



# Forms of Memory: The Aesthetics of Ambivalent Agonism in *También la lluvia* and *Conquistadora*

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ARTICLE



## ABSTRACT

This article uses a comparative cultural studies approach to analyze two contemporary re-tellings of colonial history in the Americas: Spanish director Iciar Bollain's film, *También la lluvia/Even the Rain* (2010), and US-Puerto Rican author Esmeralda Santiago's historical novel, *Conquistadora* (2011). *También La Lluvia* and *Conquistadora* offer case studies in the aesthetics of the agonistic mode of remembering, although it is one that I qualify as *ambivalent* for the ways in which both texts' goal of promoting individual and collective agency is mediated by narrative strategies that replicate colonial power dynamics. Through metanarrative, defamiliarization, multiple points and other strategies that question narrative cohesion and historical truth, the texts' ambivalent agonism exposes the coloniality of power across spaces and time, including within the texts themselves.

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In the year between 2010 and 2011, two seemingly unrelated things happened. In 2010, the Spanish director Iciar Bollain released her metadramatic film, *También la lluvia* (*Even the Rain*);<sup>1</sup> and, in 2011, the U.S. Latina writer Esmeralda Santiago published *Conquistadora*, her first work of historical fiction. While *También la lluvia* was lauded by the international film community, Santiago's novel has received scant attention from critics, mainstream and scholarly alike.<sup>2</sup> Bollain's film, starring well-known actors such as Luis Tosar (Spain) and Gael García Bernal (Mexico) tells the story of a multi-national film crew who arrives in Cochabamba, Bolivia to make an anticolonial period drama about Christopher Columbus's arrival to the New World, highlighting the role of Padre Montesinos as "the first voice of conscience against an empire" (Bollain 2010). Similarly, Santiago's novel begins by narrating the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors on the island of Puerto Rico from the eyes of the indigenous Taíno people. The novel moves forward to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and follows the life of Ana Cubillas, an unconventional Spanish aristocrat, as she takes control of a Puerto Rican plantation while Spanish colonial rule in the Americas begins to crumble.

The two texts differ in national origin, genre, and reception, but both texts model what I term an "ambivalent agonism" as a mode of remembering through aesthetic techniques that locate colonialism and its legacies within a four-dimensional spatiotemporal model. Through metanarrative, defamiliarization, multiple points of view and other strategies that question narrative cohesion and historical truth, the texts' ambivalent agonism exposes the coloniality of power across spaces and time, including within the texts themselves.

## THE AESTHETICS OF AMBIVALENT AGONISM

Memory studies currently identify three modes of remembering: cosmopolitan, antagonistic, and agonistic. Cosmopolitanism has enjoyed certain popularity within the field during the recent past. According to Bull and Hansen, a *cosmopolitan mode* is closely aligned with the emergence of human rights discourse in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Within cosmopolitan modes of remembering, the figure of the hero as the object of historical memory is replaced by an attention to history's victims (and their descendants). Conflicts are understood as a struggle between a universalized, abstracted Good vs. Evil, where democracy is good and totalitarianism is evil. Cosmopolitanism treats historical context itself as universalized and transcended in the larger struggle against human suffering. Critics of cosmopolitanism accuse it of subsuming or glossing over the political substance of social conflict in the service of problematic notions of universalism that are inherently Western-centric (Cazdyn and Szeman 28). Other critics, most prominently, Mouffe, argue: "cosmopolitan discourse, in arguing for solutions built upon transnational institution and universal rights, ignores real and legitimate differences of social and political interests and leaves vital political questions unanswered for populist nationalists, racists, and fundamentalists to seize upon" (Bull and Hansen 4). Such global neo-nationalist movements rely on reconstructions of national territory and territorial forms of essentialized identification. This is often referred to as the *antagonistic mode* of remembering. Where cosmopolitanism risks promoting an elitist, depoliticized mode of remembering, antagonism's heavily politicized narratives threaten to manipulate historical events in the service of divisive cultural-nationalist myth-making.

As a response to the need in memory studies to devise an alternative to both cosmopolitan and antagonistic modes of remembering, Bull and Hansen identify what they call the "*agonistic mode* of remembering. Agonism contextualizes conflict within specific socio-historic circumstances in order to learn from the multiple perspectives of victims, perpetrators, and third-party witnesses alike. An agonistic mode of remembering exposes the socially constructed nature of collective

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1 The screenplay was written by Paul Laverty.

2 The film's accolades include 21 awards and 16 nominations, including Best Latin American Film (Ariel Awards, Mexico, 2011) and Panorama Audience Award (Berlin International Film Festival, 2011). Conversely, a search on Google scholar for "Esmeralda Santiago" and "Conquistadora" reveals less than ten citations for scholarly work that focuses on the novel and not on other aspects of Santiago's career.

3 They explain: "the cosmopolitan memory discourse emerged as a result of two different but narrowly intertwined phenomena: the transnational Holocaust memory in the late 20th century, and the "growing consciousness of coming to terms with the violent past of the authoritarian regions of the 20th century" (Bull and Hansen 2-3).

memory and “rel[ies] on a multiplicity of perspectives in order to bring to light the socio-political struggles of the past and reconstruct the historical context in ways which restore the importance of civic and political passions and address issues of individual and collective agency” (Bull and Hansen 4). Agonism invites a Bakhtinian approach to historical narratives, exposing the constructed nature of memory through open-ended dialogic processes. In defining the “how” as well as the “what” of an agonistic mode of remembering, Bull and Hansen’s agonism invites discussions of the aesthetics of modes of remembering in narratives that take-up questions of individual and collective memory. *También la lluvia* and *Conquistadora* offer case studies in the aesthetics of the agonistic mode of remembering, although it is one that I qualify as *ambivalent* for the ways in which both texts’ goal of promoting individual and collective agency is mediated by narrative strategies that replicate colonial power dynamics.

The texts model an ambivalent agonism through formal devices that work self-referentially to point to the constructed nature of historical narrative and thus question the veracity of accepted historical “truths” while positing a more multi-dimensional modeling of colonial and neocolonial pasts, presents, and futures. In these two texts, the specific historical narrative under critique is a Eurocentric account of Spanish colonialism in the Americas that downplays violence and does not consider the point of view of indigenous persons, slaves, women, and others excluded under white, Christian heteropatriarchy. Ethnic studies, critical race theory, and similar fields often refer to such narratives as “master narratives.”<sup>4</sup> Through metanarrative, multiple points of view, and defamiliarization, both texts set-out to critique colonialism master narratives. They dramatize memory as constitutive of social change by staging historiography and fictional narratives as collective memory work, identifiable through formal techniques that destabilize narrative power. By unmasking the “official” past as a constructed narrative, both texts demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of an aesthetics attuned to historiography’s spatiotemporal webbing.

## TAMBIÉN LA LLUVIA

*También la lluvia* has received critical attention for the ways in which the film uses the past to dramatize the more recent history of Bolivia’s “Water Wars.”<sup>5</sup> When the production crew hires local, indigenous Bolivians to portray the Taino people in their remake of Columbus’s first landing, the crew becomes caught up in a fight over access to the water supply, pitting the indigenous people against the government and a multinational corporation. The story is based on actual events in the recent Bolivian past. Known as la Guerra del Agua (Water War), the conflict began in 1999 with the passing of the Ley 2029 de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado Sanitario, which privatized the water supply and left it under the control of Bechtel Enterprises, a multinational corporation. When water prices subsequently skyrocketed by 300 percent, the local people mounted a successful armed protest on January 11, 2000.

Screenwriter Paul Laverty has said in interviews that the events in Cochabamba in 2000 inspired him to incorporate “what happened 500 years ago, that massive exploitation, that viciousness” and “tell it through a modern consciousness, and mix it with what I consider to be much more sophisticated exploitation, the stealing of resources today, which is all done through corporate law, international treaties, powerful nations, and trading blocs” (Walsh 2). As a result, scholarly responses to the film have focused on its relationship to other cinematic critiques of Spanish colonialism (Luna), or the film’s critique of neocolonialism through the use of metanarrative (Paszkievicz). Luna argues that the film’s postmodern strategies, particularly its use of metanarrative, can “promote a decolonizing reading of historical events” (Luna 198). According to Luna, in fracturing the once-inviolable authority of the Church as the keeper of historical truth, the film enacts possibilities for narrative change from the bottom up. Such critiques engage a cosmopolitan mode of remembering that obscures the ways in which the film *also and simultaneously* replicates a Eurocentric narrative.

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4 Master narratives are stories of racial, gender, class and other forms of privilege that carry the assumptions of those with privilege, and name the social locations associated with such privilege as natural or normative (Solórzano and Yosso 28).

5 E.g. Luna, Prádano, and Moreno.

Luna and Prádanos have also emphasized the transnational nature of the production team, whose members came from France, Mexico, and Spain, while filming on location in Bolivia. In Luna's analysis of the film's postmodernist techniques, characters such as the Mexican Sebastián (played by Gael García Bernal) and the Spaniard Costa (played by Luis Tosar) have a "metonymic relation" with their countries of origin, allowing the film to comment on the shared legacy of Spanish colonialism across Latin America and also in present day Spain, forging "a transatlantic connection between Mexico and Spain" (Luna 193). However, this analysis flattens important power differences between the Spanish colonies themselves, obscuring Mexico's historically close colonial links with Spain and its location at the center of Spanish imperial operations in the Americas. Bolivia, on the other hand, was at the periphery of the periphery. Analyses of any shared colonial legacy would benefit from a more nuanced approach to the articulation of colonial power.

Like Luna, Prádanos also interprets the film as essentially decolonial, using metanarrative to not only critique Spanish colonialism but also to emphasize the neocolonial nature of globalization-as-neoliberalism:

De hecho, la película también muestra el modo en que el colonialismo de tiempos de Colón se transforma en un colonialismo interno perpetuado por la policía y por un político boliviano con su discurso reconociblemente moderno-occidental que colabora con un neocolonialismo resultante de la imposición de un mercado global asimétrico representado, por un lado, por la corporación transnacional del agua, y, por el otro, por la administración del rodaje de la meta-película. (Prádanos 95)

In fact, the film shows the ways in which colonialism in times of Columbus transformed into an internal colonialism perpetuated by police and by a Bolivian political system with its recognizably Western-modern discourse working with a neocolonialism resulting in the imposition of an asymmetrical global market represented, on the one hand, by the Transnational Water Corporation, and on the other hand, through the implementation of shooting the meta-film.<sup>6</sup>

As commentary on collective memory, the film's metanarrative qualities do visualize the past as a process of indigenous marginalization carried out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as part of what Anibal Quijano has named the "coloniality of power." Put simply, the coloniality of power describes the ways in which modern colonialism profoundly reorganized the world around ideas of race and racial classification, and those social structures continue to define modern society. As Ramón Grosfoguel has summarized: "A European / capitalist / military / Christian / patriarchal / white / heterosexual / male arrived in the Americas and established simultaneously in time and space several entangled global hierarchies" (Grosfoguel 9–10). He identifies fifteen interconnected global hierarchies that constitute a "modern world system," amongst them several that *También la lluvia* dramatizes: a global division of labor between periphery and core that relies on the exploitation of the periphery by the core; the establishment of politico-military organizations controlled by men; a global racial hierarchy that privileges Europeans over non-Europeans; and a sexual-gender hierarchy that privileges heterosexual males—what Lugones has called the "modern/colonial gender system" (2011 p.187). By highlighting the similarities between the contemporary social-economic position of the local indigenous and the "natives" under a European colonial worldview, the film draws a line through time and space from 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe to Latin America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, the subplot of the local fight over control of the water casts neoliberalism, in the form of a multinational corporation backed by a corrupt state, as the latest iteration of a centuries-old system of exploitation.

Other spatiotemporal continuities are made visible in the way the crew treats the locals through hierarchies of power that are so normalized that the crew seem largely oblivious to their complicity. This ideological work is accompanied by formal strategies of metanarrative, a layering of point of view and genre created by camera work, spatiotemporal layering created by allusion, analepsis, and cuts between scenes, and the film's ultimate reliance on sentimentality that maintains the Spanish male as the film's emotional and narrative center, displacing and sidelining indigenous experiences.

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6 Translation by Dr. Christopher Rivera.

The film's opening sequence uses irony to introduce the spatiotemporal mapping that draws the past into the present. As the metafilm crew's leaders (Costa, Sebastián, and María) drive to Cochabamba, María (Cassandra Ciangherotti) ironically observes: "We're in Bolivia. It doesn't make much sense. Because we're 7,500 feet above sea level, surrounded by mountains, and thousands of miles from the Caribbean."<sup>7</sup> María's mocking tone collapses the colonial moment of encounter in the Caribbean, the fictional moment of 2000 in Cochabamba, and 2010, the year of *También la lluvia's* release, into a critique of verisimilitude. Costa responds, referring to himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person and introducing neoliberal ideology that the film ultimately critiques: "No, Costa knows this place is full of starving natives, and that means thousands of extras." When Sebastián piggybacks on María's critique, complaining that the aforementioned extras they've been scouting for the film are "Quechas from the Andes" and not indigenous people from the Caribbean islands, Costa sneers: "From the Andes or wherever, they're natives." Sebastián protests from the backseat, but Costa responds with frustration: "Give me a fucking break. They're all the same." Costa's refusal to see the indigenous as differentiated groups with different historical trajectories under Spanish colonialism sets him up as the true contemporary double for Columbus, even more than Antón (Karra Elejalde), who plays Columbus in the film-within-the-film.

Bollaín's dexterous temporal weaving becomes clearer in a subsequent scene where the actors and crew have assembled around a table in their hotel's garden to rehearse. Through point of view shifts, the scene displaces the colonial past onto a neocolonial present. The scene heading, narrated by one of the unnamed actors, establishes the film's point of view: "We see the stunned faces of the Taíno children hiding in the bushes. From their point of view, we see Columbus and his men landing in the New World." At this point, the film's star actor, Antón cuts in, off book: "I, Christopher Columbus, humble servant of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, in the name of Jesus Christ, son of the one true God, take possession of these lands and seas and all they contain." He rises from the table and strides across the lawn, still speaking, carrying an umbrella that he plants into the ground, claiming Hispaniola for Spain. A mid-range shot captures the actors playing the Spanish soldiers in their jeans and t-shirts as they assemble themselves behind Antón.

The film then cuts quickly to a close shot of two indigenous hotel staff (ironically—intentionally or unintentionally—played by extras), watching the rehearsal. The next shot, filmed from directly behind the shoulder of a female server, switches to her point of view. Her gaze emphasizes the strange, defamiliarizing qualities of the tableau before her. When, from off camera, one soldier shouts, "Admiral! You have to see this!" the camera cuts to a close-up of her face as one actor peers at the server. From this point of view, the woman is on full display beneath the camera's colonial gaze, a position we viewers are uncomfortably occupying as well. As Antón approaches her, the camera cuts back to her point of view. We watch through her eyes as Antón reaches toward her left ear. This angle invites us into her point of view, an ambivalent positioning for the non-native viewer, which is both appropriative and empathetic. Antón plucks a gold earring from her ear and utters, "Gold." He asks her: "Where is the gold?" As the shot cuts back to his perspective, we watch her awkward smile as he asks her again, voice raising, "Where is the gold? Gold!" The woman gives her coworkers a puzzled glance as Antón now angry, shouts in her face, "The gold! You know what I'm talking about, woman! Where is it? Here the camera hovers on the woman's face, increasing the tension of the cringe-worthy moment. Just when the moment becomes too tense, Antón breaks character: "Who gives a shit about gold? I need a fucking drink!" Everyone laughs. He tosses an off-hand apology to the woman, noting that "actors are like this; we are purely selfish." She nods with an accommodating "de nada" as Bollaín cuts to a new scene.

In this fictional interaction between Columbus and a Taíno woman, it's impossible to miss the message: history repeats itself. Indeed, the scene's heavy-handed connection between colonialism past and neocolonialism present have invited narrow critiques that focus on how the film pits good (the locals) against evil (the outsiders) in a story of postcolonial redemption. Through Antón's antics, the scene calls attention to the origins of the relationship between the

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7 In citing dialogue from the film, I use the English language subtitling from the official DVD.

Spanish and the Tainos—the gold, the quest for it, and the global social-economic system it gives rise to. Patricia Seed has shown how the Spanish “encounter” with Tainos gave rise to a series of economic contributions that not only invented a flat “Indian” identity but also:

laid the groundwork for one of the basic principles of modern economics, namely the quantity theory of money: the argument that money supply has a direct proportional relationship with price level. The path from the ‘Indians’ of the Caribbean to market prices and the quantity theory of money was neither a direct nor an inevitable outcome. In its own fashion, however, the creation of conditions for using labour in the Caribbean—and the resulting invention of the ‘Indians’—created the possibility for a rethinking of economic principles and for the emergence of one founding principle of the economics of modern globalization (Seed 79).

The articulation of gold to “Indian,” made explicit in the scene through the earring attached to the woman’s ear lobe, gestures towards the globalization’s very origins while also looping us into the present.

More than simply inviting us to compare past with present, the scene dramatizes the very act of attempting to re-create a pre-colonial historical archive, which has long been complicit in the colonial project.<sup>8</sup> Simply, the first Spanish archivists of the Americas (priests who became historians) had little access to pre-contact indigenous texts; and what they did have, they interpreted selectively when archiving and transcribing. For example, Arias points out how colonial copies of the Nahuatl codices (*códices*) obscured women’s complex social, religious, and political roles before the arrival of Europeans: “There is no doubt that the zealous eye of the friars filtered representations of women according to Europe’s patriarchal structures and Christian moral values of medieval origin that served to justify the imposition of colonial structures” (Arias, Kindle ed. loc. 832). Antón’s choice to draw the female server into the scene and not her male co-worker is not random. In doing so, he not only participates in conflating Quecha and Taino into a singular category of “Indian” (see Seed), he also projects Eurocentric and patriarchal assumptions around female passivity, the ignorance of indigenous peoples, and their unquestioned availability to serve and advance Spain’s colonial ambitions. He is making an archive out of this woman, without her consent.

Reinforced by camera work that switches the point of view between Antón, the female server, and a third-party witnessing the scene (presumably Sebastián), the slippages between pasts and presents make viewers acutely aware of the power differences between the actors and the hotel staff, between men and women, and between the foreigners and indigenous Bolivians. Sadly, any potential for a decolonizing counter-narrative disappears beneath Antón’s flippant sorry-not-sorry apology and the server’s accommodating “de nada” as the scene closes, reinscribing the same ideas the film wants to contest—the story will be told by those with power.

María’s documentary filmmaking as a film-within-a-film-within-a-film invokes the “realism” of documentary as the clearest nod toward the constructedness of narratives and historical truths. Ironically, in María’s attempt to document “the truth,” her efforts further unmask the constructed and subjective nature of narrative and contingency of historical truth. If the truth is unstable, the truth can change, Bollain’s film dramatizes. Using camera angles, Bollain layers multiple points of view within single scenes. For example, in an opening scene, the camera cuts from a high-angle exterior shot of a SUV speeding through a tropical Bolivian landscape to a close-up of Costa, María and Sebastián inside the car, en route to Cochabamba. We see María in the backseat as she shoots footage for her “making of” documentary. The move from exterior to interior mirrors the genre switch between documentary and movie, between truth/objectivity and subjectivity. Switching into María’s directorial point of view, the scene cuts quickly to frame Sebastián in black and white. As the scene progresses, Bollain continues to flip between color and black and white. In these moments, the film posits interesting and complex questions about what constitutes documentary evidence and troubles the boundaries between the fictional “real” of the film’s story and pure fiction. Narrative destabilization hovers around questions of how collective memories are made and alchemized into historical records and archives—or not.

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8 See Arias.

As the film progresses, the sub-subplot of María's documentary ultimately switches from documenting the film-making process to focus on Daniel (Juan Carlos Aduviri), hired to play the Taino revolutionary Hatuey, as he becomes increasingly drawn into the local revolt over water rights. After a powerful scene in which the actors rehearse Padre Montesino's historic speech, while the camera flits back and forth between the re-enactment and the solemn, sweaty faces of the indigenous laborers working to construct the set, Bollain cuts directly to the black and white footage of María's documentary lens. The switch to black and white signals the change of time, place, and genre, a cut that is as jarring as it is connective. Through her camera, we see Daniel, megaphone in hand, on a city street, rallying a group of people. "They sell our wells, our lakes ... and even the rain that falls on our heads!" he shouts. Thematically, the cut juxtaposes Montesino's protest over the treatment of the indigenous and Daniel's contemporary social protest, eschewing temporal layering in favor of direct comparison. As Daniel utters the final line, the camera alternates between color and black and white, between both directorial gazes. The mashup continues as Daniel's speech gathers momentum and succeeds in emphasizing the difference between María's empathy and Costa's detachment toward the protest.

The rupturing of narrative by the formal intrusions of María's documentary provides the aesthetic structure for Costa's redemption narrative. The film's emotional center is ultimately located in Costa, as both agent of history and agent of change. While the metafilm follows a cosmopolitan view of colonial violence that casts an evil Columbus against Montesino's tragic do-goodery, Bollain's film strives for an agonistic mode, casting Costa as an ambivalent perpetrator. From the beginning, Costa has been the pragmatic voice of the bottom line, at times bordering on callousness. As the demonstration breaks up, María begs Costa to give her the time and resources necessary to film a documentary about the conflict. Costa forcibly dismisses her: "No, I'm not spending another penny." When she pushes: "I said no! I'm not a fucking NGO! This story has nothing to do with me," to which María responds, "But you're in the middle of it." Somewhat predictably, by the end of the film, Costa and Daniel have bonded through a sweet, but melodramatic plot device involving the rescue of Daniel's daughter. In the film's final scene, Daniel gives Costa a small glass flask filled with water, both as a thank you and as a talisman of memory, ensuring that even though the film project has been shut down in the wake of state violence, Costa will not forget his important lesson in human empathy.

At the end, the film locates the possibility of, and for, change in Costa's transformation. An opportunity to use both theme and form to re-center the film on Daniel and the indigenous community is jettisoned in service of Costa's sentimental journey; the ambivalent agonism of the film's memory work gives way to a cosmopolitan narrative of good triumphing over evil.

## CONQUISTADORA

Esmeralda Santiago's historical novel, *Conquistadora*, offers a transnational, multidimensional vision of Puerto Rico's colonial past, stretching from Spain to Puerto Rico and the United States, while the narrative's collective memory work creates a temporal palimpsest that attempts to destabilize the authority of the historical record. In combining the point of view of perpetrators and victims of colonial violence in ways that expand and complicate such labels, Santiago employs aesthetics of an ambivalent agonism to comment on the process of collective memory. Formal techniques such as defamiliarization, a multiplicity of voices, spatial-temporal layering, and intertextuality emplot a Latina genealogy through space and time and foreshadow at the same time they work backwards in a process of woman-centered historical recovery.

Esmeralda Santiago was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and moved to New York City with her family when she was thirteen. Her best-known work is a memoir of her immigrant experience, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993). This first installment in a series of autobiographical books has been widely taught in schools and universities as an example of women's life writing, Puerto Rican literature, literature of the diaspora, and in Latinx studies courses. As a result of her appeal to teachers and the mass market alike, María Acosta Cruz argues that Santiago is "probably the most famous Puerto Rican writer in the United States" (Acosta Cruz 162). Her memoirs are notable

for “the tone of nostalgia for the island’s old-timey ways” that often revels in lush and romantic imagery of an agrarian paradise that has lost its way (163).<sup>9</sup> Santiago’s latest installment of fictional memoir, *Conquistadora*, continues the tradition, established with *When I Was Puerto Rican*, of narrating personal history as collective history through the eyes of a female protagonist and set against a vivid island backdrop. Set (mostly) in Puerto Rico during the years 1826–1865, the novel follows the life of Ana Larragoity Cubillas de Aragosa, a tomboyish Spanish aristocrat, who marries into a family with a large hacienda in Puerto Rico. Eager for the adventures she’s read about in her ancestor’s journals, she and her husband (and her husband’s twin brother) set out to the colony. The sweeping historical romance, not entirely unlike *Gone With the Wind*,<sup>10</sup> covers the struggles and successes of running the Hacienda Los Gemelos plantation. Written mostly from Ana’s point of view, the novel features memorable moments of narrative shifts, constructed in the style of vignettes, written from the point of view of others (including Taíno natives, the slaves Jacobo, Yayo, Quique, and Flora, and the plantation’s overseer, Severo).

In the collective focus of women’s life-writing (the inclusion of different points of view, e.g.), such texts offer an opportunity to historicize experiences that are often neglected in official histories (Dentith and Dodd 6). Indeed, Santiago’s use of different points of view in *Conquistadora* follows in an important tradition of Puerto Rican literature made popular by Rosario Ferré’s successful story cycle *Maldito Amor* (1986). Of her female narrators in the book, Ferré has written: “son ellas las que ponen en entredicho la voz del novelista oficial y desafían el mito de cacique héroe” (Ferré 14) (They are the ones who put into doubt the official voice of the novelist and defy the myth of the hero-chief).<sup>11</sup> She goes on to specify how her female narrators accomplish this: “el lenguaje mismo constituye el centro de la disputa por el poder que llevan a cabo los personajes” (language itself is at the center of the character’s fight for power). It is into this tradition that Santiago clearly situates herself—one that Marisel Moreno argues has come to define post-1970s narratives by Puerto Rican women: “concealed visions, unexplored histories, silenced voices” and “a critique of historiography” (Moreno 92). These authors privilege a female voice for their narrators-protagonists whose engagement with “questions about the past, history, and cultural identity” underscore “their agency as historical actors,” thus challenging traditional assumptions around women’s life-writing (103, 100). In Santiago’s life-writing, Moreno identifies a desire to participate in a process of the historical recovery of “a U.S. Puerto Rican historiographic tradition” (97). In constructing a two-way genealogy of memoir that contracts inward from conquistador to conquistadora to Santiago and stretches outward from Santiago back to a pre-contact world, Santiago’s novel answers Moreno’s call for a greater attention to “the deeply intertwined relation between self and community, self-life-writing and social memory” (97).

The novel opens at the very moment of the first colonial encounter, November 19, 1493, the same moment *También la lluvia*’s metafilm attempts to recreate. The novel’s recreation of Columbus’s landing is told from the point of view of the indigenous Taínos. Here, it is language, not camera angles that draw the reader into their perspective:

They came from the sea, their battered sails and black hull menacing the indigo horizon ... The men who dropped from the ship were monstrous creatures with shiny carapaces on their chests, upon their heads, and around their arms and shins. They carried spears, flags, and crosses ... With these gifts, the *borinqueños* thought, these men encased in metal who rattled every time they moved would climb into their enormous sailed canoe and disappear into the same horizon that had delivered them, hopefully never to return (Santiago 1–2).

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9 While critics such as Sánchez González find, in Santiago’s fictionalized memoirs, the publishing industry’s commodification of a certain kind of “socially upward bound, ‘white,’ and ethnically glossed feminist allegories” distasteful in light of “the worsening poverty among Boricua woman and children collectively, in the United States” (11), commercial success also offers opportunities to leverage public visibility for Latinas in ways that are validating instead of exploitative.

10 From the *Publishers Weekly* review printed inside the book: “Santiago brings passion, color, and historical detail to this Puerto Rican *Gone With the Wind* [...]” (Santiago iii).

11 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

Defamiliarization allows the reader to envision the Spanish soldiers as Santiago imagines the *borinqueños* did: large, hulking, monstrous. From the eyes of the *borinqueños*, we are offered an alternative vision, one of confusion, violence, rape, and enslavement. By making strange a familiar story, Santiago, like *También la lluvia*, exposes official history as simply a point of view, not inviolable truth. What really happened” can also be a fiction and is contingent on who has the power to record. Defamiliarization’s distancing, as both effect and affect, moves the reader through time and space differently, from “an epistemic hierarchy that privileged western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies” (Grosfoguel 10), to an indigenous worldview with its own epistemic values and conceptions of space and time.

Defamiliarization maps an indigenous spacetime of conquest, reinforced by repetition that challenges a linear construction of time. The penultimate paragraph of the prologue narrates the genocide of the *borinqueños*:

The *borinqueños* began to die from diseases they’d never known and from infected wounds opened on their backs and arms and legs from whips they’d never experienced. They died in rebellions ... They died from exhaustion ... They died from terror ... They threw themselves into chasms ... They drowned in the sea ... They fled into the mountains ... They died of humiliation ... They died in such numbers that their language began to die ... (Santiago 3)

Repetition, in the form of anaphora and parallelism, emphasizes the pervasiveness of genocide and provides a grammar for the circular operations of time and memory, reflecting an indigenous worldview in which time and space are understood as circular, repetitive and interconnected. Furthermore, by introducing the nonlinear movements of time, Santiago establishes early that the narrative will take up the question of history repeating itself, much like *También la lluvia*.

Indeed, these opening pages recall the scene in *También la lluvia* when Antón defamiliarizes the hotel garden by jumping into the character of Columbus unexpectedly. Santiago’s narration creates a similar tension around the power relations at play. On the one hand, seeing the world through the eyes of 16<sup>th</sup> century Tainos creates opportunities for empathy-building and raising awareness. On the other, occupying the gaze of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Taino imagined for us by a contemporary Puerto Rican raises questions of cultural appropriation—who has the power to imagine whom, and who *historically* has had the power to imagine whom and how *historically* have they gone about it? Tricky stuff. While the novel doesn’t move so far as to link the genocide of indigenous people to contemporary exploitation, like *También la lluvia*, it does ask us to consider the similarities and the differences between Ana and someone like Santiago, a 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. Puerto Rican. What is the relationship, across time and space, between today’s Latinas and their Taino ancestors? A fascinating question that the novel ultimately swerves in favor of another: what is the relationship, across time and space, between today’s Latinas and their European female ancestors?

If multiple voices and perspectives are part of the *spatial aesthetics* of an ambivalent agonistic mode of remembering, prolepsis and analepsis make-up a *temporal aesthetics* of ambivalent agonism. Following the prologue, the main narrative jumps ahead in time to 1826, when Ana is a girl, dreaming of faraway adventures. Yet, the 16<sup>th</sup> century makes ghostly appearances in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, creating a temporal texturing of narrative pits individual agency against biological determinism. Ana’s wanderlust is framed as a 16<sup>th</sup> century ancestral inheritance: “Ana was a descendant of one of the first men to sail with the Grand Admiral of the Ocean Sea himself, don Cristóbal Colón” (9). And on her father’s side, Ana is related to three men who were amongst the first conquistadores, including one don Agustín, the only ancestor to survive his adventures and return to Spain. But Ana is no ordinary descendant. From the moment of her birth, the narrative suggests that somehow Ana has a greater affinity to these distant ancestors than even her own parents: “If Jesusa hadn’t suffered for twenty-nine hours to deliver her into the world, she wouldn’t have claimed the small-boned, black-haired, black-eyed girl who looked like no one but the portrait of don Agustín dominating the gallery” (10). The description of Ana’s physical appearance foreshadows her later obsession with her conquistador relatives. Exiled to her grandfather’s estate for the summer months, Ana discovers a chest containing the letters and journals of Hernán

Cubillas Cienfuegos, another ancestor who sailed the seas for Spain. Enthralled with this aspect of her heritage, Ana “spent hours reading his accounts, studying his drawings, trying to imagine what it was like for a pale, blue-eyed Spaniard to encounter the brown, black-eyed natives of the New World” (16). The phenotypic imagery in these early passages links Ana to the distant past of the black-eyed don Agustín and also foreshadows her connection to her future descendants. The contrasting imagery between the “pale, blue-eyed Spaniard” and Ana’s black hair and black eyes cannot be read outside of the context of the hierarchies of racial difference that colonialism brings to the New World.<sup>12</sup> The difference that Ana already recognizes as a child gestures forward to the racial logic of *mestizaje*, which continues to structure social life in Latin America and the Caribbean as part of the colonality of power, particularly in Caribbean national narratives of an internalized *mestizaje* that privileges being mixed-race over *mulataje*, silencing and obscuring Blackness and/or Indigeneity.<sup>13</sup>

The collapse of space and time into a textual palimpsest is embodied synecdochally in the ghostly hand of don Hernán: “[Ana] felt don Hernán’s hand reaching across the centuries toward her” (18). The complex layering of time and space that the image invokes include: Spain’s 16<sup>th</sup> century past; the past-as-family-genealogy; the narrative present of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the present moment of the book’s publication in 2011; and the reader’s present moment of reading. The passage gestures forwards to Ana’s destiny in Puerto Rico, her descendants, and generations of future readers. In that dark bedroom in 19<sup>th</sup> century Spain, other places lurk: the Spain of Ana’s ancestors; Puerto Rico as a Spanish colony; Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory; and the U.S. diaspora mixed-race Puerto Ricans, to which Santiago belongs.

Santiago invokes simultaneous flashforward and flashback later in the novel when Ana is an adult. If Ana’s childhood fascination with her ancestors casts her as subject to the operations of past, present, and future, as an adult, Ana is no longer the passive subject of history, caught in the ghostly grasp of her ancestors; she is actively aware of how her present is embedded in longer and larger histories:

History was both personal and universal, and Ana was conscious that it swirled inexorably whether people paid attention to it or not .... She envisioned someone standing in the same spot a century after herself wondering who else had stepped upon that ground, seen that tree, the pond, the stone shaped like a pyramid. Had her conquistador ancestors asked these questions so long ago when they stood on this land, so foreign, so far from Spain? (Santiago 164)

As she surveys her ambivalent success as *patrona*, she sees herself as an active agent of history, creating in her present moment the past that the future will contemplate, while simultaneously embodying the speculative future of her predecessors. Before she arrived in Puerto Rico, Ana’s conception of a collective past was limited to her framing of her personal ambition as an inheritance, passed down to her from a long line of conquistadores. However, the more time that she spends on the island, the more conscious she becomes of her individual complicity in the operations of history as well as her sense of the individual’s role in creating collective history. This history that is “both personal and universal,” “swirls” not in a linear progression from then to now, there to here, but through a more complex spatiotemporal web where the individual is ambivalently both subject and agent, individual and collective, victim and perpetrator. What the passages clearly side-step is any self-awareness on Ana’s part of her complicity in colonial violence. Perhaps it’s too much to ask from a 19<sup>th</sup> century protagonist—but is it too much to ask from Santiago?

As part of an ambivalent agonism, Ana’s ancestral, phenotypic, and imaginative connections to her conquistador ancestors cast her complexly as a perpetrator figure. On the one hand, as a woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century Spain, Ana feels the constraints of the gendered expectations and roles she’s meant to fulfill. She rejects the “cloistered” life of aristocratic femininity, she reads,

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12 See Anzaldúa, Castillo, and Lugones’s “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System” and “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.”

13 For elaboration on *mulataje* vs. *mestizaje*, see Buscaglia-Salgado 2003 and Martínez-San Miguel 2014.

she identifies with her adventurous male ancestors, and her first sexual encounters happen with her best friend, Elena.<sup>14</sup> When being generous, we might describe her characterization as unconventional, a would-be gender rebel negotiating her agency as best as she can. But, of course, she is still Spanish; she is still wealthy; she still becomes a colonial “landowner” (Spanish/colonial law prohibited women from owning land, but everyone in the novel recognizes Ana as the real boss); she still becomes a slave owner; she still beats her slaves and orders their public punishment (she feels bad about it but still does it). Without a doubt, she is a perpetrator of colonial violence. But is she just the “female” version of her ancestors? If Santiago suggests history as repetition with a difference, what difference does the difference make? What does the “a” of “conquistadora” signify? In the “a” of *conquistadora*, Santiago’s novel offers a woman-centered version of the colonial past and attempts to recover the lost histories of the colonial women who had no access to self-representation. Although we may wish that Ana had made different choices, had rebelled more forcefully against the injustices of her worlds, it’s Ana’s ambivalences that underline the uncertain role of those women who embodied racial and class privilege but endured the restrictions of patriarchy.

Through movements across space and time that implicate Spain, Africa, and the Caribbean of distant past, near past, present, and future, Santiago maps an ambivalent agonism that recalls what Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez calls “critical cartographies of racialization” as much as for what the text obscures as for what it alludes to. As a relational cartography, “critical cartographies of racialization for Afro-diasporic and exilic peoples outlines the unfixed racial and ethnic ontological and phenomenological experiences that emerge when moving across spatial and temporal locales” (9). Attention to the critical cartographies of racialization in Santiago’s novel offers a lens through which to question and complicate the Latina genealogy offered. Why does a novel that begins with an indigenous point of view and includes the voices of diasporic Africans in Puerto Rico ultimately use 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain as the prism through which Ana and her descendants are refracted?

It’s useful to take a closer look at how Santiago addresses an “Afro-Atlantic”<sup>15</sup> presence in her novel through the aesthetics of an ambivalent agonism. The chapter, “A Song for Mother Earth,” narrates the story of Flora, Ana’s personal slave and all-around housekeeper, through a third-person limited voice that nonetheless takes us deep into Flora’s mind. Flora recounts her early life along the Congo, her capture by Portuguese slavers, being auctioned and sold to various colonial masters until her arrival on Hacienda Los Gemelos. Through defamiliarization and juxtaposition, Santiago poses Flora’s coming-of-age *elima* ceremony with her Mbuti people as a counterpoint to her Christian baptism. While both are sacred rituals that mark significant transitions in a person’s life, Flora’s happy memories of the *elima* ceremony complicate her relationship to her new, colonial religion. Flora recounts her Christian baptism: “A man wearing black robes wet her head and made strange signs around her forehead and lips and said her name was now Flora” (Santiago 97). But Flora remembers: “Among her people, she was named Balekimito. When she was blessed with the blood, her clanswomen and friends celebrated Balekimito’s first menstrual period in the *elima* ceremony” (96). The passage goes on to describe the building of the *elima* hut and the training young women received from their female elders during the ritual. “The days in the *elima* house,” she recalls, “were the happiest time in Balekimito’s life” (*Ibid*). While Flora recalls her solitary and strange Christian baptism with a tone of detachment and passivity reinforced by defamiliarization—it was something incomprehensible that happened to her—the *elima* celebration is joyous and communal. It’s also important that Flora remembers her original name. The act of remembering her Mbuti name preserves a certain amount of, if not agency, at least some measure of internal resistance. Although she has little control over her physical life once she becomes a slave, her memories represent a rich interior world of memory and selfhood.

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14 “She was happier in the gardens, fields, and orchards around the farm than in the parqueted salons of Sevilla ... She was a girl, cloistered and swaddled in the expectations of her class, but she identified with the audacity of the conquistadors” (15, 17). In the chapter titled “Her First Love,” Santiago details Ana’s first sexual experiences with her best friend, Elena: “They explored each other with furtive, fluttery fingers, hot mouths on cool flesh, wet tongues in salty crevices. So much sensation left her weak” (18).

15 Figueroa-Vásquez uses the term “Afro-Atlantic” to “signal or claim afrodescendencia or Afro-descendance” as well as to name the forms of racialization and domination often expressed through anti-Blackness (3–4).

Indeed, Flora's memories show how Flora's life-writing unfolds across a different spatiotemporal organization than Ana's. Heterosexual, Christian marriage and the *elima* ceremony mark (or legitimize) women's sexuality, yet the ways in which they structure women's lives are profoundly different. For Ana, it is her marriage to Ramón that marks her passage from girl to woman, after which she is expected to inhabit an ever-diminishing world of home and family. Marriage is as much an ending as it is a beginning. In contrast, the *elima* ceremony celebrates a girl's entrance into a community of women and not the transfer of patriarchal responsibility from father to husband. Through the ceremony, girls are welcomed into a larger, bigger world of women. Their worlds expand instead of shrinking. In privileging a girl's first menstruation amongst her clanswomen over (or at least in addition to) her marriage, the *elima* ceremony also speaks to an alternate view of human development and the passage of time, one that is more communal than it is individual and in which a woman's sexuality is an occasion for celebration and not something that should be contained as soon as possible through marriage to a man. While the simple fact of Flora's memory might not be enough to call "resistance," given the other ways in which Flora's life on the plantation is so thoroughly dictated by the violence of the colonial project, it does offer a living, alternative vision of life outside of colonialism.

It's worth noting that Santiago begins Flora's story in the time and place *before* her slave life. Instead of collapsing slave life into a static narrative of victimhood, eschewing a cosmopolitan mode of remembering for the transnational, transtemporal memory that offers an ambivalent agonism as a more productive lens through which to consider Flora's subjectivity as an enslaved woman in Santiago's narrative. Flora's life did not begin when she became a slave, but it also did not end. Ultimately, the novel positions Flora ambivalently as *mostly* subject/victim to history (and the narrative) and the inclusion of her story, although lyrical and rich, can't compete when Ana takes up so much narrative space.

If "A Song for Mother Earth" offers the possibility for multiple perspectives on Puerto Rican history that complicate both official histories and Ana-as-perpetrator's account of the past, it's, nonetheless, valid and valuable to consider the limitations of appropriating an enslaved woman's voice by a mixed-race 21<sup>st</sup> century writer. It matters because of the nature of the historical archive on enslaved people, particularly women, from the Caribbean. As [Marisa J. Fuentes](#) makes clear in *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, we have little historical record of enslaved women's voices that was not provided by white colonial slaveowners (men and women) and that has not been reconstructed and analyzed through limiting methodologies of white supremacy or the desire to recover that which may be unrecoverable. Fuentes's work asks us to consider how "slaveholders' interests affect how they document their world, and in turn, how do these very documents result in persistent historical silences" ([Fuentes 9](#)). Of course, Santiago is writing a novel and purposefully engaging in acts of imagination, which is a different kind of project and different kind of document than the ones Fuentes considers. Yet, the question of Santiago's positionality, in regard to the voices of enslaved women, offers a productive entry to an interesting conversation. We might ask, does Santiago's novel replicate forms of gendered and racialized colonial violence in its narration? How do we think through the presence of brief moments of indigenous and black voices in a novel so thoroughly dominated by a white slaveholder's voice? When, where and how do unequal power relations, both historic and current, ask us to reconsider who and what an artist can imagine in their art? These intriguing questions are best unearthed through ambivalent agonism's attention to multiplicity, conflict, and context.

## CONCLUSION

*También la lluvia* and *Conquistadora* set out to critique colonialism's master narratives and its modern-day iterations, encouraging us to revision how we imagine the past, as individuals and collectively. Modeling an ambivalent agonism in narratives of collective and individual memory work, both texts engage different points of view to point to the constructed nature of historical narratives. In doing so, both texts engage the colonial past transnationally and transtemporally, using aesthetics to demand, as the Chicano literary historian [Louis Mendoza](#) argues, that historical narratives about the past, both real and fictional, demand an attention to "how style, purpose, and

context function to facilitate and/or constrain our understanding of the past” (15). The aesthetics of ambivalent agonism at work in each text invite us to question what constitutes historical truth and expose the constructed nature of historical narrative text. They enable moments of narrative destabilization where the slippage between the real and the fabricated reveal how power operates through racial and gender privilege to control the historical record. Ironically, however, these same mechanisms can also be turned back on the texts themselves, revealing how both replicate and perform certain aspects of the coloniality of power.<sup>16</sup>

As ambivalent perpetrators of neocolonial and colonial violence, Costa and Ana are meant to embody an agonistic mode of remembering. On the one hand, they are well-positioned to undertake the kind of complex memory work championed by agonism. They are “figure[s] around through which the work of cultural memory can be conducted, and by which transcultural, comparative work might take place—a node around which productive tensions and asymmetries between the remembrances of past events can be generated” (Crowshaw 75). It is uncomfortably ironic, however, that both Bollaín and Santiago undertake a critique of Spanish colonialism and its legacies through singular, sympathetic Spanish protagonists. Costa’s lesson in empathy comes at a cost, as does the choice to place a Spanish aristocrat at the center of a novel about Puerto Rico’s colonial past.

While the destabilization of master, national narratives could create a decolonizing opportunity for narratives from the bottom up, Bollaín and Santiago fall back on sentimental narrative structures that reinforce their Spanish protagonist’s centrality while side-lining other voices. *También la lluvia*’s closing gesture inscribes Costa as an agent of change, but an individual change that begins from within and thus relies on the redemption narrative. Bolivia’s indigenous community pays the price for Costa’s change, both literally and figuratively. *Conquistadora* figures the female individual as agent of historical change who comes to stand in for a collective, transnational women’s history, albeit it one that only superficially and tangentially confronts the racial reality of the Afro-Atlantic for Caribbean and Latin women. Furthermore, the very qualities that make Ana complex embroil her in a plantation-*telenovela* melodrama that dilutes the novel’s transformative potential.

Despite *and* because of their shortcomings, the two projects demonstrate the potential of an ambivalent agonism as a mode of remembering. The aesthetics of ambivalent agonism offer opportunities to account for multiple voices, including perpetrators and third-party witnesses, intersection of personal and collective memory as part of multi-dimensional narrative structures that encourage layering over linearity, in order to critique the past-as-privilege, a space and time molded and maintained by those with power.

## EPIGRAPH

*Sabe bisabuela, I just barely thought about you tonight  
For the first time considered I might be related to you  
Because we mestiza cafecitas con high cheekbones believe  
We’re almost ninety-nine percent Indian  
And we may be ninety-nine percent right*

From “Preguntas y frases para una bisabuela española” (Questions and lines for a Spanish great-grandmother) by [Teresa Paloma Acosta](#).

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<sup>16</sup> See Pérez and [Lugones](#) for their theorizing of the decolonializing potential of counter-narratives.

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15

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