

From Alienation to Revolution: Female Characters as Decolonial Tools in J.L. Torres's *The Accidental Native*

En The Accidental Native (2013) de J.L. Torres, Rennie regresa a su natal Puerto Rico luego de haberse criado en los Estados Unidos. Allí, conocerá a su verdadera madre biológica y a su futura pareja (una mujer). Su ignorancia sobre la existencia de su madre, así como de la situación colonial de Puerto Rico, y la enfermedad de su pareja, entrelazan el amor maternal y sentimental con la isla. Dichos lazos afectivos pre-configurarán el nacimiento de la conciencia decolonial de Rennie. Este análisis dialoga con representaciones de los Estados Unidos como una figura patriarcal opresiva hacia la isla, su hijo inepto, para incorporar y contraponer el rol de la madre y otras figuras afectivas en la larga tradición de metáforas familiares en la literatura de la isla. Una interpretación decolonial del trabajo de Torres propone una configuración familiar en la que las fuerzas afectivas provenientes de personajes femeninos funcionan como herramienta de liberación epistémica en contra de poderes coloniales patriarcales e imperialistas, proponiendo así lazos teóricos entre los estudios afectivos y decoloniales.

Palabras clave: Puerto Rico, maternidad, femineidad, decolonialidad, J.L. Torres, *The Accidental Native*

In J.L. Torres's The Accidental Native (2013), Rennie moves back to his native Puerto Rico after being raised in the United States. There, he meets his true biological mother, as well as his future (female) partner. Rennie's unawareness of his mother's existence and Puerto Rico's colonial situation, as well as his partner's illness, interweave maternal and romantic love with the Island. Furthermore, their ties pre-configure the birth of Rennie's decolonial consciousness. This analysis dialogues with representations of the United States as an oppressive patriarchal figure to the Island, its inept child, in order to incorporate and contrast the role of the mother, as well as other affective figures, within the long tradition of genealogical metaphors in the Island's literature. A decolonial interpretation of J.L. Torres' work proposes a familial configuration in which affective forces originating from female characters function as a tool of epistemic liberation against imperialist, colonizing,

patriarchal powers, thus proposing theoretical ties between affective and decolonial studies.

Keywords: *Puerto Rico, motherhood, femininity, decoloniality, J.L. Torres, The Accidental Native*

Literary representations of decolonial processes in the Hispanic Caribbean are full of moments of contention that reveal the negative impacts of coloniality in the region. Consider the portrayal of sociopolitical tensions between the United States and Puerto Rico in a breadth of genres that span from canonical essays such as René Marqués's *El puertorriqueño dócil* (1966), to Jack Agüero's TV script, *They Can't Even Speak Spanish* (1971); from Luis López Nieves's short story *Seva: A History of the First American Invasion of the Island of Puerto Rico in May 1898* (1983), to novels such as Mayra Montero's *El capitán de los dormidos* (2002) and Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016), or to Víctor Frago's play *Newark, 1974* (2018). But instances of gaining an awareness of such impacts are rarer. In *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* Ania Loomba ponders, "What does it take for colonial subjects to move from alienation to revolution, from a recognition of injustice to resistance? What are the dynamics of anti-colonial consciousness and revolt?" (185). These same questions function as the axis of J.L. Torres' novel, *The Accidental Native* (2013).

The Accidental Native revolves around the personal growth experienced by its main character, Rennie Falto (also referred to as René in the novel), as he returns to his native Puerto Rico, now as an adult. Born in Puerto Rico, then raised in the United States by Puerto Rican parents, Rennie is made to believe his stepmother is his biological mother. Upon losing his parents to a tragic accident, Rennie returns to the Island following a job in academia. There, he learns about how his biological mother, Julia, was pressured into disappearing from her son's life after suffering from post-partum depression. Over time, Julia recovered to become a lawyer and activist, promoter of independence for the Island and activist against colonial injustices perpetrated there by the United States. Thus, Julia's new presence in Rennie's life becomes a decolonial, instructive tool as she "reeducates" him on the history of the Island, constantly bringing forth events commonly censored from official accounts. Similarly, Rennie develops a romantic relationship with a Cuban-Puerto Rican colleague, Marisol, whose political relationship with the Island is much more complicated than Julia's nationalistic approach, yet shares similarities with it. Rennie's return to Puerto Rico functions, therefore, as a twofold rebirth

narrative, both at the personal and national levels, a process enabled by the actions and knowledge of Julia and Marisol.

This essay is an attempt to enter the conversation where gender and colonialism intersect, specifically departing from points regarding politics and the (re)generation of historical accounts, to reconsider the role of female characters through our notions of romantic love and motherhood as political and revolutionary tools, thus challenging traditionally “passive” ideas of femininity within the context of colonialism. Throughout my discussion, I will engage with concepts previously put forth by key decolonial theorists such as Rita Segato, María Lugones, Walter Dignolo, Ania Loomba, José Piedra, and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé to enrich their various thoughts by bringing in how female characters enable the birth of Rennie’s decolonial consciousness to the fore.

Rita Segato has already established the ways in which politics is usually conceived of as a patriarchal arena and, within it, masculinity is positioned at the root of (political, colonial) domination (*La guerra contra las mujeres* 23, 16), both literally and symbolically. It follows that the physical violence perpetuated against female bodies and which is the focus of Segato’s discussion finds its parallel in literature in the way that land is presented as a “female” subject/object: land is to be conquered and subdued. My analysis of J.L. Torres’s *The Accidental Native* aims to break with this submissive notion of femininity. It is my intention to review the way in which female characters, together with social attributes traditionally perceived as “feminine,” such as motherhood and romantic love, are studied, sometimes under the assumption that these can be limiting rather than liberating aspects of womanhood.

I would like to further open the discussion with María Lugones’s reflection and acknowledge it as a main driver in this work: “We need to place ourselves in a position to call each other to reject this gender system as we perform a transformation of communal relations” (1). Lugones’s work is, thus, an open rejection of metaphorical approaches to decolonialism in which the colonizer is portrayed as “male” and, as such, is assumed to be more powerful than a “feminized” colonized country. My analysis of J.L. Torres’s work will demonstrate how “female” powers can function as opponents of equal strength to colonial, “masculinized” ones and can thus successfully break with internal colonialism. Here, engagement with the gender binary is a heuristic thought experiment and not a means to perpetuate it. The oscillating movement of characteristics socially marked as “male” or “female” among characters in the discussion aims to build upon such questioning and further complicate gendered colonial allegories.

I propose a shift in the metaphorical portrayals of colonial situations and to present colonial oppression and subjection with a more equitable

image that parts ways with gender binarism in the sense proposed in Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*. Halberstam proposes that masculinity is usually exclusively reserved for the male body, recognizing as "male social powers" aspects such as physical strength, economic independence, a certain sexual prowess, and a command of professions socially understood as "male." Thus, when these "male" aspects are placed upon a female body, they are questioned: "far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed ... female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that masculinity may appear to be the real thing" (Halberstam 1).

While Halberstam's study focuses on the representation of masculine lesbians in various contexts, the notion does not need to be attached to a lesbian body to function successfully in its "transferability" of masculine behaviors to females. After all, masculinization, it is argued, also takes place on a symbolic, social level, and is not restricted to the physical. Female masculinity is then a productive point of departure to understand the roles played by Julia and Marisol in Rennie's new and decolonial understanding of Puerto Rico, and simultaneously, to question the gendered metaphors used in the discussion of decolonialism. More specifically, two of these male social powers are key: Julia's success as a lawyer, a "male" profession, and Marisol's sexuality, especially her active role in courting Rennie.

The tropes traditionally used in decolonial metaphors assume, in Halberstam's terms, a *female* femininity in their portrayal of colonized lands and its peoples, where these are taken and subdued by the symbolically male powers mentioned above. In this sense, the fact that Julia's professional life and powerful role in both the re-education of her son, as well as on the Island's partial decolonization, align her with attributes socially understood as male.

Observing decolonial situations through Halberstam's set of social dominances and conceptualizing these as "transferable" rather than fixed allows us to both acknowledge the factual power imbalance between colonizer and colonized, while simultaneously raising awareness of the way gendered metaphors perpetuate ideas of female oppression. Furthermore, within a decolonial context, to utilize gendered metaphors and understand femininity and masculinity as categories affixed to specific genders, hinders the plausibility of decolonization: in their female "passivity," colonized (feminized) countries would then be perpetually understood to be of lesser strength and incapable of overcoming colonial (male) powers. The transferability of masculinity to feminized lands or peoples, therefore, enables colonized countries to imagine decolonization as a plausible outcome.

The novel's plot is especially effective in its establishment of decolonial analogies through the relationship between Julia and her son. Julia "had a reputation for being a firebrand, an *independentista* [an advocate for the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States] ... Often, she took on high-profile cases defending radical nationalists whom most Americans would brand as terrorists" (Torres 24-25). In stark contrast and to the shock of everyone around him, Rennie often rejects his Puerto Rican heritage. In a conversation with his colleague, Roque, Rennie points out, "My parents were Puerto Rican, not me" (Torres 47). At the same time, Julia's son is quick to realize how complicated the relationship between the Islanders and their colonizers is. When Roque sarcastically calls him "patriotic" for not considering himself Puerto Rican, Rennie replies, "Patriotic like this people here?... Who kiss every American ass they see?" (Torres 47).

Rennie's reaction to visiting some key Puerto Rican historical sites is thus not surprising. Upon realizing that Rennie's knowledge of the Island is limited, his biological mother begins a tutelage process she calls, "The Re-education of René," as she prefers to call him by the Spanish version of his name, which involves various "cultural field trips" around Puerto Rico (Torres 25). Rennie's first trip with Julia places them in Lares, at the commemorative statue of the Grito de Lares rebellion. Julia explains, "They took this town, Lares [on September 23, 1868], proclaimed the Republic of Puerto Rico, but the Spaniards outnumbered them – it was over almost as soon as it started" (Torres 29). Rennie reflects upon the trip and concludes, "I didn't give a flying fuck about the shitty monument, about how Puerto Ricans celebrated the Fourth [of July, the American Independence Day] – why not, it's as stupid as anything else Puerto Ricans do – fuck the Grito and Puerto Rican history" (Torres 30). The instances in which Julia's and Rennie's political views clash mirror the political spectrum of the Island. From that perspective, Julia would represent the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP), which seeks independence from the United States; Rennie, the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP), which pursues a permanent liaison between the Island and the United States through statehood; and bystanders such as Roque, the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), which aimed for a middle ground by its establishment in 1952 of the current political status of the Island as a Free Associated State (*Estado Libre Asociado*) of the United States.

As Shatki Castro points out, scenic locations in the novel play a threefold role, namely: (1) a way for Julia "to teach her son the importance of connecting to the land"; (2) a way for her to connect with Rennie; and (3) a way to give the reader a physical sense of the Island. Thus, the novel "veers between a fish-out-of-water story, a thriller, and a history lesson" (Castro). It is these trips, together with Rennie's trips with his girlfriend Marisol,

which will be discussed later, that serve as the frame for the character's "de-linking," revealing his newly acquired decolonial thinking.

In a very Freudian manner, it is the death of the father which enables Rennie to discover or "reconnect" with his true self, his birth mother, and his place of origin. Such a combination of elements calls for the discussion of the term, "*la madre patria*," literally "the mother fatherland," a phrase used in Latin America to refer to Spain as "the mother country" in reference to the role of the nation in "birthing" the region through the process of colonization. Thus, Julia's role in the narrative can be understood as a stand-in for Rennie's "*madre patria*," a mother country that will initially be more easily compared to Spain, to then morph into Puerto Rico.

Julia is originally portrayed as a mother who is present for the grueling process of birthing, an event that can be understood as reminiscent of the violence of colonization, only to then "abandon" her child and give it away to his father, a move that finds an analogue in the way Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States as a result of the 1898 Spanish American War. Rennie's "transit" from his mother to his father and from the Island to the mainland thus replicates Puerto Rico's change of colonizer, from its "*madre patria*" Spain to its "fatherland," the United States. Julia's status as "motherland" is further reinforced by her full name, Julia Matos Canales. Julia, as Torres explained to Castro, is named "as a tribute to Julia de Burgos, the famous Puerto Rican poet" (Castro). Furthermore, her last names make reference to two other pro-independence icons and poets: Francisco *Matos* Paoli, and Nemesio *Canales*. Therefore, the composite places a known pro-independence female at the forefront of her persona, while the other two forefathers of the nation who provide Julia's last names are transformed into maternal forces through their incorporation into Julia's identity.

Ania Loomba reminds us that, "The identification of women as national mothers stems from a wider association of nation with the family" (216). Accordingly, Rennie's last name is Falto, which translates into "lacking," a note on both his lack of parents, but also of Puerto Rican-ness. However, Rennie's return to his birth mother is not to be understood as a Puerto Rican return to Spain or linked to Hispanophile tendencies. Julia left her son behind due to her inability to take care of him, a situation not unlike the Spanish handover of the Island to the United States. In this context, Julia's suspected postpartum depression could be understood as the difficult developmental stage that followed the American invasion of Puerto Rico, which, in political terms, would include moments such as the Ponce Massacre (1937), the systematic suppression of nationalist movements, the FBI's surveillance and sabotage of any pro-independence activity (later known as "*las carpetas*" or "the files"), and the birth of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA), which established Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth.

It follows that his birthmother's phone calls fall in line with the "call" of his native country, which Rennie initially disregards, only to attend to later: "The first time she called, I hung up. The following calls, I didn't answer. I just couldn't. Her persistence and the sad-ass but optimistic messages she left made me finally cave in" (Torres 9). They are also a reflection of the problematic relationship between them: "Those early conversations were limited, guarded on my side, forced. Part of me grew to enjoy her calls ... But that connection with her would diminish minutes later as I wondered why a woman would abandon her baby son" (9). This argument is not unsimilar to pro-statehood voters who associate Puerto Rican progress with the work made by "the father," the United States, without acknowledging the difficulties confronted by the local government, which, in Julia's case, pose as mental health issues.

José Piedra's seminal essay, "Nationalizing Sissies," demonstrates the way in which metaphors that illustrate colonial relationships replicate an implicit sexual and gendered submission between a man and a woman, or a "macho" (self-identified as straight) man and a "sissy" or homosexual one. In these contexts, colonizers assume a certain "femininity" or "effeminate behavior" in the colonized that sets them up as "passive, weak, and forever ready to suit the bully's whims" (Piedra 370). Piedra's allegory, while in many ways stands true, ultimately portrays femininity, be it in the female or male body, as inherent to a feeble character.¹ While arguably a colonizer's position is one of superiority and arrogance over its colonized, who, because of their situation, are indeed in a weaker stance from an economic and political point of view, it is wrong to assume the colonized's position as an exclusively feminine – and thus assumed weak – one. Such alignment of the feminine with the weak perpetuates the gender binarism that negates the embodiment of masculine behavior within a female body, thus negating certain social powers and agency to women, and by extension here, to colonized countries.² Furthermore, it denies the important role of socio-cultural powers associated with femininity, such as affective bonds and feelings of belonging, thoroughly discussed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, in the shaping of nationalist movements that often nourish decolonial ones.

Nevertheless, Piedra's comparison, which mainly centers around men – male colonizers as "bullies" and colonized men as "sissies" "standing in for a woman" (370) – is quite useful to speak of the situation of women in a colonial context. When Piedra hints, "Can the sissy be the real powermonger in the bully's colonial takeover?" (372) his question aligns with my proposal to understand femininity and its affective bonds –in Torres's work, heterosexual romance, and motherhood – as effective social powers within the colonial matrix rather than weak ones. The *sissy* and the woman *do* yield

power in the colonial context and that needs to be acknowledged for us to envision the possibility of breaking with its matrix.

So then, where *is* the weakness of the colonized located if not in femininity, and how can it be represented in the development of a new allegory? Piedra's discussion brings to the fore the symbolic implications found in sexual positioning and the submission implied in being penetrated and "at the bottom" as a gay man (top/bottom) or straight woman (missionary position or bent over on all four), collocations that figuratively demonstrate the power relations between the people involved. In *The Accidental Native*, positioning in the first sexual encounter between Marisol and Rennie establishes the woman's nationalistic approach and questioning of Island politics as a decolonial tool that overpowers or "takes over" Rennie's preconceptions of Puerto Rico and its colonial status.

Marisol Santerreguá, a co-worker at the University of Puerto Rico, ends up becoming Rennie's girlfriend and, like Julia, also plays a role in his education about the Island. The couple makes three key trips. Firstly, Marisol gives him a tour of the fictional Baná Campus when he first arrives. At its center, he sees a replica of one of the sculptures in the United Nation's garden, "Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares," a gift to the organization from the Soviet Union in 1959. In this instance, the sculpture functions as an obvious reference to the campus's past as an army base and its transformation into an educational institution: "Made by Evgeniy Vuchetich, the bronze statue represents the figure of a man holding a hammer in one hand and, in the other, a sword which he is making into a plowshare, symbolizing man's desire to put an end to war and convert the means of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of all mankind" (from UN.org). Not only that, the statue also signals Rennie's future transformation into one of those tools "to put an end to war," as he will forego his role in the education of Puerto Rican students as a university professor "for the benefit of all mankind" through his work as a lawyer, once he joins his mother's legal firm and decolonial activism by the end of the novel.

The couple's second trip places them at the Jíbaro Monument following their attendance at a concert by Fiel a la Vega. Formed in 1994, the local *rock en español* band is known for reigniting the independence movement within the musical context of the Island by putting together "covers" (new versions) of songs such as "Boricua en la luna" (lit. Boricua/Puerto Rican on the moon), and creating original ones that have become equally important in regards to the development of feelings of national belonging, such as "Salimos de aquí" (literally, "We came from here") and "El Wanabí" (literally, "The Wanna-Be").³ During the concert, Rennie observes "the miniature Puerto Rican flags [the attendees] carried" (Torres 81), how "every soul in that venue except [him], knew the lyrics to [Boricua en la luna], and [how]

the concert became a collective communion of song, flag-waving, nationalistic intoxication" (82). Over the noisy background, Rennie manages to hear Marisol's explanation about the song, "It was something about how no matter where you were, even on the moon, you would always be a Boricua, a Puerto Rican" (81).⁴

The Creative Writing assistant professor also notes, "The roar at the finish of that number was deafening, but more so was the reaction when the group began its hit song, *El Wanabí*" (Torres 82). "El Wanabí" recalls the diasporic history of the Island, describing the process of migration and naming Puerto Ricans that have attained world-renown upon leaving for the United States, such as the poet Julia de Burgos, the baseball player Roberto Clemente, and the actor Raúl Julia. The song lyrics take on particular importance in the context of the couple's national and diasporic backgrounds. As previously mentioned, Rennie is a DiaspoRican, as he was born in Puerto Rico, raised in the United States, and eventually returns to the Island. Similarly, Marisol was born in Cuba, yet her parents belonged to the first wave of Cubans who left the Island for Puerto Rico after the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

Once the show ends, Marisol believes visiting the Jíbaro Monument would make sense, despite it being almost midnight, and that Rennie would "appreciate it more" (Torres 82) provided the nationalistic context of the night. Once there, Marisol translates the plaque on the statue, "The jíbaro has always been the symbol of our collective identity, the synthesis of the virtues of the Puerto Rican people." Later, Rennie reflects, "I felt bad she had taken the time to show the monument to me and I had felt unmoved" (Torres 83). Nevertheless, this is where their first sexual encounter occurs, and Marisol, the woman, is sexually on top and takes control of the situation.

She glided across and kissed me. A soft kiss, a peck really. She must have seen something inviting in my eyes. She kissed me harder, and I could not resist. I could not say no to her, not then and there. She climbed on top of me, slipped off her underwear, unbuckled and lowered my pants and underwear, and breathlessly told me to adjust the seat. I did, with one hand, as the other bunched up her dress. (83)

Rennie's sexual subdual at the hands of Marisol should thus be read as a metaphor for the way in which her love for and knowledge of the Island imposes itself over Rennie's ambiguous and at times resentful perspective of the country.

Marisol and Rennie's third trip is similarly important. On their way to visit the phosphorescent bay at La Parguera (Guánica) they happen to see the spot where Americans landed during the 1898 invasion of the Island. Rennie stares, "[I] saw how ridiculous it looked, jumping from the ground,

surrounded by an old, grated railing meant to protect it, from what or whom I wasn't sure ... The boulder made me think about the invasion, made me revisit in my mind the status issue" (Torres 105). Marisol then reveals that, unlike most faculty, she is not pro-independence but pro-statehood, to which Rennie inquires, "How can you be so sure, Marisol? ... To become part of the nation that invaded and colonized Puerto Rico?" (106), showing again signs of colonial consciousness. But Marisol's feelings toward the Island's colonial status are further complicated by her sociopolitical position as a person of Cuban descent. She explains, "The U.S. has been nothing but good to me and my family. Why should I hate it?" (106)

This conversation is essential to understanding the novel's tongue-in-cheek reference to the Puerto Rican well-known short story by Ana Lydia Vega, *Pollito chicken* (1977). Vega's story exposes the complex relationship Suzie Bermúdez, a DiaspoRican, has toward the Island. Having lived in the United States most of her life, when she visits Puerto Rico, she sees the Island through the lens of a tourist. The way she does not see herself as Puerto Rican and maintains the Islanders at arm's length comically collapses in on itself once she has sex with a Puerto Rican man. It is through this act of sexual liberation that Suzie yells, as she orgasms, "¡VIVA PUELTO RICO LIBREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" (Long live freeeeeeeee Puerto Rico!) (Vega 80; my translation), a phrase that simultaneously recognizes the Island's sovereignty and Susie's own Puerto Rican-ness, since her pronunciation of the Island's name substitutes the "r" for the "l" (Puelto instead of Puerto), a marker of the Islanders' speech.

Torres's novel revisits this recognizable passage from Puerto Rican literature the first time Marisol and Rennie have sex. Rennie recounts, "Her last words, when she reached orgasm, resonate in my head today as when they broke the black stillness of that cool Cordillera night. 'Dios mío,' she screamed, '¡que vivan los nuyoricans!'" (Torres 83). Through this wording, I propose, J.L. Torres is invoking Ana Lydia Vega's story with a twofold purpose: firstly, to further reinforce Marisol's alliance with the United States at this point in the novel; secondly, to position Puerto Ricans on the island and DiaspoRicans on the mainland on equal footing in terms of feelings of national belonging, this in relation to both the United States and Puerto Rico. In this sense, "¡que vivan los nuyoricans!" engages with the call to freedom in Vega's story, "freeing" DiaspoRicans from the peripheral space they often occupy in both the Puerto Rican and American national spaces through Marisol's (sexually and discursively "on top") endorsement. Therefore, the validation and reinsertion of DiaspoRicans into these two national discourses is only possible through Marisol's ambiguous and rare political positioning as both a pro-statehood university professor, and the person who introduces Rennie to iconic and ultimately nationalist Puerto Rican

landmarks and songs. More importantly, validating Rennie's status as a Puerto Rican breaks the conflictive sociocultural divides that deny Puerto Ricans on the mainland the ability to describe themselves as "true" Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, it expands nationalistic discourses and their ability to include DiaspoRicans as allies in the Puerto Rican independence movement, rather than assume their alliance with the United States simply by virtue of residing on the mainland.

Rennie's stand on the colonial status of the Island is initially presented through a dismissive attitude characteristic of a colonized subject. At the beginning of the text, various conversations point out that the character perceives himself as American, not Puerto Rican. At the beginning of the novel, Rennie self-identified as an "asimilao" (assimilated), slang for someone who has completely integrated into American culture and "forgotten" their Puerto Rican heritage (Torres 72), this despite his parents' attempts to instill in him a love for the Island. Neither was he interested in learning the Spanish language throughout his adolescence. He declares, "It [was] a burden I simply didn't want" (24). Let's then consider Walter Mignolo's thoughts on decolonial thinking: it "is what colonial subjects do when they do not want to assimilate and are not happy with being colonial subjects" (42).⁵ Originally, Rennie is very much in his comfort zone because he does not see himself as colonized despite his father warning him that, "ours is an oppressed, colonized people losing its culture and history" (72). It is only after his cultural "education" by the main female characters in the novel that he will undergo a decolonial rebirth.

While sexual positioning works to speak of Marisol and Rennie's relationship, the mother-son ties between Julia and Rennie require the consideration of a different allegory. In this context, I propose a new *locus* for the disadvantage of the colonized: specifically, for the straight woman, this lies in motherhood. A key aspect in Piedra's analysis of the colonial situation and the metaphors he uses to describe it is the colonizer's ability to keep the colonized "in a suspended libidinal state between maleness and femaleness" in order to establish the colonizers' rhetorical and physical prowess (372). I would like to reposition such a state of "inbetweenness" (Piedra 372) within the context of Torres's *The Accidental Native*. In the novel, it is motherhood which functions as a libidinal space used by supposedly superior forces to weaken their oppressed. In this sense, a "good" mother would hold a social supremacy equivalent to a "male" or "bully" (to follow Piedra), an overall stronger power. A "bad" mother would thus inhabit the place of a "sissy" whose strength is invalidated or inferior, hence replicating the image of the colonized. Therefore, both a "bad mother" and a "colonized" person, in the colonizer's eye, would be in dire need of

direction and “education:” the colonial father would be doing the bad mother/colonized subject a “favor” by colonizing them.

Unbeknownst to Rennie, his biological mother had left him in the care of his father and stepmother (who Rennie believes to be his birth mother), due to her inability to care for him. Severely affected by postpartum depression early in Rennie’s life, Julia oscillates between being a “good” and a “bad” mother throughout the novel: “good” because she is able to recognize her situation and capabilities when suffering from mental health issues, as well as being able to overcome these; “bad” because she “abandons” her child and cuts ties with him. Her characterization as a “professional” woman is also used against any positive “motherly” attributes. Before learning the truth about her postpartum depression, her son wonders about her reasons for leaving him behind, “Was she one of those career women who put ambition before her child? How selfish. How convenient to play the comforting mom after someone does all the work to raise your kid” (Torres 9).

Nevertheless, Rennie comes to appreciate Julia as he finds out more about her political values. While he despises the wealth that comes with being a lawyer, he comes to conceive of her as a mother figure the more he learns about her role in the struggles for the independent cause for the Island as “a founding partner at a law firm ... known for taking cases involving political activists and action lawsuits against the U.S. government” (Torres 24-25). It follows that Julia’s quality as a mother is at the root of her son’s rejection or acceptance of what she signifies, a free, decolonized country. Julia’s “inbetweenness” as both a good and bad mother functions in the novel as the main characteristic to judge her capabilities, not only for self-governing, but also for taking care of others through her metaphorical role as the mother of the Island, represented by Rennie, the child-man that has yet much to learn about Puerto Rican history. It is thus her symbolic “rehabilitation” as a mother through her role in the re-education of Rennie as a “true” Puerto Rican that transforms her into a decolonial tool within the text, as well as into the embodiment of the motherland.

During their first trip together, when Julia and Rennie visit Lares, the mountain municipality known as a symbol of the independence movement due to serving as center-stage for the Lares uprising (Grito de Lares), Rennie gets to meet independence activist Lolita Lebrón. Unaware of her cultural significance, Rennie makes fun of her in front of his mother and must later deal with the effects of such an act on their relationship. A mother of two by the time she decided to enter and fire shots in the USA Capitol Building’s Hall of the House of Representatives as a means to protest the Island’s colonial situation, Lebrón missed seeing her children grow up while she carried out her jail sentence from 1954-1979. Provided Julia’s successful

career as a pro-independence lawyer, Rennie's initial perception of his birth mother mirrors the situation experienced by Lolita Lebrón, an icon of the independence movement on the Island. His early dismissiveness for both Lebrón and his mother show a disregard for women activists, specifically when their political activity may affect their role as mothers. Once again, Julia is put in the position of the "bad" mother as Rennie believes her love for her country is in opposition to that of her child.

However, as the novel and Rennie evolve, he learns to appreciate the power of female agency within politics and activism. His awareness of the Island's colonial situation and the role played by women within this context transform Julia into a "good" mother by the end of the novel. Similarly, at Lolita Lebrón's funeral, Rennie admits, "Through my mother I had learned to respect and understand Lolita Lebrón, to appreciate the leadership qualities of Puerto Rican women in the vanguard" (Torres 246). On the last cultural trip with his mother, this time to Las Fiestas de Loíza, which celebrate St. James, who fought the Moors out of Spain, he notes, "How bizarre ... A town with such an African legacy and the Spaniards are the good guys. 'And what's most African, the *vejigantes*,' [Julia] responded, 'are demons, the bad guys'" (237). These remarks make it evident that René comes to understand the complexity of Puerto Rico's colonial situation and colonized mentality, which in this case has been transmitted through the celebration's incongruous racial politics.

Once Julia recovers from postpartum depression, she becomes a successful lawyer, her transformation a reinvention of the "mother country:" moving from being the "bad" or incapable (Spanish) mother to becoming an extremely capable "good" mother who can raise her child independent of the father. In this sense, this new mother (Julia) is the embodiment of a future, idyllic Puerto Rico, proud of its (national, not colonial) roots and capable of caring for itself and its offspring. Once recovered, Julia/Puerto Rico is able to develop a unique identity independent from its previous colonizers. Thus, Rennie gets to meet a brand-new mother, a Julia no longer exclusively related to birth or under the effects of postpartum depression, but instead a strong lawyer and activist, a new Puerto Rico.

It follows that this reading of *The Accidental Native* dialogues with canonical parallels between the United States as an oppressive patriarchal figure and the Island as its inept child, firstly put forth in Antonio S. Pedreira's well-known *Insularismo* (1934). The island trope was further illustrated in novels such as Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976) as well as questioned and complicated by scholars such as José Piedra, Juan Gelpí, and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé.

While avoiding assigning a specific parental role to the countries involved, Piedra looks at the Latin American situation through Freud's primordial scene and from a colonial perspective to acknowledge that, "in the symbolic scene of the interpersonal or the international theater, the Father tends to be the colonizing agent, the Mother the colonized, and the offspring, a colonial" (382). That is exactly the position that Rennie assumes throughout the novel, and which would align Rennie's father as a stand-in for the United States (due to his move to the mainland) and his mother, Julia, with the colonized island, due both to her location and her political activism.

Based on Juan Gelpí's portrayal of "the nation conceived of as a family, a monstrous sort of family – racially miscegenated, pathological, infantilized – over which a father-teacher presided with his disciplining voice" (140), Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé uses sexual metaphors similar to Piedra's to read key Puerto Rican literary works by René Marqués, Luis Rafael Sánchez, and Manuel Ramos Otero. Cruz-Malavé ponders, "What if in a colonial "nation" like Puerto Rico – in that queer state of freedom within dependency, of nation without nationhood – impotence and lack were the only weapon, the ultimate ruse? ... Puerto Rican canonical texts have not ruled through potency but through impotence" (140).

Through the trope of sexual might, the scholar joins Piedra in bestowing strength upon the colonized underdog. In utilizing the Island's *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA) status as a territory of the United States to queer it, Cruz-Malavé, once again, positions the Island in an "in-between" space. According to the Island's political relation to the United States, it is "free" while simultaneously dependent on, or "associated" to the mainland's whims. Neither free nor an official state within the United States, for Cruz-Malavé, the best metaphor to illustrate the Island is that of queerness: neither male nor female, and therefore, sexually ambiguous in its positioning – as its potency lies in impotence – this queer state is replicated in the female masculinities at work in Torres's novel. The roles of Marisol, a woman with a "male" sexual positioning, and Julia, a woman with a "male" profession, as decolonial tools function as echoes of Cruz-Malavé's queer trope in his discussion of the Island's political status.

Another important metaphor driving the discussion in Cruz-Malavé's essay is Antonio Pedreira's well-known reading of Puerto Rico as a growing child, "Pedreira claims that Puerto Rico had a birth [Spanish conquest], a childhood [Spanish-Cuban-North American war of 1898], and an adolescence, but that at the point in which adolescence was to turn into full manhood and independence, the North American occupation thwarted it" (Cruz-Malavé 149).

The emotional and intellectual growth experienced by Rennie throughout the novel in his discovery of his biological mother as well as of

the true history of Puerto Rico offer echoes of Pedreira's analogy since it is his separation from the mainland and its colonial knowledge which previously "thwarted" his development as a Puerto Rican. It is also noticeable how *The Accidental Native* shares a development arc with the *Bildungsroman*. Although Rennie's journey to the Island takes place once he is already a man, the presence of his mother and her role in aiding him multiple times (solving legal issues with squatters, for example), together with his ignorance of history, political figures, and culture, often evoke a sense of childhood in the protagonist for the reader. Rennie's lack of knowledge regarding both the existence of his biological mother as well as of typically Puerto Rican customs is just one of the ways in which the maternal figure and Puerto Rican-ness intertwine in the novel's journey of self-discovery. The fusion of the rediscovery of the Island and his mother's identity enable a decolonial reading of the novel in which Rennie's confrontational bond with his mother mirrors his learning of the Island's past and present as a territory of the United States. The complicated reunion between mother and son pre-configures the birth of a colonial consciousness that leads to Rennie's eventual activism and protest against colonial powers over the country.

While colonial powers are often masculinized and recognized as patriarchal in their oppression against colonized countries, it would be a mistake to present colonies aiming to "delink" (to use Mignolo's terminology) or depart from colonial knowledges and powers as weaker through their feminization as this would invalidate their political (male) "prowess." Such an analogy would deem decolonization (almost) inherently impossible. In contrast, Torres's novel proposes links between characteristics socially identified as "feminine," such as romantic and motherly affection, and ones socially identified as "male," like legality and activism. It is precisely this queering of the decolonial gender tropes and the connections between male and female social powers that enable Rennie's *delinking* in the novel.

Furthermore, Segato establishes a connection between motherhood, legality, and intimacy that is particularly productive for our understanding of Torres's work. In her discussion of colonial America, Segato points out that the concept of motherhood is intercepted by legal issues, as well as affective ones: the (white) biological mother occupies a legal role, while the (black) wet nurse takes on an affective one. These, together, make up for the role of the mother, turning motherhood into a communal and politically charged experience (Segato, *La crítica de la colonialidad* 28-29). J.L. Torres's work can be understood in similar terms, and perhaps as a contemporary portrayal of the complex colonial situation for women: motherhood is represented by both Julia, representative of the law (as biological mother

and lawyer) and, as proposed before, of Spain, and by Rennie's stepmother, who embodies the affectionate aspect of the mother-son bond. While the novel does not provide information regarding the racial background of Rennie's mothers, it is clear that motherhood here functions in a politically engaged "relay" in which Rennie's stepmother steps in when Julia cannot carry out her motherly duties and vice versa, replicating, thus, the nexus between motherhood, legality, and affection established by Segato.

María Lugones remarks that:

One does not resist the colonality of gender alone. One resists it from within a way to understand the world and living in it that is shared and that can understand one's actions, thus providing recognition. Communities rather than individuals enable the doing; one does with someone else, not in individualist isolation. (754)

And while the "community" that resists colonality in the novel is not forged in an explicit way, the "education" of Rennie/René in Puerto Rican matters and the eventual birth of his decolonial thinking occurs through all, his father, a historian, his stepmother, a Spanish teacher, his biological mother, a lawyer and activist, his partner, an academic, and in some ways, his colleagues and the awareness they bring about the effects of colonialism on campus. Similarly, Segato reminds us that, "the history of women emphasizes rootedness and close relationships" (*La guerra contra las mujeres* 27).⁶ Thus, it makes sense to find a means to rebuild the island's history and its significance to Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, such as Rennie, through the interactions Rennie builds with Julia and Marisol. Rennie's "re-education" in Puerto Rican history is made significant and consequential through its highly affective "feminine" delivery.

Rephrasing Indian political theorist Partha Chatterjee, Mignolo states that, in order to decolonize being, we need to decolonize knowledge ("Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom" 13), "*epistemic disobedience* is necessary to take on *civil disobedience* to its point of no return" ("Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom" 15). Through her metaphoric role, to decolonize Rennie's mind will be Julia's endeavour from the moment she realises her son's attitudes toward the Island and his ignorance of its people:

She told me how distressed she was that her only son was so ignorant of Puerto Rican history and culture, how distressingly alienated I was from my Puerto Ricanness ... how naïve I was about the U.S. involvement in Puerto Rico ... I listened respectfully as she outlined a plan to "re-integrate" me into Puerto Rican society. "I have to purge you of the last drop of Yankeeanness," she joked, in Spanish ... She dedicated herself to

lecturing me in Puerto Rican history, culture, and society. She faxed me a bibliography of “must read books.” (Torres 24-25)

As Mignolo points out in “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” knowledge is affected by geopolitics. Breaking with imperial knowledge, or information provided by the colonizer is, thus, engaging in epistemic disobedience. The books and experiences that Julia and Marisol provide are, to put it in terms I have developed elsewhere, decolonial *artefacts* in Rennie’s epistemic revolution and eventual activism. In my discussion of Gabby Rivera’s *Juliet Takes a Breath*, I make use of the polyvalent spelling of the word “artefact” to read the library and books as “explosive devices” within the decolonial context, as they facilitate a “violent expansion ... [of] historical knowledge and social consciousness” (Martínez-Reyes 334). Together with their trips to culturally significant places, the list of (unnamed) books that Julia faxes Rennie are, therefore, tools that will allow for his delinking and decolonial awakening. Throughout the novel, just as Rivera’s Juliet begins to question authoritative sources of knowledge, such as her parents and schooling, so will Rennie doubt his father, stepmother, and the U.S. colonial administration. While the secret of Julia’s existence affects his trust on an emotional level – “And why didn’t my parents tell me [about Julia]? What were they hiding? What other secrets were they keeping from me?” (Torres 9) – his experience working on a university campus plagued with cancer will shatter his political trust in the U.S. imperial government.

Rennie and his biological mother end up working together investigating and exposing the truth when he finds out that the fictional Baná Campus of the University of Puerto Rico where he works is a high-risk zone for hazardous, toxic, and radioactive waste left there by the U.S. Army, as the site previously served as a military base. While the American government is supposed to be cleaning up the site, there is no real action visible on the campus, which may account for the high number of cancer cases amongst his peers. When Rennie loses a close co-worker to cancer, he decides to contact the “Congreso leadership” (which stands for a worker’s union in the novel). He wonders, “How was it that no one knew about this stuff? Or if they did, no one cared enough to make a stink about it? But then, what could one demand when the U.S. government was officially doing something about it?” (Torres 77).

The situation reminds him of his second “cultural field trip” with Julia, when they visited Vieques, a small island off the northeastern coast of Puerto Rico and part of its archipelago. His mother explained, “The Navy would bomb targets on the island ... without any concern for the people or the fishermen, or the high incidence of cancer in Vieques ... Some of us had

been working decades to close [the naval base] down” (Torres 77). His questioning of official, colonial sources of knowledge, like the USA Army Corps of Engineers website, where he reads the site’s cleanup was supposed to have begun years ago, will thus open the doors of access to knowledge alternative to that provided by the colonizer. Experiences like this one enable Rennie to validate his mother’s and colleagues’ knowledge – representative of the colonized / Puerto Rican knowledge – over that of the colonizer.

To go back to Mignolo, “De-colonial options start from the principle that the regeneration of life shall prevail over primacy of the *production and reproduction* of goods at all costs of life” (“Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom” 3). In the context of the novel, Mignolo’s words signal that the loss of his co-worker Rita makes Rennie reconsider his views on the status of the Island as a colony of the United States. The cancer on campus becomes a literal and metaphorical one: U.S. troops have taken over the body of the university, and Rennie is only then ready to fight the effects of colonialism. It is relevant to note that Rennie abandons the idea of possible protest once he fears losing his job after receiving threats by Foley, a co-worker who is suspected of working for the FBI. Foley stands as a symbol for the U.S. and reminiscent of the empire’s previous oppressive and intimidating political tactics toward the Island’s independence movement, instilling fear, halting progress, and maiming self-awareness as a country on a symbolic level. As colleagues gather to come up with a plan to confront the USA with their role in the cancer cases on campus, Foley insists it would be too much trouble for nothing. Rennie describes the meeting thus: “After a century, a colonial mindset is not easily shaken. No one stood up to challenge anything he said. There was silence, unnerving in all of its revelation” (Torres 211).

When his girlfriend Marisol is diagnosed with cancer, Rennie decides to take full action, and protests at the university campus begin. Marisol eventually recovers from cancer, and Foley (representative of the United States) disappears. The novel leaves the issue unresolved and concludes amid protests, but two statements provide closure. First, while Rennie had previously expressed indifference towards the status of the Island, by the end of the text he explains he “can live with statehood or independence. Anything but this mess we have now” (Torres 246), a blatant rejection of Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Secondly, Rennie decides to quit academia to work for his mother and become a lawyer specializing in environmental law. Thus, Rennie has gone from being an “accidental native” to becoming a colonial subject opting for the decolonial option.

By way of conclusion, let us return to our opening question, initially postulated by Loomba within a broader context, “What does it take for

colonial subjects to move from alienation to revolution, from a recognition of injustice to resistance? What are the dynamics of anti-colonial consciousness and revolt?" (185). As we read the question, it is unavoidable to note its simultaneous levels of abstraction and pragmatism: Do we conceive ourselves as colonial subjects or do we align with our colonizers? Do we alienate ourselves from the discussion of larger imperial powers as we move through everyday life? Resistance and revolution, protests, are very factual, tangible events. Rennie's "education" is not a theoretical or abstract one, but instead made concrete through the personal, affective, and experiential. It is not the need for a hypothetical future for the Island that makes him reflect upon Puerto Rico's colonial status, but rather, it is facing impotence in front of colonial powers, his powerlessness while going through everyday life visiting key national sites, listening to his peers, living with a sick partner, experiencing colonialism through legal matters and his mother's revolutionary eyes. In Mignolo's terms, Rennie's epistemic disobedience was key to the development of his civil disobedience.

Rennie's eventual integration into the Puerto Rican community that surrounds him, together with its goal to change the Island for the better (Torres 247-48), makes evident what Segato has noted before, namely, that "to knit a community means to enlist yourself in a historic project with goals that diverge from the historic project of capital" (*La guerra contra las mujeres* 28).⁷ By the novel's resolution, Rennie decides to quit his job in academia in order to, like his mother, pursue a degree in law, a move he sees as "the surest way to achieve change [on the Island]" (248), joining those around him in their historic project against the USA forces on campus, which diverges from the production of capital and instead seeks out the decolonial goal of the preservation of life at all costs. Rennie has developed a decolonial consciousness and a sense of belonging and acquired a new biological mother and a new Puerto Rico.

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NOTES

- 1 It is not my intention to disqualify Piedra's important work in any way, but rather to converse with it and part from it to resignify the female body. While at some points of the essay, words or metaphors may be open to (negative) interpretation, Piedra's arguments are ultimately in line with mine. "In principle, this fashion of subjecting can be practiced by men, women, straights, and gays. But, in actuality, men who perceive themselves as macho models

- claim advantage over, and even exclusivity in, the act of sissification" (Piedra 371).
- 2 The same would apply to male homosexuality.
 - 3 Translation of song titles is mine. *Boricua en la luna* was originally a poem by Puerto Rican poet and pro-independence activist Juan Antonio Corretjer, which was turned into a song by singer/songwriter Roy Brown in 1987. Fiel a la Vega's "cover" was produced in 1997.
 - 4 "Boricua" is the name the native Taíno population of the Island would give themselves as their name for Puerto Rico was "Borikén," thus the demonym "Boricua." The use of this demonym itself instead of the Spanish "puertorriqueño" implies nationalistic feelings.
 - 5 In Isasi-Díaz and Mendieta.
 - 6 My translation. Original: "La historia de las mujeres pone su acento en el arraigo y en las relaciones de cercanía."
 - 7 My translation. Original: "retejer comunidad significa alistarse en un proyecto histórico que se dirige a metas divergentes con relación al proyecto histórico del capital."

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