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BOOK REVIEW

Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writings: Subversion in the Flesh

Roberta Hurtado. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019 (ISBN: 978-3-030-05730-5)

Nancy Bird-Soto

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI, USA
Email: birdsoto@uwm.edu

If a theory can suggest paths to explain the principles both behind and beyond a process, Roberta Hurtado's *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writings: Subversion in the Flesh* is at once study and praxis of a theoretical pathway for colonial subversion. This book enables this pathway through its focus on discourses of the flesh in the literary arts and as it relates to Puerto Rican women's struggles with the patriarchy and their contestation of the legacies of imperialism. As the author states, this study sets out to examine how coloniality manifests in discourses about/around the body. To this end, Hurtado's analysis explores literary works by Puerto Rican women writers that provide a site for the subversion of those discourses by recovering and uncovering experiences of enfleshment. Indeed, *enfleshment* is the term Hurtado employs as the anchoring point of her study. The authors in focus are Judith Ortiz Cofer, Alba Ambert, María Luisa Arroyo, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, and Aracelis Girmay.

Drawing from the literary and philosophical legacies of Chicana, Latina, and Latin American writers and philosophers—from Gloria Anzaldúa to Maria Lugones—this book provides a solid sample of literary works that decolonize the process(es) of healing. It enacts subversion by shifting the trope of the body and its proneness to the colonial gaze to that of the potentialities in and of the flesh. The urgency of addressing the experience(s) of Puerto Rican women, nuanced by multilayered colonial/colonialist realities, makes the decolonizing turn Hurtado foregrounds not only a goal but also a feasible, ongoing process, purposefully anchored in feminist Latina and Latinx philosophy.

Enfleshment and Subversion

One of the most salient contributions of *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writings* is how it seamlessly bridges Latin American and Latinx literary works and philosophical currents without glossing over crucial contextual differences. Hurtado applies Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* and the enfleshed experience of this concept, linking it to the *hembrismo*-anchored and sacred womanist concept of Spirita as discussed by Lillian Comas-Díaz. Adding to the broader context of the coloniality of gender, Hurtado incorporates pertinent postulations by Lugones about the notion of worlds as sites of resistance. These worlds carry potential to enable "an alternative construction

of the social" (Lugones 2003, 20–21). Contesting colonial legacies requires multiple and diverse possible constructions of the social, and that is especially so when it comes to discourses about the body, and even more so when it comes to bodies constrained by the white, cisheteronormative gaze that coloniality maintains and normalizes.

The shift from the trope of the body to the flesh underscores the *conocimiento* or the knowledges imprinted in that flesh and onto the flesh, from the cellular to the metaphorical. This *conocimiento* encompasses theories and philosophies of knowing that are rooted in the enfleshed experiences of women living in and through the matrix of coloniality. As such, it allows for personal and collective subversion. Based on this *conocimiento* and *la facultad*, the sentient-flesh that Hurtado underscores becomes a primary source of knowledge, information, and resistance.

The subtitle: *Subversion in the Flesh* signals the coexistence of an active process of contestation (subversion) and a site for that action that can move between worlds both physically and metaphorically (the flesh). This is in keeping with the notion of worlds and movement between them as resistance and ways to access multiple ways of seeing, sensing, and sense making (Lugones 2003, 7). Facilitating the very theoretical framework for colonial subversion that is simultaneously a goal and a methodology, Hurtado approaches enfleshment as a dynamic process that breaks away with the "mind/body split" (3). This suggests why the author chooses a different route rather than an exclusive focus on a body-based affect theory. The crucial motivator for dismantling dichotomies in which the trope of the body is conceptually immersed is, in Hurtado's own words, that "what emerges from within the sentient-flesh is not only an awareness—down to the cellular level—of how to survive coloniality but also a history of surviving and thriving" (117). To unpack what this analytical route would entail, we could consider affect theory's interest in the "not-yet" of a body's doing and switch tropes with flesh to highlight the potential of enfleshment over the limitations placed on bodies. With the sense-making of the sentient-flesh, there might be a convergence with what Lugones notes about that "not-yet" entity engaging with its own *conocimiento* with the "infinitely connectable, interpersonal, and contagious belongings to *this* world" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 4).

In *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writings*, Hurtado takes the "not-yet" of a body into the flesh of the *has beens*, the *ares*, and the *can bes*, thus mapping out a pathway toward the potentialities of enfleshment as colonial subversion. With a deft finger on the pulse of the subversive palpitations the sampled writers infuse in their works, Hurtado indicts the continued oppressions upheld and facilitated by Puerto Rico's multilayered colonial history. Furthermore, the analysis successfully illustrates the guiding point of regarding the flesh as "the site where knowledge of this [imperial violence] intimacy occurs for Latinas" and opting for this trope (and not the "body") to avert the risk of "pathologizing Puerto Rican women's experiences and identities" (9). Through the focus on enfleshment, this book avoids pathologizing these experiences. Hurtado soundly develops the analysis through a philosophical feminist lens that stands in opposition to the imperial gaze that has constrained the female/feminine body—the Puerto Rican woman trope, more specifically—thus developing and enacting a decolonial study and praxis.

From the established notion of the sentient-flesh—supported by the critical contributions to Puerto Rican studies of Marisel Moreno, Jorge Duany, Lisa Sánchez-González, Edna Acosta-Belén, and others—the author leads the reader into the chapters devoted to the authors chosen. As such the introduction to *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writings* is a thought-provoking critical source that, in and of

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itself, would enrich a graduate seminar and advanced survey in Puerto Rican literature and/or cultures. Carrying on into the chapters, the critical and philosophical strands established early on are woven together into three sections: 1) the first devoted to motif and narrative persona; 2) the second focusing on metaphors as ways to delve into experiences of violence; and 3) the third centering projects of decolonial empowerment through resilience. In each, Hurtado delves into the intricacies of healing processes through literary means, processes that denote what the author herself lays out in the introduction as "a shift outside of a colonial matrix and coloniality of power" (23).

A guiding principle of *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writings* is the application of the dusmic. This is a concept embedded within the main threads laid out in the introduction of *la facultad* and the sentient-flesh, and which is summarized as a "specific term describing Puerto Rican poets' ability to transform pain into healing" (22). *Dusmic* is a term that draws from the legacy of the foundational Nuyorican poets of the 1970s. In addressing issues and experiences of the flesh, the texts Hurtado analyzes take the dusmic into the literary arts to further decolonize the colonial imprint of the patriarchal gaze upon female bodies, with women authors and characters having agency in the subversive process. As Patricia Herrera notes in the case of Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves: "between relating her personal experiences and performing her poetry, she overcomes other women to overcome the silence . . ." (Herrera 2020, 11). Experiences and performances are lived in and enlivened by the flesh. Thus the necessary shift to enfleshment that Hurtado proposes becomes clear and urgent. Following the methodical way the author develops the need for such a shift, a brief overview of the sections follows.

From Narrative Persona to Metaphors

Hurtado is keen to apply the devices of literary analysis in ways that converge with the subject matter and its presentation without being bound to genre-related traditional expectations. In the first section of the book, the auscultation of narrative persona is applied to the poetic work of Judith Ortiz Cofer (chapter 1) and María Luisa Arroyo (chapter 2). In analyzing Ortiz Cofer's "The Gift of a Knife," the need to shift from the trope of the body to that of the flesh parallels the obvious rhetorical rift between the constraints of the former and the Anzaldúa-informed *facultad* and *conocimiento* in the latter. This poem is especially nuanced by the history of forced sterilizations in Puerto Rico, an emblematic endeavor that illustrates the colonial/imperial enterprise and how it attempts to dominate, limit, and constrain women's (female/feminine) bodies.

In the case of María Luisa Arroyo's "Still Bedwetting at Nine," the shift enables the opening of layers into the deeper wound of family-sanctioned sexual violence in the name of colonialist machismo. The poem provides a poignant development of the narrative persona's understanding of the flesh and its responses, as that enfleshment moves away from imperial and colonial narratives foisted upon female/feminine bodies. As Hurtado maintains throughout the study, the sentient-flesh carries knowledge(s) that cannot be suppressed. Indeed, any imposed silence on experience is thus inherently imperfect.

This brings us to the second section of *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writing*, which comprises one chapter, which examines Alba Ambert's novel *A Perfect Silence*. Hurtado approaches the use of metaphors drawing from the concept of dusmic poetics that is generally associated with the founding Nuyorican Poets Café members.

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Transforming pain into healing is a profound process of enfleshment with multiple layers: from the trauma received as a "body" to the decolonizing potential of the sentient-flesh that experiences healing. Enfleshment is nuanced, dynamic, and inherently subversive. In this section of the book, metaphors emerge as tropes and tools that illustrate the violences endured and that also subvert the colonial gagging tactic of silencing embodied lived experiences.

From Resilience to More Decolonization

Lugones's conceptualization of the world-traveler consciousness is readily palpable in the third section of this book, which centers the resilience of Puerto Rican women—a resilience also informed by Anzaldúa's notion of *la facultad*. Thus the gendered and racialized realities of Puerto Rican women under the boot of imperialism emerge in a cellular/enfleshed ability to detect how those gendered and racialized notions of being do impact the body and—therefore— the sentient-flesh. The latter, in turn, will enact the subversion from within the colonial matrix, thus unlocking pathways of liberation.

The third section includes two chapters: one that analyzes Dahlma Llanos Figueroa's novel *Daughter of the Stone*, and one that continues the efficient use of close reading established in the first chapter, as in the case of the three selected poems by Aracelis Girmay.

The emergence of the subversive potential in *Daughters of the Stone* is sustained by what Hurtado highlights as the "cultural transmission of knowledge that is not governed by a coloniality" (99–100). This is a crucial aspect in *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writing*, and Hurtado brings home in this chapter the intricate concepts each chapter has been methodically weaving, underscoring how Llanos Figueroa's novel illustrates how to navigate spaces outside of the grasp of coloniality (108). In this way, Lugones's postulations about the world-traveler figure and the act of navigating between worlds seamlessly align with the analysis presented. As Lugones states: "it is not how far one moves but how one moves, within what complexities and against what simplifications of histories, geographies, and meanings" (Lugones 2003, 3). Indeed, Puerto Rican women, Afro-Puerto Rican women especially, are constantly negotiating and reclaiming meanings and identities within the complexities of the colonial matrix. Colonialist entanglements relegate women to mere bodies to be abused, take pleasure from, and/or consume via the gaze of exoticization. It is the sentient-flesh that comes to the discursive fore to challenge and contest those simplifications and reductions.

Resilience, the shifts between worlds and intergenerational experiences, "the ability to know the coloniality but not be limited by it" (116) are all integral to healing and the decolonization of that healing. The poetry of Aracelis Girmay is the focus of the second chapter in this section, and for which the idea of decolonial imaginaries—following the work of Emma Pérez—as envisioned sites of subversion. One of the poems examined is "Starlight Multiplication," which stands out for two main reasons: the figure of the elder female relative (which ties back to the analysis of Llanos Figueroa's novel), and the possibility of a sexuality beyond "something clinically controlled" or "as a tool of violence" (123), a sexuality that can be associated with pleasure. The experience of the clinical and the violent draws connections to the earlier chapters. The poems by Ortiz Cofer and Arroyo denounce the appropriation of Puerto Rican women's bodies by imperialism and abusive cisheteropatriarchal cultural hierarchies.

Hurtado aptly applies the close reading technique to Girmay's poems (as with Ortiz Cofer's and Arroyo's). Some scholars may deride the technique as supposedly not

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theoretical enough, but it not only serves a crucial analytical purpose, but also delves deeper into the narrative voice(s) and the work itself by the author. In this sense, close reading is a valuable tool for avoiding the application of theory as an imposition over the work of the authors, in this case, Puerto Rican women writers. Via close reading, the reader/researcher facilitates how the messages and meanings in the text are studied. This enables the critic and/or scholar, and/or examiner—readers at large—to subvert rigidly Western or normative ways of approaching texts in the literary arts.

In conclusion, *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women's Writing* is a sound contribution to our understanding of a feminist philosophical praxis that actively teaches its readers about the ramifications of the colonial/ist matrix and its intertwining with US Anglo-imperialism in the multilayered realities of Puerto Rican women in the island/archipelago and the diaspora. Through the examination of literary works by Puerto Rican women writers, Hurtado demonstrates how enfleshment is pivotal for conveying messages, from the cellular level to the cultural. Thereby the author thoroughly illustrates how "[t]he act of decolonization begins in the sentient-flesh" (132). The enfleshed knowledge, *facultad*, and *conocimiento* are thus actively engaged in liberatory practices.

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Nancy Bird-Soto is Professor of Spanish at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she teaches Latin American and Latinx literature. Her monograph, *Dissident Spirits: The Post-insular Imprint in Puerto Rican/Diasporic Literature*, was published in 2018 by Peter Lang. She has published several articles about Puerto Rican feminist Luisa Capetillo. Her most recent publication is *Luisa Capetillo: Escalando la tribuna* (edited by N.Bird-Soto and translated by Amy Olen; Editora Educacion Emergente, 2022). Her experimental novel in Spanish, *Aries Point*, was published in 2016 by Isla Negra Editores.

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