DUSMIC POETIC OF THE FLESH:
Decolonial Shifts in Puerto Rican Women's Fiction

Roberta Hurtado

Abstract: Since 1898, Puerto Rican women have been subjected to colonial narratives that depict them as helpless and/or pathological pawns to be saved by a beneficent Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power. Imbedded within these narratives have been tactical logics that not only transform Puerto Rican women into objects to be dominated, but also manifest a social structuring that has lasted to this day. The wounds resulting from this colonial imposition have been felt in the most intimate of spaces, and suggest the need for a shift in how Puerto Rican women and their experiences are narrated and interpreted. This essay explores these issues by engaging Latina decolonial feminist theories to identify the presence of a "dusmic poetic in the flesh" that identifies, delineates, and subverts colonial narratives via artistic literary creation. A dusmic poetic of the flesh is an aesthetic that returns to the flesh in order to combat colonial narratives by demystifying the impact of coloniality and creating visions of transformative consciousness. This essay contends that Alba Ambert's *A Perfect Silence* contains representations of a dusmic poetic of the flesh that not only exposes and challenges the Anglo-U.S.'s narrative of Puerto Rican women, but also constructs a culturally-specific decolonial praxis for healing. This essay asserts that a dusmic poetic of the flesh emerges as a tactical aesthetic for empowerment beyond the boundaries of coloniality's limitations.

In the 1945 publication "Puerto-Rico-The Forty-Ninth State?," Belle Boone Beard contended that the U.S.'s possession of Puerto Rico created "our opportunity to demonstrate to the world our theories about the handling of dependent peoples. This is our laboratory for experiments in democracy and the rights of self-government" (116). From this perspective, Puerto Ricans within this Anglo-U.S. colonial imaginary need saving by the beneficent U.S. Even more disconcerting is that, within this imaginary, Puerto Ricans emerge as pawns to be controlled by the U.S. government. Despite the date of Beard's argument, not much has changed in how the U.S. government,

and those acting on its behalf, perceive and treat Puerto Ricans. For Puerto Rican women especially, the resulting macro-level violations—and more intimate micro-level manifestations of the imposed social structure—that emerge as a result of this narrative have been numerous. Two questions aim to unpack Puerto Ricans' experiences in relation to the U.S. as colonial savior narrative: 1) how does Anglo-U.S. coloniality impact the Puerto Rican community, and 2) how can Puerto Rican women narrate their own experiences of coloniality without these being appropriated by Anglo-U.S. coloniality or lapsing into a reactionary binary that places Puerto Rican women back into a "victim in need of saving" identity? To attend to these inquiries, I examine Alba Ambert's frame narrative fiction novel *A Perfect Silence* (1995) for the presence of a *dusmic poetic of the flesh* that exposes the impact of coloniality while simultaneously proffering a decolonial praxis of culturally specific healing.

Dusmic poetic of the flesh is a concept that engages decolonial theory to explore how Ambert's novel offers representations of how Puerto Rican women—both on the island and the mainland—experience Anglo-U.S. coloniality at the macro and micro level, and how *A Perfect Silence* also delineates flesh experiences of coloniality and individual identity formation. *A Perfect Silence* follows a Puerto Rican woman, Blanca, during a process of personal revelation as she explores the history of violence to which she has been subjected on the island and mainland. I contend that such experiences are not merely manifestations of a "dependent people" learning to be civilized, but instead reflect the incarnation of colonial structures. This essay, then, examines the ways that Puerto Rican women writers—and potentially other Latinas and women of color—can create a dusmic poetic of the flesh in fiction.

To do so, I begin by mapping Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power. Next, I explore how concepts put forward by Latina decolonial feminist theory

provide insight into understanding how Puerto Rican women navigate and contest these structures. The second half of this essay analyzes the narrative arc of the Puerto Rican female protagonist in Ambert's novel as a representation of a dusmic poetic of the flesh. Specifically, I apply the concept of dusmic poetic of the flesh to demonstrate how fiction novels function as a praxis of healing. For this analysis, I examine how a novel—*A Perfect Silence*—depicts the ramifications of the Anglo-U.S. coloniality on the construction of identity within coloniality. Then I unpack how a dusmic poetic of the flesh depicts how intimate experiences of coloniality of power can be depicted via engagement with world traveler consciousness. Finally, I articulate how a dusmic poetic of the flesh can create a decolonial praxis in which Puerto Rican women's narratives of trauma can move beyond the "victim needing saving" model provided by Anglo-U.S. coloniality and, instead, fashion its own culturally specific modes of healing within creative acts. While this article does not intend to be prescriptive in terms of what or how that decolonial praxis is defined, or limit who or what can be engaged, it does attempt to map out one possible avenue for how Puerto Rican women impacted by Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power can constitute a space beyond the reach of colonial violence and violation.

Defining Dusmic Poetic of the Flesh

A dusmic poetic of the flesh is my own term for a tactical aesthetic in the literary arts in which authors identify, delineate, and subvert colonial narratives by exploring embodied experiences of coloniality to promote a process of healing. It emerges through engagement with Nuyorican "dusmic" poetry's revolutionary potential in combination with the Chicana feminist theory in the flesh. The former, coined by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, is the method by which Puerto Rican poets discursively fight colonial ideologies and activities by envisioning a transformative consciousness that

maps alternative ways of knowing, and share those with their communities (1975). The latter is defined by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (2015) as a means of theorizing power by exploring its very real, intimate manifestations in the rhythms of daily life. In recognizing how poetry and experience can come together, a dusmic poetic of the flesh is an aesthetic that both portrays and critiques; that exposes social injustice while simultaneously refuting it as Puerto Rican women's defining quality. Importantly, I expand the concept of "poetry" to a "poetic" to incorporate different forms of verbal expression, recalling Ana Lydia Vega's description of how authors detail their experiences of oppression via different writing styles (1994).

Dusmic poetic of the flesh is particularly useful in analyzing Ambert's *A Perfect Silence.* Ambert's novel takes place during the second half of the twentieth century, and follows Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. northeast, as well as return migration. Her protagonist's movement to the U.S. depicts the personal experiences that various Puerto Rican women writers attended to during this era (1994). Indeed, Juan Flores (1993), Lisa Sánchez González (2001) and Jorge Duany (2002) have reminded us that depictions of Puerto Rican experience in the twentieth century would be incomplete without attention to the creation of diasporas in the mainland U.S. They have also identified why these experiences must be contextualized with attention to their colonial moment: they do not happen in a vacuum. For example, scholars such as Lisa Fortuna, Michelle Porche, and Margarita Alegria (2008) have identified the need to understand the push factors that cause people to leave their countries of origin in order to understand how historical events can influence current behaviors. Their work also indicates the need for further conversations regarding how the U.S. has contributed to those macro-level experiences via its international policies, and also how the culture within the United States might foster conditions that exacerbate

symptoms of transgenerational trauma as pointed to by Rachel Goodman and Cirecie A. West-Olatunji's work (2010).

For Puerto Rican women writers, a dusmic poetic of the flesh begins by strategically accounting for experiences of colonial imposition. The movement pattern that Ambert—along with other authors such as Nicholasa Mohr (1975)—depicts must be understood not as Puerto Ricans moving as a result of free, unencumbered decisions but instead as occurring simultaneously, and in conjunction with, Anglo-U.S. colonial impositions that began in 1898 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. This treaty surrendered Puerto Rico to the United States as bounty of war.[1] Since that time, the U.S. has—under the Jones Act of 1917 and previous/subsequent legislation—required Puerto Ricans to become U.S. citizens, be subject to U.S. federal policy, and build its economy via U.S. management. To better understand the foundations that enable such policies, and their influence on Puerto Rican women, I turn to Aníbal Quijano's (2000) analysis of coloniality and systemic oppression. Quijano describes coloniality of power as a structure of domination that, emerging at the time of Western European colonization in the Americas, constructed a new model of domination that gave rise to modernity. It contains two main axes of power that create a "body" available for exploitation: race and labor (2000, 534-35). In witnessing the "body" of the colonized as available for control, and manifesting social organizing principles that justify and maintain that control, coloniality of power functions as a self-sustaining system in which the flesh transforms into objectified "bodies" for colonization.

Decolonial Feminism and a Dusmic Poetic of the Flesh

As María Lugones has shown, understanding the intricacies of coloniality requires recognizing the coloniality of gender. In "Towards a Decolonial

Feminism," Lugones (2010) delineates the manner in which gender is at the center of colonialism, defining how race historically functioned for colonized individuals and how labor relations transpired. Importantly, for the woman of color, biological categorization determines how she is exploited via processes of fragmentation that are part of a colonial praxis. Importantly, gender as a social category is both imposed on women of color but has also been denied to them even as it has been part of the colonial imposition because only those who are deemed human in a coloniality of power can have gender. Humanity is, thus, restricted to the colonizer (2010). Additionally, a direct connection exists between the colonization of land and the colonization of the female body of color. In her analysis of Lugones's work, Xhercis Mendez (2015) has noted the importance of historicizing gender as a set of multidimensional practices, mapping relational power, and maintaining awareness of coloniality and how it functions within the constitution of bodies under control.

Therefore, it becomes paramount to establish how bodies or flesh are transfigured into targets of domination within coloniality, while obfuscating those mechanisms via carefully constructed narratives. This move is necessary to distinguish between coloniality, its processes and narratives, and the bodies upon which Anglo-U.S. coloniality is imposed. As David Spurr (1993) has demonstrated, a key tactic in colonial rhetoric is the appropriation of colonized lands and people. In his analysis of English and French colonial writings, Spurr shows how this strategy transforms the colonized individual and community into an object that reflects the needs and desires of the colonizer—including justifying the colonizer's activities or even the colonizer's identity (1993). The colonial structure simultaneously continues to exploit the actual flesh of the colonized even as the flesh is ideologically transformed into a source of validation for the colonizer. This maneuver is evident in Beard's statement (1945) from the opening of this essay. As Walter

Mignolo's analysis of colonial representation has shown, coloniality does not care to depict the colonized beyond the dynamic of what they represent for coloniality (2005). It does not matter if the narrative is true or if coloniality's machinations that happen as a result of that narrative are harmful to those who they are imposed upon. Thus, a dusmic poetic of the flesh must directly contest the acts of appropriation and domination Beard's discourse intimates by exposing the limitations levied by this system of oppression on Puerto Rican women's subjectivity.

Important to the construction of a dusmic poetic of the flesh is whether and how colonized peoples know themselves to be different than how coloniality narrates and treats them. Ambert's protagonist, similar to those created by Carmen de Monteflores (1989) and Mohr (1974, 1975), not only navigates what it means to be a Puerto Rican girl/woman whose movements occur while being a colonial subject, but also how people's treatment of her shifts depending on her positionality. I turn here to María Lugones's concept of world traveler consciousness (2010) to consider how expressions of power are relative and contextual; that is, power exhibits itself depending on the spaces and bodies at play.[2] Lugones describes how women of color in the United States become world travelers because of the "distinct experience of being different in different 'worlds' and of having the capacity to remember other 'worlds' and ourselves in them" (2003, 89). Moving in and out of locales that are historically as well as geographically marked by power, each "world" functions as a space in which meanings and definitions change. World traveler consciousness develops from understanding not only the entering and exiting of each world but also the meanings and alterations in how a person is "read" within each world. It also means knowing how to engage and navigate these spaces.

I contend that a dusmic poetic of the flesh exists in which this world traveler consciousness informs the way Puerto Rican women engage creative acts like fiction writing in order to attend to their experiences. Importantly, analysis of narratives by and regarding Puerto Rican women's navigations of both macro- and micro- level violence within Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power requires attention to the *act* of creation within the literary arts. Aurora Levins Morales pays specific attention to the ways in which stories both "bear witness" and how, in their creation, "we tell ourselves and each other of why the world is at it is" (1998, 4). As part of a dusmic battle against colonial appropriation, literary creation can be what Levins Morales describes as "[c]ultural work, the work of infusing people's imaginations with possibility, with the belief in a bigger future" and which is "the essential fuel of revolutionary fire…the capturing of imagination, the restoration of wholeness and a sense of dignity" (1998, 4). Puerto Rican women, by narrating their experiences within their own words and perspectives, show the potential of transformative consciousness. They can determine their own methods of definition, in recollection of Carmen Rivera's assertion in *Kissing the Mango Tree* that select Puerto Rican women authors use "storytelling to dismantle traditional behavioral paradigms and to invoke a 'magical' transformation that empower[s] women to gain control of their bodies, their minds, their sexuality, their own space, and ultimately their lives" (2002, 157). Rather than pawns for Anglo-U.S. coloniality, Puerto Rican women writers can envision and portray their own range of potential.

This creativity—formed by and entrenched in the corporeal, the mental, and the spiritual—can participate in a decolonial praxis of healing. Yet, a nuance must be made, as Lillian Comas-Díaz (1995) has noted in exploring therapeutic decolonization for Puerto Ricans as vital but also paradoxical because, although decolonization may happen at the individual level for

Puerto Ricans, they continue to contend with Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power. Within this awareness, she goes on to note the importance of this process because it "attempts to increase awareness of and differentiation between external and internalized colonization" which, in turn, can enable "attempts to empower clients" as well as address the "colonized person's need for fundamental change by helping Puerto Ricans become aware of their capacity to shape reality" (1995, 54-55). In the shift that takes place, the Puerto Rican individual can distinguish the coloniality and its imposition, and reframe how to engage it as well as constitute self-understanding. This healing comes by moving beyond the appropriative and fragmenting tactics undertaken within a regime of coloniality. Writing, therefore, becomes a space of affirmation made possible by the knowledge born with the flesh and manifested by world traveler consciousness. Indeed, it becomes part of a process for creating the "individual freedom from the constraints of patriarchal and colonized mandates" that Luz María Umpierre has described (2012, 187).

Objects of Saving

Having mapped the theoretical groundwork that links the dusmic poetic of the flesh and Lugone's world traveler construct, this section explores how Ambert's *A Perfect Silence* enacts a dusmic poetic of the flesh to challenge Anglo-U.S. coloniality by first mapping out the impositions of coloniality. The construction of this poetic requires identifying the mechanisms of coloniality that position Puerto Ricans—among other Latinas/os/xs and communities of color in the U.S.—as objects to be controlled and saved from themselves in Anglo-U.S. coloniality's rhetorical strategies. Indeed, an important strategy of the colonial savior narrative, as Beard's statement shows, is to diminish and invalidate the agency or autonomy of the colonized if it operates unsanctioned by coloniality (1945). In the novel, Ambert presents a Puerto Rican woman

who has suffered from and struggled against these restraints that are particular to Latinas. Oliva Espín (1997) reminds us that while women are molded by their experiences of gender, Latinas are subject to gender norms that are contextual to their cultures and experience of colonization. This awareness is important because, and as Espín argues, Latinas are often pathologized in the U.S. for their survival strategies in relation to oppressive forces. Moreover, as Ada María Isasi-Díaz states, "Often considered intellectually inferior, Latinas' understandings are indeed one of the many subjugated knowledges that are ignored to the detriment not only of our own community but also of the whole of society" (2012, 44). Through the character of Blanca, the novel tells of how Latinas come to know the structures of power that govern their lives within a coloniality of power. This knowledge includes understanding the various matrices that position Latinas within overlapping aspects of categories of identity such as gender, race, and ethnicity, as delineated in Kimberle Crenshaw's work on intersectionality (1991).

The novel, *A Perfect Silence*, opens with the protagonist, Blanca, in the midst of a suicide attempt. The narrative states, "Convinced that death is darkness, I want to be sure" and then follows with descriptions of her "chalky tongue," how her "mouth floods with thin saliva" and putting a "black sleeping mask over my eyes" to achieve an even greater darkness: death (1995, 11). Even before the narrator is given a name, she already appears to need saving. Her wish to commit suicide and end her life seems to demonstrate that she is unable to exist without intervention. Additionally, the way that she narrates her experience of the attempted suicide constructs her as a series of fragments—she is not a whole human but instead an inventory of parts. It could easily be argued that, especially since she does not demarcate any of her self-destructiveness or self-fragmentation in relation to coloniality, this experience is a result of an inherent flaw or inadequacy that she has as a Puerto Rican

woman. However, as Mendez (2015) asserts, it is necessary to put the narrator's experience into historical context and the reality that, as Comas-Díaz notes, "colonization is a predominant component in the lives of Puerto Ricans…the legacy of colonialism results in feelings of alienation, frustration, and poor self-esteem" (1995, 33). Thus, the protagonist's initial actions and statements must be placed within the context of the narrator's reality in order to fully understand them: a woman existing as a colonized object. In doing so, echoes of narratives such as that of U.S.-based author Christopher Tietze (1947), whose advocacy of Puerto Rican women's mass sterilization often focused on the need to control fragmented parts of their anatomy in order to save Puerto Ricans from themselves. A question might emerge as to how coloniality is present in this segment of Ambert's novel even though it is not directly named: Blanca's self-narration depicts her as neither human nor deserving of treatment as a sentient-human being, and thus it is through her actions that coloniality is witnessed via her own use of colonial rhetoric.

Mapping the colonial context via a dusmic poetic of the flesh also exposes the ways that coloniality frames and influences identity formation. Following her attempted suicide, Blanca is brought to a psychiatric hospital where she attends therapy sessions and begins to divulge the history of her life and the events that brought her to seek death. Blanca, switching to a third-person narrator, begins by detailing how "[s]he was born in El Fanguito, in an *arrabal*, a shantytown, in San Juan. *Fanguito* is the diminutive of mud. That was where she was born: in the mud, not even a full-fledged mud, mind you, a diminished one. So she was a shantytowner, an *arrabelera*. Or she still is. She did not know whether she could ever peel herself from the circumstances of her birth" (1995, 19). The first introduction of Puerto Rico into the novel occurs in a similar manner as Blanca's self-introduction: fragments. Here, the island is broken down into

a series of geographic locations with each becoming more and more specific in location. The fact that Blanca is born in a "shantytown" that is named a "diminutive of mud" indicates the manner in which the neighborhood and the people within it are perceived. Lugones notes that "structures construct or constitute persons not just in the sense of giving them a façade, but also in the sense of giving them emotions, beliefs, norms, desires, and intentions that are their own. That is, the person does not just wear a mask, but that person is the person who the structure constructs" (2003, 60). Thus, Blanca's acknowledgement that she does not know if she will ever be dissociated from being from a "diminutive of mud" indicates an awareness of how she is socially positioned. Important to these descriptions is the fact that, at the time of her birth, Puerto Rico is already a colony of the U.S., and that she herself is a U.S. citizen even as she is in Puerto Rico. As such, from the moment of birth, Blanca symbolizes a dirty, small, diminished, colonized object of a foreign government—not a person capable of self-determination, and especially not one worthy of being treated as anything other than less than "full-fledged mud."

The novel also represents experiences of Puerto Ricans on the mainland in a manner that demonstrates the nuances that coloniality's narratives take on within the mainland and the impact of these nuances for the continuation of colonial domination within its internal boundaries. Blanca notes that, on the day of her attempted suicide, she had been teaching at a high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts and been in charge of the detention session where

> A fight broke out between a Vietnamese and Puerto Rican. With great display of purpose so as not to be misinterpreted, Tran grazed Miguel's shoulder when he walked by his desk. Miguel shoved him, and before Blanca could intervene, they were rolling on the floor in

> a tight clinch. Students were always fighting over girls or because someone gave someone else a bad look. That was the excuse, but the squabbles were really territorial. Very little territory was left at the bottom of the heap, and everyone fought for it. There was no other choice. Falling out of the bottom was falling into oblivion. It was a crucial struggle. (1995, 39)

While superficial justifications for fights are given—such as romance or reputation—the reality is that these youths are living in a social structure that squeezes their existence into a battle for survival. Importantly, Blanca does not passively bear witness but instead provides insight into why the events are occurring. Blanca's narration thereby echoes Levins Morales' (1998) previously noted discussion of the role of witness. Additionally, the manner in which this insight is portrayed reflects the creation of a dusmic poetic of the flesh exemplified by Gloria Anzaldúa's assertion stating, "My job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions" (2015, 10). In bearing witness and identifying patterns, the colonial narrative at hand becomes clearer. Whereas a surface depiction of these young men renders them symbols of a population in need of controlling, the reality is that they need saving from a social structure that pits them against one another to survive.

Delineating Objects of Saving

A dusmic poetic of the flesh, via its engagement with world traveler consciousness, exposes systemic oppression and illuminates the impact of coloniality. Such a depiction is necessary as a strategy to combat rhetorics of appropriation among other colonial narrative impositions. Indeed, and as

Algarín and Piñero describe, "we are in a match where we insist on our right to make our words communicate our experience" (1975, 24). Within dusmic poetry, and by my extension, a dusmic poetic, assertion of the right to reclaim personal and community experiences from the grasp of coloniality is of vital importance. The literary arts hold within them the ability to create a space in which Puerto Rican women can utilize language to convey their experiences in a manner that is not dependent or filtered through the narratives of coloniality.

Yet, in the development of a dusmic poetic of the flesh, it is also important to consider the different elements that will be called upon in order to convey that experience while also attending to a need for a feminism that is practical rather than only theoretical, as pointed to by Vega (1994). Anzaldúa writes,

> For me, writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out. My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body. The body responds physically, emotionally, and intellectually to external and internal stimuli, and writing records, orders, and theorizes about these responses. (2015, 5)

Thus, depicting experiences of oppression and violation within Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power must incorporate not only a mapping of coloniality and its impact on the community at a macro-level but also the very intimate manner in which coloniality exists as a daily reality. Importantly, in Anzaldúa's awareness of the "body as text," she points to how the "body" holds narrative, but when she describes writing from "within" the "body"

she is pointing to the way in which she exists within the experiences of narratives that are formed—she is pointing to the very flesh of existence.[3] This distinction is vital for understanding what lies beneath and beyond the narratives constructed by those who seek to dominate.

Ambert's novel demonstrates the importance of such delineation in identifying the colonial context of violence within the Puerto Rican community in order to frame these as micro-level manifestations of coloniality. As the novel progresses from Blanca's birth forward, the third-person narrator (Blanca) describes episodes of severe and chronic physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Following the death of her mother, Blanca briefly lives with an elderly aunt whose son burns Blanca with cigarettes. Then, Blanca's father moves her to the Bronx in New York City where she lives with her paternal grandmother who is physically and verbally abusive. The narrator describes how Blanca, at four years old, is trained to wash the dishes and, when she breaks them because she is four and struggles with dexterity, "Paquita solved the problem by thrashing Blanca with any object at hand. Her beatings were so creative, Blanca developed an extraordinary level of fine motor coordination for a child of her age" (1995, 71). Although Paquita is a Puerto Rican woman, and most importantly the young child's grandmother, Paquita nevertheless exists within—and thus has learned from—a system that determines that those with authority have the right to exert power over those who are subordinate to them. As part of a world traveler consciousness, and as Lugones contends, women of color see how they and others are trained by systems of domination to behave in specific ways, and that women often take on the behaviors that are ascribed to them even if they do not wish to (2003). Although Lugones specifically notes attributes such as servility and docility as among the main attributes, I contend that the need to dominate is an intrinsic lesson of a coloniality that

exists through the outright control of specific bodies (2003). It is therefore not surprising that Paquita would be violent with her own kin. However, what is disturbing about the description of the abuse is the inclusion of the word "creative." The violence appears crafted rather than a spontaneous overflow of anger, and as such becomes sinister. Yet, by knowing the colonial context, Paquita's violence can appear as less an inherent pathological flaw of Puerto Rican women and more accurately attributable to a system that frames Puerto Ricans as pawns to be controlled.

A dusmic poetic of the flesh can also provide language to narrate abuse as more than just a symptom of Puerto Rican women's inability to save or protect themselves. After a particularly vicious beating by Paquita, "a tight-lipped neighbor rushed Blanca to the emergency room, an eardrum ruptured, ribs bruised, a concussion, and purple hematomas tattooed on her body…Her black and blue sadness cut a jagged tear in the core of her existence through which she would forever peer at the world" (1995, 99). Once again, Blanca is detailed as a series of pieces. However, this description eschews Blanca emerging as only a series of dehumanized fragments. By noting that she peers from a "black and blue sadness," the narrator maintains the experience of Blanca's flesh—the heavy bruising—within the sentient component of Blanca's experience. This movement away from the fragmented corporeal pieces and into a system of color could be viewed as representing dissociation. However, Blanca's narrative also suggests a tactical navigation of a world that she does not control but must survive in order to live. Thus, it becomes possible to travel into her world, as Lugones describes it, in order to witness how Blanca as a small child learns the meanings ascribed to her (2003). Rather than being depicted as a mind/body split that then would make Blanca's "body" an object for control, in this scene she is united as an entire being that is enduring extreme violation.

The novel also engages a dusmic poetic of the flesh to explore other types of violence that occur within spaces of intimacy. As Blanca grows older, she experiences sexual abuse both in New York City as well as after her return to Puerto Rico. The first experience occurs while she is a child and is raped by a care-giver with whom she is left, while the second occurs when she moves through adolescence, and once again when she is an older teenager. These later experiences occur when she returns to Puerto Rico and lives with Paquita. As Blanca moves into adolescence, Paquita begins a practice that appears almost ritualistic, in which she forces Blanca to lie down on a bed while Paquita inspects Blanca's vagina and hymen to ensure that Blanca is still a virgin. Additionally, Blanca is violently raped by an older male driving instructor when she is a teenager, which the third-person narrator describes as a "seduction [that] was carefully choreographed and executed…until the Saturday afternoon when he drove her to a solitary place, and she knew with horrifying fear what his intentions were. She ran, but he was faster, stronger. He scalded her flesh with blows, split her lips" (1995, 167). Importantly, these sexual violations occur at the hands Puerto Ricans rather than members of the hegemonic Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power. It would be easy to read the violence perpetrated against her as a symptom of Puerto Rican machismo and/or a Puerto Rican pathology.

However, to do so would be to ignore the fact that these violations occur against and among people who live within a colonial system whose very structure is dependent upon the right of those with power to exert it over and exploit those who are subjugated. Indeed, and as Comas-Díaz notes, "sexual oppression and victimization may have been internalized as an aspect of colonization and simultaneously as an identification with its negative effects. In other words, sexual abuse may represent a familiar behavior within the polarities of power and powerlessness, and domination and

subjugation" (1995, 35). While it is not arguable that those enacting sexual violence should not be held accountable for their actions, a dusmic poetic of the flesh requires that not only the colonial context be confronted but also that the kinds of wounds that it has created be accounted for. Blanca's world traveler consciousness, in this instance, enables her to expose the micro-level colonial violence that she experiences at the hands of other Puerto Ricans while simultaneously fighting impulses to pathologize Puerto Ricans.

Fighting Back

A dusmic poetic of the flesh within the literary arts also creates a visionary movement beyond coloniality that can constitute a decolonial praxis for healing. This transformation is possible because, and as Anzaldúa argues, "Through narrative you formulate your identities by unconsciously locating yourself in social narratives not of your own making. Your culture gives you your identity story, pero en un buscado rompimiento con la tradición you create an alternative identity story" (2015, 6). The narrative itself becomes a space to create nuanced possibilities. A dusmic poetic of the flesh, specifically, creates the opportunity for not only manifesting in words a vision of a decolonized future but also one that attends to the needs of the community as a praxis of healing to reach that new space.

Integral to this transformative potential is how it reframes Puerto Rican women's experiences. Indeed, and as Isasi-Díaz argues, "In order to remain true to the struggle for liberation, one needs to continuously find ways of creating knowledge from the underside of history. This is why mujerista thought attempts to be beyond controlling rationality of dominant discourse. To do this, we use the experience of Latinas as the source of knowledge" (2012, 44-45). The process of creating a dusmic poetic of the flesh can take up this activity by maintaining awareness of not only colonial

imposition but also the reality that Puerto Rican women are more than the sum of oppression. In altering how Puerto Rican women's experiences are narrated, this poetic can also provide an alternative narrative that moves beyond the potential limited by coloniality's narratives.

Ambert explores this very concept as the novel progresses. During a moment of reflection, Blanca notes, "I hate myself for the restitution I make for sins I never committed" (1995, 153). Notably, this self-hatred does not come from the fact that she is Puerto Rican but instead from navigating the logistics of coloniality in order to survive. In her description of "restitution" she exposes a paradox in which her existence is defined as the source of her problem, but is also narrated as an activity that in some way must have been chosen because her existence is a sin, although she did not make the choice to be born into these structures. Her increasing consciousness of this problematic narrative indicates a shift in which she begins to reshape how she understands her engagement with the world as a Puerto Rican woman. Although the beginning of the sentence articulates self-hatred, the end of the statement nevertheless appears to be a shift towards empowerment—which Comas-Díaz asserts is a necessary component of decolonization (1995)—because Blanca is clarifying that during her life she has been trained to see the actions of others as her own responsibilities. Indeed, when Blanca notes that she makes restitution for "sins I never committed," she exposes coloniality as well as how its insidious reach can transform how those who are colonized see and narrate themselves.

As the novel progresses and returns to the internal story of the frame-narrative, Blanca describes getting impregnated by her rapist in her late teens, marrying him, giving birth to a daughter, and—after years of continued abuse—leaving him. She attends college and is eventually

accepted to Harvard, where she moves with her daughter. Blanca then becomes an educator in a local high school, and eventually attempts suicide, which is where the novel begins. In the ever-present now of the novel, Blanca notes that she has spent her time in the hospital—and thus the interior of the novel—attempting to clarify the events of her life to herself (1995, 161). With this clarity about the events that she has endured, Blanca concludes that "I want to leave here on my own two feet. I came here humiliated but I intend to leave here with some dignity" (1995, 233). The distinction that she makes regarding her experience is vital to understanding the turn that she has made in her own self-awareness. Blanca's narration of her decision-making process appears to be one of her own self-making, echoing Comas-Díaz's description of psychotherapeutic decolonization as a multi-part process that requires the increase of "self-mastery and achieving autonomous dignity" (1995, 54). This strategy requires a shift in how the individual self-perceives. Although Blanca once again fragments her body—this time recalling the expression of being on one's own two feet—she nevertheless claims the parts as her own and as part of what makes it possible for her to choose to move. She also notes the importance of her sense of self and the potential to have dignity, whereas when she entered the hospital she felt humiliated.

A dusmic poetic of the flesh can be seen in the conclusion of the novel in Blanca's movement towards transformation. She describes walking "down the long, waxed corridor. I pause a few seconds in front of the outside door, the final door, the door that will open all doors. I push it open and feel the warm air on my face" (1995, 233-34). In this instance, Blanca is in control of her actions and how she interprets them. Although it could be argued that Blanca's emergence is made possible only because she has been in this hospital, what is more important is what she has accomplished

within her time in the hospital via her own determination to explore her past. As she moves out of the hospital, it is Blanca who is opening the doors: Blanca who is pushing to move outside. The novel thereby ends on a point of potential, but one that "gives hope without deceptive illusions" (Algarín and Piñero 1975, 130). Importantly, the novel does not end with an intense celebration or a narrative of congratulations in which her destiny is determined to be one of complete happiness. Blanca has decided that she will engage the world unheeding the colonial narratives that seek to delude her of that which she is capable. Additionally, she moves beyond binary thinking—healed/unhealed, for example. Instead, Blanca steps onto a path of multitudinous possibilities.

Dusmic Poetics of the Flesh

Alba Ambert's novel *A Perfect Silence* demonstrates the potential of a dusmic poetic of the flesh to create a decolonial praxis of cultural healing beyond the boundaries of coloniality. This poetic maps out how Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power imposes upon Puerto Ricans both on and off the island. In doing so, this poetic also enables an exploration of the ways that coloniality's technologies of domination can be witnessed at both the macro- and micro-levels of daily-lived experience. In this manner, it becomes possible to distinguish Puerto Rican women from the narratives that circulate within the coloniality of power, and take stock of what is occurring within the community and the need to promote shifts towards transformative consciousness. It also demonstrates the need to create moments of healing from the violations that have occurred within and as a result of coloniality's different machinations. These moments must allow Puerto Rican women to define themselves in relation to these traumas, to account for their reality beyond that trauma, and to recognize their own potential. A dusmic poetic of the flesh makes the expression of shifting

from colonial narratives not only imaginable but also quite possible. It does not require deception or delusion. Instead, it confronts the reality of what is happening and offers a vision of an existence replete with struggle but asserts its own unique, dignified existence.

Notes

[1] Importantly, Puerto Rico was one month into an interim government that was part of a larger process for formal decolonization of the island from Spain's empire. Under the Treaty of Paris, Puerto Rico was not officially labeled a colony. The U.S. has never officially listed Puerto Rico as a colony, although recent events such as the island's economic devastation, wrought by colonial mismanagement, and the selling of the island's debt and restructuring of the debt through the PROMESA board has resulted in both federal level government officials as well as the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledging the island as such. However, the island is formally known and described as a "commonwealth."

[2] This article specifically focuses on Ambert's novel and the situation of Puerto Rican experience with Anglo-U.S. coloniality. However, the very nature of being Puerto Rican—Latina/o/x—in the U.S. mainland necessitates dialogue with other Latina/o/x communities. This conversation is not designed to obliterate the unique experiences of each community, but instead to build solidarity in regards to challenging coloniality and how Anglo-U.S. hegemony positions Latinos/as/xs in the mainland.

[3] Although Anzaldúa does not distinguish the body as different from the flesh, I contend that when she discusses the body in this writing she is indeed pointing directly to cuerpo as not only a container or vessel but instead as a very real, flesh being.

References

Algarín, Miguel and Miguel Piñero. 1975. *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. New York: Williams and Marrow.

Ambert, Alba. 1995. *A Perfect Silence*. Houston: Arte Público.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2015. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherríe Moraga. 2015. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 4th ed., Albany: SUNY University Press.

Beard, Belle Boon. 1945. "Puerto-Rico-The Forty-Ninth State?" *Phylon* 6(2): 105-17.

Comas-Díaz, Lillian. 1995. "Puerto Ricans and Sexual Child Abuse." In *Sexual Abuse in Nine North American Cultures: Treatment and Prevention*, edited by Lisa Aronson Fontes, 31-66. London: Sage.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241-99.

de Monteflores, Carmen. 1989. *Singing Softly/Cantando bajito*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.

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

Espín, Oliva. 1997. *Latina Realities: Essays on Healing, Migration, and Sexuality*. Boulder: Westview.

Flores, Juan. 1993. *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Houston: Arte Público.

Fortuna, Lisa, Michelle Porche and Margarita Alegria. 2008. "Political Violence, Psychological Trauma, and the Context of Mental Health Services Use Among Immigrant Latinos in the United States." *Ethnicity & Health* 13(5): 435-63.

Goodman, Rachel and Cirecie A. West-Olatunji. 2010. "Educational Hegemony, Traumatic Stress, and African American and Latino American Students." *Multicultural Counseling and Development* 38: 176-86.

Hernández, Elizabeth and Consuelo López Springfield. 1994. "Women and Writing in Puerto Rico: An Interview with Ana Lydia Vega." *Callaloo* 17(3): 816-25.

Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. 2012. "Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas' Subjugated Knowledge." In *Decolonizing Epistemology: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, edited by Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, 44-67. New York: Fordham University Press.

Levins Morales, Aurora. 1998. *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity*. Malden: Blackwell.

Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppression*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Lugones, María. 2010. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25(4): 743-59.

Mendez, Xhercis. 2015. "Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology: Revisiting the Race/Gender Matrix." *Trans-Scripts* 5: 41-59.

Mignolo, Walter. 2005. *Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.

Mohr, Nicholasa. 1974. *Nilda*. New York: Harper & Row.

—— 1975. *El Bronx Remembered: A Novella and Stories*. New York: Harper & Row.

Quijano, Aníbal. 2000. "Coloniality and Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla* 1(3): 533-80.

Rivera, Carmen. 2002. *Kissing the Mango Tree: Puerto Rican Women Rewriting American Literature*. Houston: Arte Público.

Sánchez González, Lisa. 2001. *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press.

Spurr, David. 1993. *Rhetoric of Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Tietze, Christopher. 1947. "Human Fertility in Puerto Rico." *American Journal of Sociology* 53(1): 34-40.

Umpierre, Luz María. 2012. "The Poet's Dossier: Womyn, Omens and Poems. W-omens, Poems. Mi Castillo/Morada Interior." *Chasqui* 41(2): 183-89.