survival, just as Concha has survived her mother’s death. Even more significantly, Elena discovers that family stories, wrought with memories of the past, can serve as tools for healing and survival in the present. Elena and Carisa bond through the act of storytelling, and the development of new stories and memories will ensure the longevity of their family herstory. Much as the past cannot be forgotten, the present must also be lived, and their stories will remain because of the women’s survival.

As the youngest woman in her family, Carisa’s life in New York embodies what I observe about the contemporary Afro-Latina’s complex struggle in forging an identity amidst restrictive categories of race and gender. In fact,

Puerto Ricans on the continent must negotiate even more than those on the island with the terms of U.S. culture. Although officially inside their own nation, since there is no national border between the United States and Puerto Rico, U.S. Puerto Ricans’ language, culture, and history make them outsiders. (Bost 114)

Arlene Dávila’s 2004 study, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*, also reminds us that the reality of African heritage present in many contemporary Puerto Ricans, when combined with the status of the island as a U.S. colony, serves to further complicate discussions of ethnicity, race, and social class. While the novel does not comment on the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, I would add that this history works alongside race and gender to comprise Carisa’s experience as an Afro–Puerto Rican woman. Carisa is not entirely at home

in the United States, but living in Puerto Rico confronts her with problems as well, as she must negotiate the island's own unique brand of racism.<sup>6</sup>

Carisa loves listening to her family's stories and has inherited her special gift of storytelling, yet her school teachers and later, her university professors, who uphold the classics as examples of legitimate writing, threaten to do to Carisa what was done to her grandmother Concha. Carisa learns in her formative schooling years from a teacher that there is "no need for superstitions anymore" (253), which is indicative of an elitist, racist educational model that constructs a binary with formal schooling as ideal and superior, oral knowledge as inferior and backward. This sentiment is subsequently echoed by a creative writing professor in college:

"As to this"—he pointed to my journal—"this is a mass of superstitious nonsense, clichéd 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 belles lettres. There are arenas for this type of thing..." (270)

Essentially, Carisa is encouraged to reject oral cultural traditions that influence her writing, in favor of an imitation of what her professor defines as "belles lettres." But beyond that, what Carisa correctly interprets in her professor's offhand suggestions to submit her stories to "children's fantasy magazines...for their Halloween issues" (270) is his racism, his deep-seated belief that a woman like Carisa is incapable of producing "high-quality literary work" and that she simply has no place or future in the literary world as a writer. What he defines as high-quality writing, however, is based on his privileged status as a white, male academic who maintains rigid notions of what constitutes real literature. According to this professor, stories by and about blacks and Afro-Puerto Ricans

are denounced as superstitious and even freakish, which of course reveals his own colonial stereotypes; for him, Afro–Puerto Ricans are not subjects of their own stories, but are merely marginal. This narrow view supports Irene Lara’s argument, namely that historically, African-descent peoples, women in particular, have been negatively construed as practicing a so-called “black magic” that casts evil spells on deserving people (17). Although this irrational fear may be traced to the Spanish Inquisition, we see that Carisa’s professor, living approximately 400 years after those events, nevertheless upholds a similarly exaggerated, obscured vision of African-descent women. Rather than see Afro–Puerto Rican women as worthy subjects and agents of literature, they merely exist in his colonial imagination as useful stereotypes to reinforce his own sense of racialized and gendered superiority. However, Carisa refuses to compromise her writing style or her cultural influences and instead returns to Puerto Rico to stay with her grandmother Concha, who in her old age and among her community of Afro–Puerto Rican women can show her granddaughter the beauty and necessity of holding on to family stories.

Carisa is encouraged by her professor to alter her subject matter to succeed as a writer, thereby denying a crucial aspect of her identity, but in listening to stories by her grandmother’s comadres, the women reinforce her strong belief that these are stories worthy of being heard and told. Taking classes at a university in Puerto Rico fails at teaching her about her culture, instead referring to slavery as a “regrettable period” and “who actually worked the cane and coffee fields was not the issue” (292). As Carisa learns, “the history [she has] inherited owes much to the construction made by the scribes of Western colonialism” (Torres-Saillant 90). As a nonwhite woman, this very version of history relegates her maternal family line to an invisible, forgotten class of women. In order for her to re-inscribe a maternal herstory that prioritizes “who actually worked the cane and coffee fields,” Carisa discovers

that she must live with and listen to the voices of those descendants. If the history books she reads in her university classes fail to center the experiences of her ancestors, can she, then, attempt a re-writing? What Carisa learns from her grandmother is that listening to her community of female elders must inform her writing:

They brought me the pieces of their lives and bade me make them a quilt of words. When the world was moving too fast for them, they bade me stop time. During those many weeks, I sat back and listened and wrote down what I was given. The idea of being a published writer started to take seed once again. It had been years since I had taken out that old dream and contemplated it. Now I looked at it full face. It felt good, like a rediscovered family album. Everything seemed familiar. I woke up thinking of the tales, and the pen in my hand moved and kept on moving. I couldn't write quickly enough to capture all the words that swirled around my head. I took their stories and nurtured them, blended them with my own, and let them simmer. (285–286)

This poetic language once again draws a connection between sewing and writing/telling maternal stories, abilities that daughters learn from the generations of women before them. Carisa must nurture herself through her writing, which serves as way of centering her ancestry of Afro–Puerto Rican women. Carisa does not inherit the gift of sewing, but as a contemporary Afro–Puerto Rican woman who refuses to be silenced by racist, sexist discourses of power, she may take the images and memories told to her by the women and construct them into a written story that weaves a maternal herstory, thereby inscribing self-desirability that has been transmitted since Fela's arrival to the island. Carisa essentially becomes a seamstress through her

writing, and much as African women sewed family histories into their textiles, Carisa's writing may also function as a written family album. What Carisa learns is that the familiar must be the foundation of her fiction writing; rather than emulate what her professor called “belles lettres,” Carisa refuses to imitate colonial writing, instead using her maternal family stories as authentic subject matter. Like a quilter, Carisa learns to put the pieces of her cultural history together to make a whole. The women's tales of loss, love, and family, like those stories that are a part of Carisa's own maternal herstory, provide inspiration to the developing writer in light of her struggle to defend her subject matter as legitimate and worthy. Carisa's use of quilting and cooking metaphors to describe her writing process symbolizes the maternal influences upon her life; both quilting and cooking are traditions that are typically passed down from mother to daughter. As an aspiring writer, her family stories serve as her food and quilt, for just as food and quilts nourish and protect, so do the stories provide sustenance for her creativity. Much as quilts weave family history and recipes are passed down, Carisa's writing also creates community.

Carisa's decision to go to Nigeria (first signaled in the novel's prologue) is invoked by her desire to trace family stories that originated in her land of ancestry, the home place that birthed the most silenced member of her family, her great-great grandmother Fela. But digging up the stories from Fela's homeland is a mode of resurrecting her voice and the voices of enslaved Africans brought to Puerto Rico. As Elena writes in a letter to Carisa before her departure, “I'll bring you something good to eat and we can trade stories. I'll bring the stone with me. It's fitting that it go back with you. After all, it all began with the stone. You should take it home” (322). Elena inscribes Carisa into this maternal herstory by providing her with the stone, the symbol of her family's origination from Africa. The novel represents Africa as the nostalgic home space, the source of creativity, family, and history, whereas Puerto Rico

and the United States further serve to alienate Carisa, potentially disabling the construction of self.<sup>7</sup> Having the stone with her is a way for Carisa to take home and family wherever she goes, to remember the stories and people that make up her herstory. Carisa can connect the old and the new, the past and present in order to write down the stories that have survived amidst the traumas of slavery, racism, and sexism.

Although the *Latinegra*, according to Comas-Díaz, “is not self-defined; instead, she is defined by others,” thus making the “*Latinegra* [unable] to racially socialize her daughter as a black female and to convey to her a positive sense of self” (184, 189), the women in the novel do instill in their daughters tools by which to live, remember, and survive. It is through the telling and sharing of stories and the stone that mothers teach their daughters what it means to be Afro–Puerto Rican women and how to counter official history that omits them. Indeed, the women in the novel experience a great deal of pain, loss, and trauma, but the stories remain living entities that empower them to cope and even to thrive. Carisa’s written words, shaped by oral family stories held within the stone, provide a new herstory of Afro–Puerto Rican mothers and daughters, whose voices have previously been unheard. Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s novel serves as a literary contribution to existing Puerto Rican historical, cultural narratives that neglect the presence of African women and men. By presenting us with a line of Afro–Puerto Rican women, the author also complicates *Latina/o* identity that erases any semblance of African heritage. Although scholars have written of the struggles faced by Afro-Latinas who experience a combination of racism and sexism within multiple communities, Llanos-Figueroa’s novel insists on examining methods of subversion used by her women characters to challenge forms of oppression, namely by way of sharing and telling stories from one generation of women

to the next. In the novel, the powerful, emotional mother-daughter bonds are strengthened by the communication of family history, enabling the women to survive and outlive the traumas of pain and loss. Moreover, Llanos-Figueroa constructs a space for her characters, making them subjects and creators of stories despite their prolonged neglect.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> However, as Richard Jackson's important study, *The Black Image in Latin American Literature* (1976) asserts, the racist connection between black skin and “ugliness, sin, darkness, [and] immorality” is visibly present in Latin America as well (xiii). Nevertheless, I use the U.S. framework for reading the novel because of the significance the text places on Carisa's racial identity struggle as an American-born Afro-Puerto Rican woman and her use of creative writing to unearth a revised vision of Puerto Rican history that shapes her U.S. experience.

<sup>2</sup> The terms Latinegra and Afro-Latina will be used interchangeably throughout the article, as they both refer to Latina women who may also claim African lineage.

<sup>3</sup> Space does not permit me to discuss the testimonio at length, as my reading does not engage in the novel's connection to this particular genre. See Theresa Delgado's excellent study, *Spiritual Mestizaje*, listed in the Works Cited.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for further reading.

<sup>5</sup> I thank my fellow Summer 2011 MALCS writing workshop colleague, Carolina Núñez-Puente, for reminding me of the connection between textile and text.

<sup>6</sup> Although all the women in Carisa's family suffer from the effects of racism, it is important to note that they experience it in different ways, as the novel encompasses over a century of Puerto Rican history. As the first family member to be born on U.S. soil, Carisa experiences the simultaneous Anglo-Saxon racism in the United States as well as Puerto Rico's racism as a remnant of Spanish hegemony.

<sup>7</sup> My reading of the novel does not extensively discuss Carisa's rather nostalgic decision to return to Africa, although this may certainly be addressed in other scholarship.

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