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### The Decolonial Imaginary in *Forgetting the Alamo*

Historical fictions are very real to many and serve as a confirmation of their existence in the past, especially for those whose identities are underrepresented in mainstream history. In the novel *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory*, Emma Pérez tells the adventurous story of a queer Tejana in the nineteenth century, who travels throughout la frontera and experiences the complexity of the region's peoples along the way. She focuses on characters that contest traditional representations by using storytelling to reveal their own identities and connections to mestizaje. Pérez creates a historical record of these underrepresented identities and influences the understanding of history through an alternative historical consciousness. From this alternative historical consciousness emerges Pérez's concept of the decolonial imaginary, where underrepresented groups claim agency and negotiate the parameters of historical discourse.

In *Forgetting the Alamo*, Pérez presents the decolonial imaginary, which is a concept that she has developed in her scholarly work. In *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History*, Emma Pérez seeks to reconceptualize Chicano/a history. Broadly, she describes the traditional representations of Chicano/as in history and acknowledges the historical silencing of those within this group. But her main focus is on the decolonial imaginary, described as “a theoretical tool for uncovering the hidden voices of Chicanas that have been regulated to silences, to passivity” (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 6). Pérez explains that this concept is truly abstract because it is an imaginary space where written history is disturbed and an alternative is offered (8). This idea of an alternative is further explored in Pérez's historical novel, *Forgetting*

*the Alamo*, where she establishes a historical record of underrepresented identities that contests traditional representations and reflects an alternative historical consciousness.

To the first point, in the novel Pérez introduces characters with underrepresented identities who tell their own stories to refute others' preconceived ideas, which establishes an authentic historical record of their existence. Creating a historical record is discussed in Catrióna Rueda Esquibel's work on the role of Chicana lesbian fictions in addressing historical erasures. She argues that historically underrepresented groups, specifically Chicana lesbians, understand fiction as a form of written history that recognizes their lives and existence in the past (260). In other words, where mainstream history often misrepresents or excludes marginalized groups, "fiction" becomes a truly representative historical record. In *Forgetting the Alamo*, Pérez presents a record of Black people, indigenous groups, Tejanos, and mestizos. These identities are represented by characters whom the narrator, Micaela Campos, encounters as she journeys across Texas in 1836.

One scene that introduces a historical record begins when Micaela happens upon a horse stable and meets an enslaved man named Lucius. As he introduces himself, Micaela realizes that she has heard about him before and was told that he had escaped to Mexico. But Lucius reveals that what she had been told were lies, he was actually just sold to another slave owner. Later, Lucius tells Micaela the true story of his life: how he had traveled across Texas with a Comanche woman whom he loved, but she was raped to death by white marauders and scalped (*Forgetting the Alamo* 101-4). This scene presented a character who disproved an inauthentic version of history and told his truth, which embraced miscegenation and acknowledged that Black Texans existed, loved, and even lived freely at this point in history. Through her detailed writing of this

character's story Pérez creates a historical record of an underrepresented identity, which, as Rueda Esquibel would say, is “no less ‘real’ for being fiction” (260).

A historical record is established in another part of the novel, where Micaela narrates the story of her mother, Ursula. She explains that her mother's family is from Bexar, a place with a complex history of mestizaje, or ethnic mixing. She describes how people would gossip about Ursula's identity: saying she was india, a descendant of Tonkawa, or that she was mulatta, a descendant of Spanish Moors. Micaela notes that even Ursula's family tried to define her identity by claiming that she was a pure Spaniard descended from Canary Islanders. But Micaela concludes that her mother simply defined her own identity as Bexareña (*Forgetting the Alamo* 19). Pérez's characterization of Ursula presents specific details about mestizo identity and the various ethnic groups that can mix to form it, which creates a historical record of this underrepresented group. Furthermore, Ursula's character contests others' ideas about her identity by telling her own story and defining herself as Bexareña. While Pérez uses stories to create an authentic record of underrepresented identities, she also uses this record to reflect an alternative historical consciousness.

To the next point, in *Forgetting the Alamo* Pérez establishes a historical record of underrepresented identities and uses nontraditional representations to reflect an alternative historical consciousness. Pérez defines this concept in her scholarly work, stating that history is a common past through which people understand themselves as a collective, so “historical consciousness is the system of thought that leads to a normative understanding of past events” (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 11). But *Forgetting the Alamo* influences this understanding of the past through a historical record which represents identities differently than traditional discourse, thereby reflecting an alternative historical consciousness. For instance, in the aforementioned

scene where the character Lucius reveals that he did not try to escape to Mexico, he tells his true story and offers a nontraditional representation of Black people. While historical representations of Black people in the early nineteenth century often focus on enslavement, Lucius' story is about freedom, love, and loss. This nontraditional representation affects the normative understanding of Black history, reflecting an alternative historical consciousness.

In addition to this representation of Black people, the novel's historical record includes nontraditional representations of race and ethnicity through mestizaje, which reflects an alternative historical consciousness. This alternative consciousness appears in the telling of Ursula's story, the narrator's Bexareña mother. As mentioned before, Ursula identifies herself as Bexareña, despite those who want to classify her with one sole identity. This character's unique identity can be understood further through Raúl Ramos' historical research on the past social structure of Bexar, a region of Texas, and the relationships between its people. He notes that in this region there were people of indigenous, European, and African descent all in close proximity during the nineteenth century, resulting in mestizaje. While it is true that colonization prompted miscegenation and ultimately racialization throughout the Americas, Ramos presents evidence that Bexar had a distinct racial mixing and unique ideas about race. He suggests that Bexar's system was similar to *casta* in Latin America because it identified many different categories of mestizaje. But in Bexar, race and ethnicity were more fluid and less important in structuring society (64-5).

In *Forgetting the Alamo* this unique fluidity is presented through Ursula's character who is identified by others as either Indian, Black, or Spanish, and who also emphasizes the unimportance of racial caste by simply not self-identifying as a single race. This representation of race and ethnicity contrasts that of traditional historical discourse in America, which often

recognizes racial identity linearly and underlines the importance of race in structuring society. Ursula's non-racial identity, as a mestiza, offers a nontraditional representation of race where lines are blurred, classifications are often arbitrary, and society can function fine without rigid racial groups. Furthermore, this historical record of mestizaje reflects an alternative historical consciousness by influencing the normative understanding of race and ethnicity in history. From these two ideas, historical record and alternative historical consciousness, emerges the concept of the decolonial imaginary.

In order to tie all of these ideas from the novel together, Pérez's concept of the decolonial imaginary must be revisited. But this decolonization cannot be understood without first examining how mainstream history exists in a colonial imaginary. The role of colonization in historical discourse is examined by another scholar, Louis Gerard Mendoza, who writes about the different approaches to Chicano/a traditional history and literary history. He explains how mainstream historians have neglected to situate the history of the nineteenth century American Southwest within the scope of the American colonial era. When in reality, he notes, during this time period people in the southwest, particularly Mexican descendants, experienced something very similar to colonization. Mendoza considers this experience's lasting effects as the present social, economic, and political inequalities that exist between Euro-Americans and various ethnic groups (29). This misrepresentation of Southwest history raises questions about the ability of mainstream historians to manipulate historical discourse and what their reasons are for doing so.

Understanding the colonial imaginary requires a critical examination of how mainstream history is told, as well as the purpose of approaching history in a particular way. In Mendoza's work, he claims that mainstream historians often use "assumptions about the perceived 'weak' and the assumed 'powerful' in order to 'naturalize' unequal social relations between the

dominant and subordinate cultures” (20). In the context of *Forgetting the Alamo*, this idea arises when the character’s stories contest mainstream representations of certain identities, specifically of Black people and mestizos. As mentioned previously, mainstream history often promotes the narrative of enslavement when writing about Black people and it tends to write about race and ethnicity within a rigid hierarchy. Through Mendoza’s eyes, it can be understood that these traditional tellings of history focus on power dynamics, in enslavement and racial hierarchies, perhaps to normalize the disparities that have persisted for so long. This sheds light on the role of mainstream historians in shaping historical discourse and sustaining normative social structures.

The approach that mainstream historians take in telling history, one that often misrepresents events and manipulates narratives, reflects the colonial imaginary. Pérez clarifies this idea in her work, claiming that traditional historians seek to objectively write about southwest history, but even when their work is full of coloniality, they can ignore it because they have accepted colonial relations as the norm (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 10). So, the question remains as to what can be done to rectify this approach to history. Before proposing a solution, Pérez notes that the colonial imaginary accepts established power dynamics and maintains the colonial object. She states that while the colonial imaginary does not attempt to reconstruct these relations, the decolonial imaginary does. The decolonial imaginary, as explained by Pérez, “challenges power relations to decolonize notions of otherness to move into a liberatory terrain” (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 70). This solution attempts to reconceptualize history and present an alternative, which is exactly what is presented in Pérez’s historical novel of nineteenth century Texas.

In *Forgetting the Alamo*, Pérez establishes a historical record of underrepresented identities that differs from traditional representations and reflects an alternative historical

consciousness, which ultimately presents the decolonial imaginary. As mentioned previously, Pérez defines the decolonial imaginary as a way to uncover the silenced voices of certain identities (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 6). The decolonial imaginary is used in this way throughout *Forgetting the Alamo*, as stories from underrepresented identities are uncovered to create a historical record of their lives. As explained by Rueda Esquibel, this historical record can be understood as truth, despite being formed within a “fiction.” In this true record, underrepresented identities become subjects rather than objects of history and can confirm their existence in the past. Pérez presents their existence in a way that contests traditional representations, reflecting an alternative historical consciousness. This alternative consciousness allows silenced identities to break free of passivity and tell their own authentic stories, to ultimately shape the normative understanding of history. The reconstructing of history exists within the decolonial imaginary, which seeks to present an alternative to history where underrepresented groups claim agency and negotiate the parameters of historical discourse.

Pérez’s historical novel about nineteenth century Texas privileges historically silenced peoples, specifically Blacks and mestizos, giving them authority in telling their own histories. Narratives that uncover these silences have the ability, as Mendoza notes, to alter “our prior understanding of the past for the insight that such a reconstruction can offer to the present moment” (29). Authors, like Pérez, who write historical novels in the decolonial imaginary have the power to change the present through their telling of history. The way that history is understood now has serious implications, which Mendoza describes when he expresses that marginalized groups often depend on the dominant group for institutionalized education, which can result in marginalized groups adopting a self-hating perspective (21). To ensure that underrepresented identities know their true histories and can feel proud of their heritages,

historians and novelists must continue to write within the decolonial imaginary. Pérez's queer Tejana narrator expresses this sentiment clearly in the epilogue, where she says that her children represent the future generations and she, not the colonialists, must tell them her people's stories so that they won't be forgotten (*Forgetting the Alamo* 206).



## Works Cited

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