

A WOMAN OF ENDURANCE: A NOVEL
DAHLMA LLANOS-FIGUEROA
AMISTAD, 2022

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Revealing through powerful prose and Puerto Rican storytelling, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's second novel, *A Woman of Endurance* (2022) follows the lives of women who are enslaved yet practice black femme freedom in *haciendas* of Puerto Rico. Jessica Marie Johnson defines black femme freedom as "a fluid plurality, [describing] actions, expressions, and excretions that moved beyond the fractional flesh... engaged in by women and girls of African descent" (172). The female characters in the novel reflect their freedoms through their daily rituals on the plantation and encourage each other's survivals through kinship and corporeal consciousness. Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez recognizes that corporeal consciousness builds on what Celis Salgado and Jessica Marie Johnson have identified as lived body practices of femme freedom and resistance against domination. Illuminating the lives of Afro-Puerto Ricans, Llanos-Figueroa's novels include female protagonists who practice "ephemeral acts, gestures, and practices [which] allow for the '*cuero vivo*,' the lived body, to buttress and traverse the limitations of heteropatriarchy and infantilization as well as occupation and dictatorship" (Figueroa-Vásquez 35). Their experiences honor ancestral remembrances passed on through African diaspora women

that exist beyond 19th century plantations in Puerto Rico and transcend the borders of West Africa.

The Puerto Rican born, and South Bronx raised, writer narrates in *Spanglish*, which is heavily linked to her upbringing and longing to connect with the island; she also adopts West African elements in her work. It is worth examining the importance that her protagonist is born and raised in Yorubaland before being kidnapped and shipped to Puerto Rico. This novel reveals the horrors of Africans who were captured and how they survived Puerto Rican histories by highlighting oral traditions, spiritual rituals, and testimonies. Llanos-Figueroa writes historical fiction to combat the erasure of Afro-Puerto Rican women narratives. Her first novel, *Daughters of the Stone* tells the story of a sacred power over five generations of African diaspora women raised in Puerto Rico and New York. In her new novel, characters such as Tía Josepha and Fela return to bridge the intimate stories of survival.

Keera is the birthname of the female protagonist from Yorubaland, but after an attack on her village she is captured, brutally raped, renamed Pola, then involuntarily transported to San Juan. During her terrifying transition, she is chained to other enslaved bodies and her hands feel the anger and fears from each body located in the belly of the moving vessel. Before Pola is brutally and consistently raped, she prays to the goddess Yemaya. The narrator recounts, "For the first time in her life, Keera tried to push her gift away. Her sense of touch made her much more vulnerable than her body: This knowing was more than she could bear. The emotions fired her brain and tortured her as they continued to attack" (Llanos-Figueroa 38). Various battles cause Keera to release her powers until she meets other women in various locations who remind her of her strength.

For her first 12 years at Hacienda Paraíso in Piñones, Pola's body is abused as a breeder while being denied the right to raise her children. Each of her babies are stripped away from her at birth causing Pola to lose her faith in humanity and the goddess Yemaya. After attempting to run away, she is tortured, and traded to Hacienda las Mercedes in Carolina, Puerto Rico. This unfamiliar location is described as "truly a new place, but a plantation is a plantation, and some things never change" (Llanos-Figueroa 46). However, there are numerous exchanges between Pola and other women on the plantation which eventually bear witness to value her spiritual gifts, kinship, and black femme freedom.

Rufina is the *curandera* who spends the most time healing Pola's now infertile body and trains her to treat patients on the plantation with different herbal remedies. Tía Josefa, the head of the needleworkers shop, Las Agujas, mentors Pola to control her emotional temper and offers wisdom when needed. Pastora is the head cook who shows Pola how to prepare the most tasteful meals and treats that she learned in the governor's kitchen. Even a young girl named Chachita inspires Pola to reclaim her corporeal consciousness and heal the loss of her children. Between past and present experiences, Llanos-Figueroa demonstrates how each woman overcomes her struggles because of intimate relations amongst certain women in the novel.

Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez suggests Pola's "corporeal consciousness and search for erotic freedom over and against the intimacies of coloniality are precisely the powers that allow her spirit" to heal at its own time (56). Throughout the novel, Pola has to make decisions that solidify or risk her role in several sites of endurance on the plantation. At both Haciendas she does not have autonomy over her body, but

she is able to find pleasure in between Pastora's kitchen, Tía Josefa's workshop, and Rufina's *choza*. In each female-led space, Pola starts to enjoy small possibilities of liberation which allow her to remember the gifts that her body possesses. Leaning on Audre Lorde's practice of the erotic as power, Pola's "erotic is not a question only of what [she does]; it is a question of how acutely and fully [she] can feel in the doing" (54). Llanos-Figueroa's telling reminds readers that even after the horrors of slavery, stories of women like Pola survive to give us endurance to heal at our own times.

Readers will recognize that everyone does not have time and space for healing in this novel. The children, or lack of, emphasizes the displacement of family life on the plantation and the impossibilities of Black futurities. Through the female characters, Llanos-Figueroa captures the madness and affect of memory for those who do not have community like Leticia la Loca. The narrator even reveals the pain that the community feels when losing loved ones to torture after attempting to run away. The denial of a proper burial for Adela and Benito exposes the necessity for enslaved souls to rest in peace after living a cruel life. What keeps the plantation moving forward is the love they have for one another.

Pola's admirer at las Mercedes is a Muslim man named Simon who is from the "blue people of the north" although he was kidnapped after an attack on his village which killed many including his wife Amina (Llanos-Figueroa 315). He never thought he could love again until he meets Pola in Rufina's healing hut. Because of the traumatic violence that Pola faced, Simon's presence alarms her and she is always in defense mode with men on the plantation. It is through his short self-narrated chapters described from his eyes, mind, and heart where readers start to recognize his admiration for

Pola. Eventually after numerous encounters, Pola starts to open up to Simon which eventually helps save them both.

This novel is a great reflection that narrates the importance of healing in Black communal spaces, especially for women. Shocking scenes of rape and torture are intertwined with moments of hope and restoration to display the theme of endurance that is echoed throughout the plot. Watching Pola transform from a young woman full of rage who gave up her gifts and distrusts everyone to becoming a loving healer that epitomizes inspiration for her community shows the fluidity of Black femme freedom. Llanos-Figueroa's writing makes space to see multiple sides of Black women who are not limited or defined by their oppressions. Each female character is empowered to use their strengths and differences to save one another. Though the title of the novel suggests the protagonist is the only woman of endurance, readers realize by the end of the story that many women on the plantation find endurance through each other.

Llanos-Figueroa's new novel, *A Woman of Endurance*, holds literary and ancestral space to witness the power of healing through corporeal consciousness and black femme freedom. Her spectacular narration demands that we preserve and pay attention to the survivals of Afro-Puerto Rican women. Through these stories, readers will be able to recognize the ways in which kinship amongst women drives each other to not be limited by colonial, racial, or sexuality oppressions. This novel is a great addition to the Puerto Rican and African diaspora canon due to its various intersections which display the hope of liberation and endurance.

Works Cited

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