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# Knots in the Throat: Raquel Salas Rivera's Ballasted Entanglements

> Ordered movement, configured as liberal freedom corporealized, requires ballast.
> —Mary Pat Brady, *Scales of Captivity: Racial Capitalism and the Latinx Child*

> This condition of overlapping recurrences is indicated by the term "entanglement," which is invoked, first and foremost, to suggest a topological looping together that is at the same time an enmeshment of topics. Beyond this intimation of a tangle, of things held together or laid over one another in nearness and likeness, my aim is to ask if entanglement could not also be a figure for meetings that are not necessarily defined by proximity or affinity. What kinds of entanglements might be conceivable through partition and partiality rather than conjunction and intersection, and through disparity rather than equivalence?
> —Rey Chow, *Entanglements, Or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*

Raquel Salas Rivera's poetry offers a distinctly gendered translation of anticolonial ethos rendered in verse. This essay concerns itself with the tropes and textures of Raquel Salas Rivera's poetry that coincide with his return to Puerto Rico, a return that registers in bilingual lyric ongoing anticolonial and trans movements on the island. Salas Rivera inscribes figural knots that both refuse and suture readings across *Preguntas frecuentes* and *X/Ex/Exis*. In this essay, Salas Rivera's self-translation notes serve as a hermeneutic provocation.[1] Salas Rivera calls his use of untranslated words *knots*, which creates a poetics of critical anticolonial translation of the self *not* in service of the language of access—English. And while the self becomes translated as the textures of language become more felt, English and Spanish enmesh such that no pre-existing self comes to the fore. This poetics negotiates a translational praxis and trans poetics wherein

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ABSTRACT This essay concentrates on the figural knots that both refuse and suture readings across Raquel Salas Rivera's *Preguntas frecuentes* and *X/Ex/Exis.* Tracing self-translations, the essay reads how Salas Rivera steals back from English and binary gender in the poetic and translation decisions to withhold, or hold onto, loss as itself incommensurable or untranslatable. His poetics situates Latinx at the hinge and limit of two colonial languages, requiring us to contend with ongoing problems of reference and translation. Through material tropes, Salas Rivera's poetry registers entanglements and displacements of colonial grammars, transgender terms, and the material remains of empire. Representations 162. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 109–24. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.162.8.109.

exposure and understanding are denied as telos. In place of the self revealed, we find a material and poetic return to an island that yet again registers the tensions between two deeply colonial languages. Salas Rivera's poetry asks us to read negotiations of the *x* in *Latinx* in the particular place of present-day Puerto Rico—where the *x* is only ever at the hinge of two colonial grammars. Like Puerto Rico's current status as an unincorporated territory of the US, the *x* of *Latinx* becomes delinked from the US and Latin America. Salas Rivera's poetry asks us to consider the *x* as yet another knot, an untranslated gender that truly has no original. These untranslated words, or knots, are weighted by the materials of coloniality: ballast carried from Europe to the island on ships, the foundational problem of their grounding allure in the form of Old San Juan's roads, and the colonial grammars that subtend most gendered terms. Recursive and ongoing coloniality endures in Puerto Rico, and Salas Rivera figures this material substratum that underlies so much of quotidian life in the island through a poetic thinking of Puerto Rican debt.

In order to tease out the problem of translation for gender in coloniality, in terms of exposure and one-to-one correlations, Salas Rivera writes translation notes that concentrate on the figure of a knot. Offering a foundational, material example of what he refuses to translate, Salas Rivera comments on the stones of Old San Juan as one such knot:

> Even though *adoquines* are *cobblestones*, *my adoquines*, the ones I stumbled over on my way to and from the water, could never bear the word *cobblestone*. Sometimes the word in Spanish is so enmeshed with the poem's life, that changing it would be painful. I call these untranslated words *knots*.[2]

The fabled adoquines of Old San Juan share the color of the ocean—an iridescent, opulent blue that shimmers across the old colonial streets. Most assume that the adoquines came to the island as ballast from Spanish colonial ships, but the bricks came from England over a span of years before the island's relationship to the English language itself radically shifted: 1890–96. The literal translation, *cobblestones*, reveals as much as it obscures. What does it mean to resist the narrative, colonial, poetic, and linguistic closure here that renders *adoquines* as *cobblestones*? English is doubly denied, whether by intention or linguistic felicity: denied both original emplotment and the weight of originality. English loses its stability and foundational posture.

How, then, do we read the bluish, or *azulado*, adoquines as knots? What I am after here with these adoquines is neither finding the right reference nor even tracking back to an origin. Rather, I wonder how the material provenance may inflect our reading of these beautiful blue adoquines. I want to consider the material and historical weight that pulls adoquines/cobblestones into the economic and violent exchanges of two colonialities.

In this hostile meeting ground between two languages, we read various forms of transport, transition, and transmogrification—translations across differently gendered languages and torqued translational choices that reveal a gendered negotiation between two deeply colonial languages. Adoquines both figure untranslatability—exemplify what would be painful to translate into English—and index the material history of Old San Juan's trade and infrastructure. The colonial ballast acquired in 1890–96 becomes the figurative resistance to the English linguistic dominance that creates demands for translation as exposure: to make oneself and one's foundations legible to the English language. What I want to emphasize is that the material history of the adoquines becomes all the more traceable when not translated. That is, the knot of translation in the decision to keep adoquines as *adoquines* in the English translation of the poem is, perhaps, the only reason I was able to chase after the matter of their provenance. This resistance to translation, this knot-cobblestone, led me to see how British colonialism haunts imperial prejudice. The mythical colonial ballast is actually a waste product, and yet that blue mythos becomes undeniably part of the colonial allure necessary for a tertiary economy.[3]

## Material Tracks

The adoquines of Old San Juan were an early infrastructure project: roads were first paved with wood, then granite blocks (called *chinos*), and finally the adoquines that concern this essay, ordered from the Huntly Brothers of Sunderland, in England. A report titled "Adoquines de Escoria de San Juan" (San Juan's cobblestones of waste) shows an even stranger provenance:

> With the evidence found in the files that we examined in the General Archive of Puerto Rico we have determined that the "bluish" cobblestones that we admire so much—visitors, locals, and foreigners alike—were made of iron slag in some foundry in Sunderland, England, or its vicinity. Later, and in communication with the Sunderland Borough Library, we learned that Huntly Brothers was an export house, mainly of coal, and not a factory. As Mr. Simon Weathers let us know of that library, "there were several iron companies within a couple of miles of Sunderland where the slag blocks could have been produced as a byproduct; and it is likely, given your business, that Huntley Brothers saw an opportunity to export them."[4]

The slag blocks are byproducts of industry—they are the stone-like waste materials produced by iron smelting or the refinement of ore. As the Huntly Brothers mostly exported coal, they found an opportunity to profit off industrial waste.[5] As this profitable exporting of other companies' waste materials shows, what was exported to the colonies bore an inverse relation to what was extracted. Even though these adoquines are neither exactly cobblestones nor ballast, they are stones from England—stones of waste. And anything transported on a nineteenth-century boat would still have required the balancing of ballast to make the trip and would have contributed weight to be taken into account. Such ballast accounts are archives of cruelty—specifically in the form of coloniality and enslavement. Lolita Buckner Innis reminds us of the legal register of ballast:

> Despite changes in methods and materials over the centuries, the purpose of ballast has remained constant: ballast helps to weigh down or steady ships that have empty or variably weighted cargo holds. This purpose made ballast a manifest symbol and often a signal evidence of the transatlantic slave trade, and of that trade's engagement with international law.[6]

In this way, the adoquines lose their ballast in both languages and become entangled in the trade in waste and bodies that required cruel and exact measurements: physical balance by way of the meting out of weight and counterweight.[7] Whether literal or mythical ballast, the coloniality that trafficked in enslaved bodies haunts the adoquines that line the streets of Old San Juan.

Salas Rivera may figure these adoquines as too painful to translate, but their provenance shows that pain and violence are foundational to the colonial infrastructure that underlies their materiality. The untranslated adoquines allow one to track the British coloniality underfoot. His deft translation decisions resist the pressure to translate for the pleasure and consumption of monolingual English speakers, his poetry keenly alert to how translation into English can operate as extraction—a marketing of Puerto Rican difference rendered fully translated—with diminishing returns. This is an indebted landscape where Salas Rivera steals back from English in the poetic decisions to withhold, or hold onto, loss as itself incommensurable or untranslatable. In my other writing on his poetry, I have been struck by his attention to figuration, the tension between Spanish and English, and the demonstration, through catachrestic evocations, of how loss itself is incommensurate.[8] These catachrestic figures, like pink plantains, which do not exist and therefore have no literal referent, are stitched into poetry that traffics in nothings and negativities that cannot be equated at the level of scale. By creating a nothing that doesn't exist, alongside nothings or debts that deprive, his poetics figures the differences between poetic figurations of nothing and material investments that create nothing, or less than nothing. Salas Rivera's poetic thinking of incommensurability leads me to consider figures of colonial substratum and also fascism, as this poetry will begin to direct our attention to the ongoing threat of bombs.

At the beginning of his translation notes cited above Salas Rivera writes:

> Translating my own poetry has been a way of healing my relationship with a bilingual self who struggled intensely to learn standardized dialects of both languages. After living out my elementary school years in the US, I was unprepared for high school in Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico. Having acquired an undergraduate degree in Puerto Rico, I was unprepared for graduate school in Philadelphia. . . . My bilingualism was treated by my teachers, professors and peers as something that had to be contained, a *dangerous and infectious substance*. Each language could *spill* into the other, leaving unwanted traces and incomprehensible words.[9]

Unwanted traces of incomprehensible words mark Salas Rivera's poetics, which may signal some kind of relational reparation in the form of language. And yet this uncontainable and dangerous, infectious substance spills over, sullying the two colonial languages, English and Spanish, entangled in the history of Puerto Rico's unincorporated commonwealth.

Salas Rivera's work is written under the shadow of debt, a debt that Rocío Zambrana reads as anchored in or extracted from race and gender in the colonial maelstrom that promises oversight and instead imposes debt to secure speculative finance.[10] Colonial knots resurface in this poetics that posits a *cuir*, or queer, trans difference—one that tarries with difference as a matter of translation. Entangling language, embodiment, and material structure, Salas Rivera figures visceral knots. By calling these knots visceral, I center the body in Salas Rivera's poetry in an engagement with Neetu Khanna's notion of visceral decolonial affect.[11] The knots register plural presents, and in them we may begin to see the embodied and enunciated entanglements of Salas Rivera's poems. He writes:

> This translation's unruly *knots* resist assimilation and loss and, in some ways, visibilize it as illegibility. They are ghostly traces of the original poem and the traumatic linguistic labor of making oneself legible at the expense of losing connection to the world in which the poems once reverberated. Specifically, that world is Puerto Rico. While translation has helped me heal my relationship with a bilingual self, this has been possible because it has simultaneously given me the room to acknowledge that home is still measured in *yearned adoquines*.[12]

English loses its ballast, and home is measured in *yearned adoquines*—this untranslated notion of desire for home that steals from English and creates sutures where one often finds cuts. The adoquines here function within two radically entangled colonialities that necessitate a thinking of ballast and ship freight in the lead-up to the *adoquinando*, or paving, of Old San Juan: the poetic entanglement that does not stay in place, in Spanish, by staying in Spanish but, rather, exceeds its own inscription. This leads us to fundamental questions about whether a figure registers as anticolonial or fundamentally colonial.

## Colonial Grammars

Thinkers like C. Riley Snorton and Meredith Lee showcase how sexology, eugenics, and coloniality are at play in the matrix and genealogy of trans.[13] In this vein of trans critique, Che Gossett and Eva Hayward elaborate on the task of a trans heuristic that accounts for the colonial and anti-Black underpinnings of all gendered articulation. They chart a trans heuristic that may help to consider the operations of coloniality in the movement of a thinking the impossibility of another order, of one that exceeds our order of things. Thinking from this order to one that exceeds our own suggests movement and change: "*This*-to-*that* suggests transit, transformation, trans-differentiation as a trans-heuristic that does not transcend the colonial project but reveals the force, the process, and the material constraints of trans."[14] While trans does signal a movement in and of gender, this movement is not free of constraint, not untethered from colonial conscription.

With this colonial grammar in mind, let us return to the question of transgender and translation in Salas Rivera's knotted poetry. The two terms are most obviously connected through the prefix *trans*. If we understand the linguistic violence of English's dominance and its need for immediate and near total access vis-à-vis translation, then we also find a parallel (if not commensurate) problem of access to intelligibility for all trans folks who, by dint of being non-cis, are called to account for their gendered selves, experiences, interiorities, and proper nominalizations/pronouns far more than any cisgender person would ever be queried. We may read Salas Rivera's title *Preguntas frecuentes*, or frequently asked questions, with some level of trepidation, knowing how often a trans person is questioned and asked to account for their noticeable difference. *Preguntas frecuentes* was published in 2019 by La Impresora, a small print press in Isabela, as a standalone poem on broadside whose inverted folds turn it into something that resembles a pamphlet. The poem's form recalls the broadside distributed in streets between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries—a technology of the print press and not of the digital world. My copy of the poem folds in such a way that there are two covers: one in black ink (English) and one in green ink (Spanish). Because the paper itself is a light green, the Spanish feels more merged with page, while the English takes a bold and traditional ink: black. The poem's self-translated difference is discernible not only in language and ink color but also in the physical act of reading across languages. This feat requires different embodied maneuvers to read the two poems in relation to one another, creating a disorientation that refuses the side by side of many bilingual editions, including some of Salas Rivera's own published collections. And to read between the two languages, in this format, requires the body, arms holding the poem at a remove from the face, to perpetually flip the page because the two languages are inverted—a further embodied hindrance to seamless reading, seamless translation, seamless comparison. Spanish and English have an inverted, asymmetrical scale, with the laughs paying off in Spanish. Often, in these self-translations, jokes can be a bit bereft in English or, as Salas Rivera more aptly names it, "Inglich," favoring the laughter that comes with recreating English's proper name with a phonetic spelling more akin to a Spanish accent. In this bilingually rendered and enfolded poem, to turn the page does not equate to making progress poetically or historically. The next page must be turned to and turned over again.

In opposition to this broadside letterpress format, the poem's title conjures an almost corporate interface that, in its façade, creates a strange distance: what follows is not the easy legibility of frequently asked questions (with short and punchy answers). And yet the title phantasmatically conjures "FAQs" waged against trans people. Here, what gets tracked are the possibilities of pronoun and gender in each language but also more generally the always already problem of translation that gender maintains.

The poem begins with a line that invokes a line:

| Preguntas Frecuentes | Frequently Asked Questions |
|---|---|
| un nudo es una línea cuir | a knot is a queer line |
| | |
| en inglés | in english |
| línea no tiene género | line has no gender |
| en español línea | in spanish line |
| es feminina dentro del idioma | is feminine within language |
| un nudo | a knot |

If a knot is a queer, that is, not a straight and not an untangled, line, then we understand that there might be something queer about the knots of untranslated words. This knot unfurls into different languages, the lyrical line split in a gendered way. Yet a *line* is only gendered in "spanish" and only grammatically gendered. Note, too, that *queer* in English does translate to the Spanish, where *cuir* replaces the English export of a Global Northern gendered vernacular: *queer*. This figuration of gender is within a language, doubly—and this doubling is doubled again in translation:

| | |
|---|---|
| dentro de un idioma | within a language |
| dentro de un idioma | within a language |
| (una x dentro | (an x within |
| de un puerto rico | a puerto rico |
| dentro de un español) | within a spanish) |
| | |
| en el trap | in trap |
| un género | a gen(d)re |

Parenthetically, an *x* appears "within a puerto rico, within a spanish." Both the island-nation and the language are given indefinite articles, rendered into quotidian, rather than proper, nouns. An island is encased by a language, doubly. Within these two encasings, one may find an *x*. But all of this we may find in *el trap/trap*. Note the addition between the Spanish and English. The *trap* in Spanish requires a definite article, a definite article that could appear in English but does not. If it did, it would make one trap and could not connote trap music in Spanish. The subtlety of an incommensurate translation in *trap* or *en el trap* creates a dissonance between the two languages. It also registers the sonic in Spanish and imports the English as its own beat. In the following line, the balance is renegotiated so that Spanish makes polysemous sense of *genre* and *gender* in one word: *género*. And yet every importation of gender as a concept is a recent intrusion or translation into language.[15] In this translation, Salas Rivera adds a *(d)* to the English version to make *gender* heard in *genre*, to bring out the Latin root that makes a confluence of generic form and grammatical gender. Gendered possibilities are radically different in each language, and we see, at least here, that English lacks some gender play in its supposedly neutered terrain. It is, of course, no trick or minor detail that *trap* looms as both music and as a mode of enclosure and attack. Trans studies, in particular, has thought through the trap of visibility—noting how the trans tipping point coincides with virulent anti-trans legislation and transphobic violence carried out extralegally.[16] Francisco Galarte marks the trap as a particular problem for the narrativization of trans lives, noting that such tropological encasements can often turn into traps. And yet *trap* here is both music and captivity, both aesthetic form and gender's tropological encasements.

Salas Rivera writes in a more dialect-spanish—within a language, which is within a language. It's not within Spanish generally, but within a "puerto rico," and there we may occasion to think *x*, but only within a language within a language—and, further, unincorporated in both the US and, here, *Latin*. In other words, Puerto Rico's status in a dense bind between the worlds of Latin American inclusion and US imperialism makes it a place to think the *x* in a very colonial situation. The *x* of *Latinx* travels through Salas Rivera's pen not as answer but as knot or provocation: language doubly captivated, doubly and differently gendered and genre-ed. It is in this knot that we may hear the *x*, but when it's uttered, in Puerto Rico, it's most often spoken as an "e." Language and gender stay in transit, in translation. This knot that is not English and not Spanish, precisely, serves as a hinge between the two, creating knots in the throat. These self-translations theorize a formal bilingualism that inverts colonial order and gendered expectation by creating figural knots that refuse to be disentangled from their embodied enunciation. These knotted, or refused, translations issue from the body not in order to create a fetish of the original language of Spanish but to withhold the imperial prejudices of translation labor—the interpellation that often creates access, if not exclusively then mostly, for Global North consumption. With no comfortable gendered grammar in Spanish nor feeling of home in English, Salas Rivera figures in knots what is and is not: the entanglement of what is but has no proper name or home as such and the translation of terms that have no destination. This knotted translation textures the bilingualism of these poetry editions, rendering them intimately sutured and messily woven—transgender, translated, and transferential.

The line between untranslatability and translatability is ever in flux—creating less an opposition than an apposition between the two. The withheld translation of *adoquines* does acknowledge the hierarchy of English's imperial reach, its lust for access and extraction, its constant engulfing through bereft economic promise or, better put, *PROMESA*:[17]

> By translating these poems, I am acknowledging that US imperialism's economic impact has led many Puerto Ricans to migrate to the US, where speaking English and surviving are synonymous. I am recognizing that their children have inherited that violent linguistic erasure, and within English, as well as Spanish, they still find ways to make the colonizer's language their own. . . . It is just as necessary that linguistic purism be read for what it is: violence against those who perform their difference.[18]

Two colonial languages interface here in the shadow of US imperialism's economic extraction, which created two twinned formations: Puerto Rican debt and the Puerto Rican diaspora. To put language and economic structure in overlay, or entanglement, does not equate the two, nor does it create an easy counterstance. Rather, Puerto Ricans still find ways to make "the colonizer's language their own." We might amend this to "the colonizers' languages." Regardless of the language, we see that purism is always a violence against those who perform difference. We may interrogate the entanglement of the anticolonial and trans movements by way of material provenance.

## Translating Limits

It is in this provocation that nontranslation leads me to take Salas Rivera at his word: to attend to the material provenance of adoquines in Old San Juan is to take this poetics seriously, to consider matters that swiftly turn to figure, exemplar, and lore. How do material processes take on seemingly magical traits? What engines shift body and language? And what is the limit to thinking analogously between transition, translation, and transmogrification?

Salas Rivera poetically explores these questions in his 2020 collection *X/Ex/Exis.* In "Translation is a Transformation," the title bleeds and spills into the text:

| | |
|---|---|
| *cada traducción es una transformación* | *each translation is a transformation* |
| la gente trans sabe que cada transformación | trans people know that each transformation |
| es como si explotaran triquitraques | is as if they threw firecrackers |
| en nuestras venas acordeónicas | in our accordion veins |
| del ir y venir | made of coming and going |
| de vecindarios y familias | from neighborhoods and families |
| más o menos escogidas | that are more or less chosen |
| pero cuando sueltas una bomba | but when you drop a bomb |
| no quedan traducciones | there are no translations |
| antes o después | befores or afters |

The translation is figured as impact, routed through what trans people know about the risk of transformation, a risk likened to firecrackers in veins. If each translation transforms, then trans people know that their transformations create small explosions—momentary blips in a larger colonial and racist grammar of gender. Translation as transformation becomes a way to think about a body in transition. This series of metonymic associations creates a semiological chain that centers a perspective of a trans person who conveys both linguistic and biological change. But the risky promise of change is quickly halted by the figure of the bomb. The bomb does not represent—there is no before or after the bomb—and therefore the source of bombs becomes the limit of translation, of transmogrification:

| | |
|---|---|
| pero las bombas no representan | but the bombs don't represent |
| son como el viento si el viento fuese bomba | they are like the wind if the wind were a bomb |
| no llaman ni te avisan | they don't call or let you know |
| que quieren café o que venden bizcochos | they want coffee or are selling chocolate bars |
| a cambio de donativos | in exchange for donations |
| en puerto rico la huelga estalla | in puerto rico the strike strikes |
| las bombas no lloran | bombs don't cry |
| las bombas no escriben poemas | bombs don't write poems |
| matan a generaciones de escritores | they kill generations of writers |
| pero no es una bomba | but it isn't a bomb |
| en filadelfia los fascistas marchan en los museos . . . | in philly the fascists march in the museums . . . |
| | |
| no sé si me sigues | i'm not sure if you follow |
| | |
| las bombas son la medida de todo el dolor | bombs are the measure of |
| habido y por haber | all past and future pain |
| el gobierno las construye | the government builds them |
| este gobierno | this government |
| las tira | drops them |

This limit of the bomb prompts us to ask after provenance: "what" government makes these bombs? The answer is *this* government, which is not one government but rather a Puerto Rican governmentality enveloped by US imperialism. In this transformation the movement of *trans* becomes an entry into language's ability to transport and shift, to create change, but this mutability does not have the weight of a bomb. This limit reminds us that Puerto Rico is a colony, yes, but also a military base (not unlike Guam) where bombs have been dropped time and again in Culebra and Vieques. Bombs obliterate. Meanwhile, strikes strike and poems move and fascists march. These shifts are not nothing, but they stand against an obliterating fascism that requires us to see a bomb as a bomb. To see the bomb as bomb and not symbol returns us to the weight of the adoquines, the weight of waste, the weight of ballast.

How much of coloniality still lingers in the shimmering blues of the adoquines? Are these seductions not the same as the smokescreen of beauty that cloaks the suffering of the Caribbean—to echo Suzanne Césaire and, later, Jamaica Kincaid?[19] In other words, what does the blue of the adoquines obscure through camouflage in this small place? A "puerto rico" demands to be read not merely as beautiful abjection but also materially, in the aftermath of slavery and in the correlate colonial demands that islanders play native for tourists' pleasure, whether by official or unofficial means. What I mean to suggest in this reading is that Salas Rivera's translation notes are a poetic thinking, a translation that unballasts English only to let its impact be perceived by way of nontranslation. This not/knot-translation exceeds the language on the page if we attend to the material provenance of that which the poet refuses to translate. This effectively knots together two languages with immense and differential coloniality. Knots get caught in the throat—as a problem of gender, as a problem of translation. Knots suture and cord across languages. Translations and transitions burst as fireworks.

And the untranslated word demands a reading that takes seriously whether it is or is not, literally, translatable. As Murray-Román reminds us:

> Because *adoquines* does have serviceable translation, it is not literally untranslatable. In this sense, the *knots* are untranslatables in Barbara Cassin's terms: an untranslatable does not designate a word that has no linguistic counterpart in other languages, but because those linguistic counterparts fall short, the untranslatable compels one to "keep on (not) translating." Recognizing what it would cost the poet to unlink the word from its context and put it through the operation of *trasladar*, the untranslatable instead offers more experiments, new contexts, and different solutions.[20]

We read the knot of adoquines to see what is registered in the weight of ballast that comes to pave roads that may not be translated but must be read and read dangerously. What seems to most threaten, yet again, are colonial foundations that allow bombs and fascism to obliterate difference, all possibility of entangled meaning.

What about all of this is anticolonial? The tension between English and Spanish over gender does not dialectically resolve. Rather, Salas Rivera's material and poetic return home is coincident, but not collapsible, with transition and with anticolonial movements. Yet the figuration of these two ongoing and unresolved movements (in the sense of the political and in the sense of the poetics of these untranslated self-translations) inflect upon one another in ways that surface through figures of violence and nonequivalence to display two languages fraught with coloniality. I know each time I see one of the adoquines in Old San Juan that I too fall into a seduction of coloniality and of time passing. And I know too that much resistance has marched and—even more nearly to the gender politics at play in Salas Rivera's poetry—recently vogued and perreo-ed (or twerked) on and near these streets during the 2019 *soberano* protests, as chants against then governor Ricardo Rossello created tiny fireworks, a change in political power. But time passes over well-trodden forms of disenfranchisement, and so I take Salas Rivera's poetic invocation of the untranslatability of adoquines as a provocation to consider both their material history and the ballast, or weight, that coloniality holds even in anticolonial poetics. This readerly move follows the poetic force of Salas Rivera's work to think about other evocations that turn from transness to translation and transformation in the colonial predicament. The weight of referentiality functions here as material ballast that underlies even transfigurations of gender—reminding us that nothing in a colony is inherently anti- or decolonial. Transfiguration is a force, but it is one that explodes as a mere firecracker in the face of a bomb. Transgenders and sexualities cannot, in and of themselves, decolonize colonial foundations because the very stuff of their thinking still relies upon colonial grammars.

Tracing a material metaphor, adoquines, tracks a tension with authorial intention and creates a dual register. If the bomb is the obliteration of all figuration, of all scenes of reading, then a ballasted entanglement, like that of adoquines, requires us to take the force of untranslation not as untranslatability but as a resistance to transport—a perhaps deferred or delayed arrival of meaning that requires a reading negotiated between two languages at the interstice of Puerto Rico. Here we see how the *x* becomes a figural knot, too, for Salas Rivera, one that stays hinged between the intense locality of enunciation—a "puerto rico" on a Thursday night—and the larger questions of loss, unincorporation, and gendered crossings. How to read the title, *X/Ex/Exis*, of this collection that invokes, while also isolating, an *x* that may be from *Latinx*? The first *x* gets caught in the throat because of the different sounds one makes when pronouncing it in the two languages it conjures and complicates. English skips to Latin, by pronouncing *x* as *ex*, while Spanish enunciates a syllabic difference: *Equis*. The *x* remains a backslash away from Latin, away from the prefix that denotes "out of, from." Yet *ex* becomes redoubled in English, as the slang of an ex becomes the vernacular haunting of one's former erotic affairs. And, indeed, an ex of the poetic voice is conjured in this section. Finally, *exis* is one diacritical mark away from *vos exís*, a conjugation hardly used in Puerto Rico but which conjures *exir*. If this diacritical mark were in place, it could be read as a poorly transcribed command: you take leave, all of you exit. The *x* itself transmutes across the collection, a movement that commands that one leave. We may not be welcome to mine gender in a small place.

Transport is metaphor's tropological movement, but Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Wang remind us that words can only do so much in the face of enduring coloniality.[21] If these poetic lines are queer, trans, and knotted, they are also ballasted or referentially pulled—at least in the case of adoquines—into the colonial. In *X/Ex/Exis* we see the entanglement of transformation and its limit, the bomb. That is, at the level of the untranslated knot, we see a reference to colonial infrastructure that creates a knot *with* that bomb. What I find in Salas Rivera's knots is more akin to what the *x* may or may not do in the constrictions, or at the meeting point, of two languages that wield a bulwark of violence. This violence goes well beyond but is also constituted through a gender binary code that is differential in the languages wherein gendered utterances are grammatically nonequivalent. Both Spanish and English, and the cosmologies they issue from, traffic in a colonial and racial project that often functions through sexuation. This may be one way to think with Francisco Galarte's invitation to read with the *x* rather than assign it the work of representation: "We must, then, think of the 'x' as not relieving the burden of the binary; it represents an opportunity to interrogate the effects of binaristic and dualistic thinking. I ask that we challenge ourselves to read for and with the 'x.'"[22] Precisely by (k)notting an entanglement of matter and figure that exemplifies the tension inherent in *Latinx*, Salas Rivera remarks a tension that strains the relationship between the *Latin* and the *x*. *X* becomes absorbed into undeniable coloniality and a version of the Spanish language that, in this space-time configuration, is at least less powerful than the imperial English that sought to erase Puerto Rican accents and grammars in the mid-twentieth century. The *x*, then, is unincorporated here; it remains in the margins as a gendered aspect de-linked from *Latin*, which precisely makes it an especially felicitous inscription that allows us to read the *x* without an overdetermined attachment to the lives that "make it" to English and to the states. In this way, the *x* is one knot between the two languages, one figured not as a gesture but as knotted speech, *un nudo en la garganta* (a knot in the throat). And when we have something caught in the throat, speech becomes difficult. Indeed, *x* is a letter best pronounced in the back of the mouth, near the throat. This knot connotes entanglement and conjures a homonym of *not.* This knot issues at the hinge of two languages and urges us to acknowledge that all gender is translation and issued in grammars that are all too often ensconced in colonial taxonomies.[23]

Between knots in the throat, colonially paved streets, and governments manufacturing bombs, Salas Rivera's poetics unfurls scenes of violence that threaten to make all difference illegible. The embodied moments of resistance, then, lay bare that the foundations of these streets and lines are indeed colonial and that their legibility, even the refusal of them, finds a limit in the figure of the bomb. The line, either knotted or circled but always lyrical, creates possible entanglements of queerness and (anti)coloniality. Yet if decolonization is not to be merely metaphor, then we cannot necessarily align trans with the anticolonial. Thus we have a very trans, a very queer problem of colonial foundations that asks us to attend to two things that Salas Rivera's work reveals: no language has gender transmitted faithfully, and neither Spanish nor English can release itself from the weight of coloniality. This does not mean we won't find gender play, as well as peril, in these linguistic knots. Our task is not to find the right language or word or even letter but to read, to translate, to think through the status of the untranslatable (of gender, of a critique of coloniality). Or, put another way, if we see in *Preguntas frecuentes* a thinking of the entanglement of a colonized Spanish, or a Spanish within a colony, and queerness, in *X/Ex/Exis* we see the entanglement of transformation and its limit, the bomb. That is, at the level of the untranslated knot, we see a colonial infrastructure that creates a knot with that bomb.

We are asked to think this limit of coloniality anew in the figure of the bomb—a figure of fascist force. Fascism aestheticizes politics, urging us to consider whether fascist forces may hide in beauty. Following the bomb's limit, the reading of Salas Rivera's knotted inscriptions entails taking both figuration and materiality seriously. These matters accrue urgency when we confront contemporaneous forms of fascism that entangle racist and colonial militarism with gender—whether by policing, legislation, pinkwashing, or the resurgence of red scares. Such powerful forces are stitched into Salas Rivera's poetics and attune us to loss, violence, and change. His poetics occasions a way to think about the limit of what a poem or reading can do—asking us to feel the force, or weight, of the limit that lies within the violence of bombs. More important than stating difference is the material provenance and aftermath of largescale violence. It is within these poetic inscriptions that we may imagine this violence, but the urgency of this reading would require an attendant material shift beyond poetry, beyond metaphor. Incommensurable loss knotted into the adoquines leads me to consider the weight of coloniality that paves the streets of Old San Juan, to consider material and historical registers that pull the adoquines into the violence that, perhaps, entangles them with the bombs that, per Salas Rivera's poetry, do not represent.

## Notes

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1. Raquel Salas Rivera, *Preguntas frecuentes = Frequently asked questions* (San Juan, 2019).
2. Raquel Salas Rivera, "A Note on Translation," *Waxwing* 10 (2016), https://waxwingmag.org/items/issue10/49_Salas-Rivera-A-Note-on-Translation.php.
3. Tourism constitutes much of the tertiary economy of the Caribbean and is explored in Salas Rivera's *The Tertiary/Lo terciario* (Oakland, 2018).
4. This excerpt is translated from a thorough report on the history of Old San Juan's pavements and the provenance of the mysterious adoquines. See Rafael Calderín, "Los Adoquines de Escoria En San Juan," *issuu*, 31 January 2018, https://issuu.com/coleccionpuertorriquena/docs/los_adoquines_de_escoria_en_san_jua, 26.
5. Ibid.
6. Lolita Buckner Innis, "Ships' Ballasts," in *International Law's Objects*, ed. Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (Oxford, 2019), 432.
7. Contemporary ballasting mechanisms in boats no longer use solid materials; instead, they use water. The problem of ballasted movement remains, however, since this ballasting water often pollutes oceanic waters, threatening coral reefs.
8. For my reading of Salas Rivera's catachrestic and incommensurate invocations of loss, see Christina A. León, "Risking Catachresis: Reading Race, Reference, and Grammar in 'Women,'" *Diacritics* 49, no. 1 (2021): 61–71.
9. Salas Rivera, "A Note on Translation," my emphasis. For an excellent analysis of Salas Rivera's self-translation in concert with other Latinx self-translators, see Rachel Galvin, "Transcreation and Self-Translation in Contemporary Latinx Poetry," *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 1 (2022): 28–54.
10. Zambrana Rocío, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC, 2021).
11. See Neetu Khanna, *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization* (Durham, NC, 2020). Here, Khanna provides a rich and compelling reading of decolonial affect as knotted and entangled meanings issuing from both structural dispossession and coloniality, and the mind-body's refusals and metabolizations of such impositions.
12. Salas Rivera, "A Note on Translation."
13. See Meredith Lee, "Generating Blackness: Unsettling the American Grammar of Trans Politics," *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 3, no. 3 (2017): 81–90; and C. Riley Snorton, *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, 2015).
14. Eva Hayward and Che Gossett, "Impossibility of *That*," *Angelaki* 22, no. 2 (2017): 17.

15. See Judith Butler, "Gender in Translation: Beyond Monolingualism," *philoSOPHIA* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1–25. Butler argues that all gender is a recent concept that issues often from English and that this linguistic difference must be thought by gender theorists. They write: "Indeed, gender theorists and philosophers do not reflect enough on the fact that 'gender' is a foreign term in every language other than English, which means that gender theory has a problem of translation at the core of its project. Indeed, in some parts of the world there is a resistance to the idea of gender precisely because it is foreign. Perhaps it seems like an American import, or perhaps it challenges existing linguistic terms in other languages for designating the difference between men and women" (2).
16. For more on traps in trans studies, see Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA, 2022). See also Francisco J. Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations: Rethinking Race, Gender, and Sexuality In Chicanx/Latinx Studies* (Austin, 2021).
17. Here I gesture toward the irony of the name of the fiscal oversight board instantiated by Barack Obama: the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). This oversight board functions as coloniality often does, by asking for impossible payments for debts imposed.
18. Ibid.
19. Here, I am referencing two key writings that think the ravages of coloniality and tourism in relation to the Caribbean's undeniable beauty: Suzanne Césaire, "Le grand camouflage," *Tropiques* 13–14 (September 1945): 267–73; and Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York, 1988).
20. Jeannine Murray-Román, "Errors in the Exchange: Debt, Self-Translation, and the Speculative Poesis of Raquel Salas Rivera," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 20, no. 1 (2020): 88.
21. See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.
22. Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations*, 130.
23. Butler, "Gender in Translation."