

## Revolving Identity in Esmeralda Santiago's *Almost a Woman*

By Jaclyn Salkauski

The memory is a mysterious - and powerful - thing.  
It forgets what we want most to remember,  
and retains what we often wish to forget.  
We take from it what we need.  
-Mary Helen Ponce. "Note from the Author"

I carry	mis raices
my roots	las cargo
with me	siempre
all the time	conmigo
rolled up	enrolladas
I use them	me sirven
as my pillow	de almohada
-Francisco Alarcón. "Raices/Roots"	

Edouard Glissant defines national language as "the one in which a people produces," which proves to create a conflict in identity when an individual is removed – by choice or by exile – from the culture of her origin.<sup>1</sup> How then, does language choice affect the identity formation process? The hybrid nature of postcolonial Caribbean discourse continues to play an equal part in connecting an individual to her culture of choice. Glissant indicates that a Caribbean individual instinctively rejects the conflicted nature of lived experience in relation to the normed account of history told by the colonizer. Homi Bhabha extrapolates that language not only affects the individual identity process, but rather, because postcolonial culture is written from the interstices of majority/minority space, individual identity formation process will only proceed to develop through profound understanding of the collective identity.<sup>2</sup> This tug-of-war between cultures is a common thread in postcolonial literary representations of the Caribbean female's attempt to define herself within the geographical Caribbean, as well as a cultural extension in foreign lands.

Juan Flores and Stuart Hall attest to the claims of Glissant and Bhaba. Flores makes clear that because physical geography is not the most important factor in national (collective) identity an individual can maintain a strong identification with her origins through her choice in language.<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall reaffirms that identity (both collective and individual) is based in time and place and that Caribbean identity is a representation of hybridity that allows a collection of related individuals to represent an ever-changing heterogeneous conglomeration of individuals.<sup>4</sup>

One such novel that offers exemplary representations of the role that language and location play in a female's identification process is *Almost a Woman* by Esmeralda Santiago. Moreover, the specific language choice – Spanish or English – made by the displaced female protagonist is often the essential component in the individual identification process because of the cultural worldview connected to the language of choice; her language is the umbilical cord connecting her to her roots and supplying her with the Puerto Rican cultural nutrients needed to nurture her survival in her new environment, New York. Many critics, including Bhabha, Glissant, and Benedict Anderson, have indicated that culture and language are so strongly linked that one cannot be separated from the other. This predicament is a commonly portrayed complexity of identity formation in the hybrid, post-colonial Caribbean. The protagonist in this novel wrestles with the linguistic (and cultural) markers that position them either in the space of

social norms, or in a marginalized exterior. This complexity of language (and cultural) choice is not foreign to the author of this novel, as she herself had a choice of languages in which to publish her work. While the factors for writing in English or Spanish may not be entirely based on identity for Santiago, it is an important factor to note when understanding the locus of enunciation in Caribbean literature.

In *Almost a Woman*, it is the language and cultural environment that she experiences in New York that creates a conflicted identification process for the protagonist. While the protagonist of this novel, Negi, had no choice in the decision to leave her birthplace, Puerto Rico, she does have a choice in her language usage and the level at which she maintains or breaks contact with her cultural heritage. It is this string of choices that will ultimately dictate her identity process, and whether her decisions lead to fluidity, rather than stagnancy, in the identification process. The representations of identity in *Almost a Woman* allude to a tendency to easily flow between a Puerto Rican and U.S. identity, similar to the ebb and flow of the sea, without physically abandoning either place. Meanwhile, similar to the in-and-out motion of a wave, flowing between two cultures offers Negi the benefit of continually revisiting her past, and allowing her to carry parts of it with her to her new location. This same wave, upon return, crashes into its new location, often churning up unwanted or forgotten elements. While Negi has the benefit of revisiting her cultural roots, she also finds that the impact of returning to her new culture churns up deep-seeded emotions and conflicts which were not previously apparent to her.

Negi entered into a theoretical revolving door<sup>5</sup> upon her relocation to New York because of the physical displacement between her mother land (Puerto Rico) and the United States. The theoretical space of the revolving door is often considered to be an *encrucijada mágica*<sup>6</sup> between various planes of existence, including identity. The revolving door offers the psychological space necessary for individuals to engage in an identity formation decision-making process; however, many times those that enter this space have difficulty making a string of decisions that will forever prevent them from escaping another revolution in the doorway to identity formation. The self-identification process for many migrating (whether temporarily or permanently) Puerto Rican women is similar to the difficult and painful task of choosing an undefined point of entry into and exit from the internal space of the revolving door. Exiting this safe space requires acceptance of the decision to hold onto certain elements of a past cultural identity, while embracing other elements of a new cultural identity. The positive and idealized memories of these individuals take hold of the mind and permit neither a complete acculturation nor deculturation, such that these female immigrants “bring their own cultural conceptions of their identity” (Vásquez 439). Often, these preconceived conceptions of identity “do not coincide with the ideological constructions of the receiving societies” (Vásquez 439). This new ideology leaves them caught in the middle of the identification process and as a result, the *encrucijada mágica* between multiple identities – the ideologically new identity of the United States, the mixed identity that is used to survive in the new environment and the identity that can only be remembered through memories of the place of origin – is the only space where the Puerto Rican protagonist represented by Santiago can feel safe while participating in the process of identification. In addition, as the author herself is a Puerto Rican woman who migrated to the United States, her *encrucijada mágica* can be found in this same revolving door, and is demonstrated through her representational writing.

While the revolving door is an *encrucijada mágica* that allows for personal introspection, it is clear that this process takes place on the border dividing normed society from the margins. However, in order to talk about the borders and limitations of a nation it is first necessary to

define border according to popular Puerto Rican opinion.<sup>7</sup> The majority of critics say that a national border does not maintain as limited a definition as it has in the past. Today, critics such as F.J. Turner say that the border is alive and claim that it is located “not nowhere” (qtd. in Flores 202-3). If the national border is not located anywhere, then it must be located everywhere. The border, then, is not geopolitical, linguistic or even racial. Jorge Duany refers to these erasable lines and the people who live beyond as “on the edge” (Duany “Rough” 178). The Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States has been more fluid than that of other countries because of Puerto Rico’s unique status with the United States, allowing for ease of access to the mainland as well as a lack of legal complexities upon return to the island. These same people that “frequently cross geopolitical frontiers also move along the edges of cultural borders, such as those created by language, citizenship, race, ethnicity, and gender ideology” (Duany, “Mobile” 358). These “cores” and “rough edges” of identity formation serve as the site of decision-making for circulating individuals. What makes this circular movement so prominent in previous decades is the presence of greater access to transportation and means of communication.

Duany continues with a distinction between the “rough edges,” those which pertain to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or the diaspora while the “hard cores” are those that pertain to language, religion – in the case of Puerto Rico, the Catholic Church – canonical literature and other cultural customs originated on the island (Duany “Rough” 178). This preoccupation with the cultural norm can be seen among the centralized towns and the marginalized outskirts of the same towns in *Almost a Woman* when Negi attends Performing Arts, a white-dominated school dedicated to teaching performing arts, and learns that the city where her family lives, Brooklyn, is not part of New York proper, but “an outer borough” in the words of the city’s mayor (111). By referring to Brooklyn as an “outer borough” the mayor’s words are reiterated here to emphasize the marginal status of the non-homogenous white upper middle class world to which Negi, and other immigrants, do not pertain. In addition, many times the diaspora itself makes it difficult to delineate where one culture ends and another begins. There are many instances throughout the novel when the protagonist laments that the adults in her life tell Negi to do what they say and not what they themselves do. The lack of an adult who can serve as a model through their actions causes her much confusion. In the fittingly titled third chapter “martes, ni te cases ni te embarques ni de tu familia te apartes,” Negi realizes that there are some white behaviors that she should emulate, but all the while “[she was] to remain 100 percent Puerto Rican” (25). For a young adolescent woman such as Negi in a new place, “the problem was that it was hard to tell where Puerto Rican ended and Americanized began” (25). Determining the appropriate level of assimilation can be a difficult feat for an adult woman, and even more so for a *casi mujer*. The title of this section suggests that although a family can cross geopolitical, linguistic, and cultural borders, family relations and memories of one’s place of origin maintain a tight emotional and psychological, if not physical, grasp.

Stronger than geopolitical limitations are the limitations of emotional, cultural, and familial distance. After Negi spends some time in her new school for the whites, as her mother says, her career as an actress gives her the opportunity to take notice of the changes that have taken place within herself and to recognize that her family no longer understands her changed ideals. After presenting a theatrical performance in which Negi played the role of the Virgin, a representation that Negi believed to be “a less pious interpretation” of the Mother of God, she feels trapped between her new life as a student and actress on one side and her family life with strong ties to the island on the other (143). On opening night, the same students who had been criticizing Negi momentarily changed because “this night everyone loved everybody’s work”

(144). As Negi moves closer to assimilation with her U.S. classmates, she simultaneously recounts the distance she experiences with her family: “as we [my classmates and I] hugged, kissed cheeks, and applauded ourselves, my family backed away. The distance was not much, a few feet at most, but it was a continent” (145). For Negi, this experience causes a great impact. For the first time, Negi is recognizing that differences have arisen between her and her family that had not been there before.

The acknowledgement of Negi’s feeling of distance between her and her family render her overwhelmed, even to the point that she feels that “immobile, I stood halfway between both, unable to choose, hoping the party wouldn’t move one inch away from me and that my family would stay solidly where they were. In the end, I stood alone between both” (145). It is important to note that Negi did not feel as though she were part of either group, but that she felt alone. This “not nowhere” space between two cultures is an undefinable space for the undefined individual. Since Negi perceives that she is caught in this space between two possible cultural identifications, the protagonist must be studied from this abyss – marginal to both the dominant and non-dominant cultures.

Now that Negi has rooted herself between two cultures, two lands, two identities, she assumes roles representative of both her past and present cultural surroundings. However, Negi’s past cultural identity is rooted in a hybrid culture, further complicating the identity process. While Negi’s experiences in her new culture progress, Negi begins to question herself, specifically concerning her decisions about how to act in certain white situations without losing herself completely. After avoiding her family for awhile, she realizes that she no longer desires to be in their presence or emulate their culturally identifying characteristics. She encounters a new reality in which she has changed so significantly that she no longer understands her family, and they do not understand her. In Negi’s case, she is unable to reconcile the person she is with her family and the person she is outside of the house and at school. This is a common occurrence for the identity process for individuals who find themselves in-between cultures, public and private life, and between identities. It is not until one day when Negi decides that she wants only to follow her own instincts: “I longed to cup my hand to my mouth, the way singers did, and listen to myself. To hear one voice, my own, even if it was filled with fear and uncertainty. Even if it were to lead me where I ought not to go” (210). Seemingly, Negi would succeed in furthering her identity process if she were to follow her own inner voice; however, like many others in her position, the freedom to choose each and every aspect of her identity “muddled [her] thoughts so that [she] didn’t know where [she] was, where [she] was going, or why” (311). The importance of these words lies in the unknowing nature of why she might choose to emulate certain aspects of one culture over another. Further problematizing the nature of Negi’s identity formation process are the possibilities for a *casi mujer* in her position.

For example, in regards to education, Negi never finished with her bachelor’s degree nor was she a skilled typist despite working as a secretary. Her romantic possibilities are not clear either. Negi is confronted with a decision: 1) relocate to Miami with boyfriend, Ulvi, and have children, fulfilling the role of mother 2) relocate to Miami as Ulvi’s girlfriend and nothing more, or 3) stay with her mother and family in New York. In each case, each situation parallels a specific level of assimilation with or against the dominant culture. Moving to Miami and having children, becoming a mother, is representative of becoming completely comfortable in the new, dominant culture. Moving to Miami as Ulvi’s girlfriend without set plans for the future is representative of being trapped between the two cultures, and finally, staying with her mother and family in New York is representative of not being able to break ties with the past and with

her roots. Should she choose the latter option, she may never be able to find the balance that comfortably situates her between two cultures. In turn, her identity formation process may never reach a desired state.

Despite the quality education that Negi received in Performing Arts, she misses the most important connections needed to enter the dominant culture through education. Flores suggests that this situation is nothing more than the “conditions of hostility, disadvantage and exclusion that confront the Puerto Rican in day-to-day reality” and that “corresponding to the absence of economic and political opportunity is the lack of cultural access and direction of any kind: the doors to the prevailing culture are closed” (Flores 186). Without higher education Negi has a severely limited chance at surviving the circumstances of her new world. Although she continues searching for an appropriate career path, there is much doubt that she will encounter a fulfilling career because she is trapped in the vicious cycle that Flores recounts: those that do not have an advanced education will not find a good job and those that do not find a good job never achieve the economic and political opportunities of the predominant culture. The result is that there is no available path for Negi in the dominant culture; it seems that the doors of opportunity have closed on her.

Negi’s continued search for the most appropriate door of opportunity and identity to pass through places her in the 1.5 generation.<sup>8</sup> As a *casi mujer*<sup>9</sup> in a new culture, she is not only attempting to define herself, but she is attempting to progress in the identity process at two crucial points in the life of a member of the 1.5 generation: adolescence and acculturation. By definition, she is experiencing something completely different from what her mother and aunt have experienced as women, and something altogether different from her older family members who did not experience childhood and/or adolescence in a foreign culture. According to Rumbaut, “psychologically speaking, the refugee’s experience combines elements of premature death and rebirth, a peculiar process in which he is both conscious protagonist and conscious spectator” (Rumbaut 396). While Negi is becoming a young woman, she is simultaneously becoming more aware of her surroundings and what is expected of her – as a female, as a Puerto Rican, and as a U.S. American. She herself must decide what elements of her former life must be put to death so that she can experience rebirth in her new life. While all adolescents must progress through a similar process of growth as they enter adulthood, the experience for Negi and others who abandon their homeland – for whatever reason – are confronted with a seemingly unending string of decisions about who they were and who they want to be. This string of decisions leads to a final representation and acceptance of the desired elements of identity. However, the process of identity is not as simple as picking and choosing certain elements to retain and certain elements to dispel, but according to Rumbaut,

the decision to choose – or reluctantly accept – exile entails an inner agony between those forces that bind and those that expel a person from his land. After the initial decision is acted on, the dilemmas that accompany it persist for years. First and foremost one must survive, which channels the decisions and experiences of the refugee along available structures of opportunity. Then comes the agonizing arrangement of priorities, the careful selection among narrow options.” (Rumbaut 396)

This process of deciding what and how much of the homeland to preserve is what Rumbaut and other critics describe as the experience of the 1.5 generation.<sup>10</sup> The whole of Santiago’s novel

chronicles the experiences that Negi, a member of the 1.5 generation, undergoes on her path to identity.

As part of this process, Negi must take into account the old with the new, and Rumbaut recommends that “although it is true enough that the 1.5 generation is ‘marginal’ to both its native and its adopted cultures, the inverse may be equally accurate: only the 1.5 generation is marginal to *neither* culture” in addition to the fact that this space between the two cultures ‘implies an equilibrium’” (Pérez Firmat 4, 6). As a consequence, this equilibrium and the ability to flow between two cultures are at the same time miraculous and binding. Upon arriving on the mainland, those of the 1.5 generation feel overwhelmed with worry for what may come, and then are filled with the enchantment of the illusions of the island of origin in contrast with the reality of the mainland (Flores 187). Meanwhile, many immigrants elect to acquire “dual home bases” which allow them to be able to maintain “strong psychological attachments to the island even when living abroad for long periods of time” (Duany, “Mobile” 360). These two home bases allow them to exist in separate worlds without mixing the characteristics of each. One of the strongest separations that can be constructed through the use of dual home bases is that of the separation of languages.

One way of making one’s origin valid while simultaneously living in a new place is through representation of the mother tongue. While Santiago has come to recognize the benefits of choosing to write her novel in the dominant tongue while simultaneously publishing a translation in her native tongue, throughout the argument of the novel, the young Negi must continue learning how to navigate between Hispanic and English traits. But, even more important than being able to distinguish between the two are the questions she asks herself: Who am I? And what do I represent in choosing to use one language over the other? Negi had to learn English very well in her program while attending Performing Arts and even more so, how to pronounce the words because this language is not only the dominant language but it is also the language that would open other doors of opportunity for her; doors of success, of experience, and those that would gain her power in this Anglophone environment. Because of the touching experience she has in the welfare office while translating for her mother, Negi swears that she “had to learn English well enough never again to be caught between languages” (21). To begin, she started studying the English pronunciations that were part of her homework for Performing Arts while concurrently ignoring her younger siblings’ questioning: “You don’t want to sound Puerto Rican?” (85). For a *casi mujer*, an adolescent of the 1.5 generation in the midst of change – biological, as well as cultural - Negi maintains a balance between the two worlds.

In addition to giving her power, the use of one’s native language reinforces identity, or at least reinforces ties with her origin - more specifically, her native tongue, family, food, nature, and the countless other possibilities of memories and connections with the past. These questions about when and where a specific language could or should be used depends on myriad factors, but always results in the same answer for someone of the 1.5 generation: she will remain immobile between the two possibilities, the two identities, the possible paths behind the two revolving doors, unless she conscientiously answers these questions for herself. For many, the decision is too difficult and the possibilities so horrifying that they get trapped between their past and their present. Some leave the space of the revolving door while others remain stuck in this space of confusion for so much time that their futures become endangered, and as a result, they will have to fight against this confusion forever. Until a woman of the 1.5 generation is willing to make a decision regarding her future, her path will continue to engage her in a tug of war between her past and her present, rendering herself unidentifiable.

The definition of a member of the 1.5 generation—just like those of the generation 1 and generation 2—are not always defined by themselves, but rather by outsiders. From a young age, Negi learned that even though she would eventually have to choose her own path to identity, outsiders would continue to impose their opinions on her. When she meets a girl in her neighborhood, the girls converse and Negi learns from her that in the United States she is no longer considered Puerto Rican, but grouped with all other Spanish-speakers as Hispanic. Negi's new friend defines Hispanic as something that “has to do with being from a Spanish country” and Negi is no clearer on the subject after this definition (5). At this point, Negi questions her identity for the first time, realizing that “[she] had always been Puerto Rican, and it hadn't occurred to [her] that in Brooklyn [she]’d become someone else” (5).

Once consciously beginning the process of transculturation, Negi withholds certain elements of her being with each individual she encounters. She is continually hiding something from her friends and family. She “refused to venture into [her] deepest self, to reveal [her] feelings, to examine [her] true emotions publicly” because if she did, “everyone would know [she] was illegitimate” and that in that moment it still seemed to her that she was acting a part in the new culture rather than actually taking part and situating herself in the new culture (74). This decision to alter or redefine certain elements of one's identity and meanwhile maintain other elements is what Flores refers to when saying that Puerto Ricans “do not aspire to enter an already given America but to participate in the construction of a new hegemony dependent upon their cultural practices and discourses” (216). Negi's process of transformation begins when deciding to pick the most important traits that she is not willing to change and then replacing the least important traits with something completely new.

Negi has chosen to find herself in the space of the revolving door and to take the lead when deciding between the two cultures in conflict. Although it may be necessary to assimilate at a certain level, it is evident that Negi and others in the same position also need to:

find a means by which to maintain their nature consistently through generations. The solution to this problem is offered by cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation (Assmann 126).

This “cultural memory” takes place in Negi's family as representative of the experience of the 1.5 generation. At home, Mami and Tata reiterate the importance of some of the “rough edges” of identity, as defined by Duany. For example, one day Mami begins to cry because her son is repeating the English that he heard on the television. On another occasion, Negi performs the role of the Virgin and Mami's reaction becomes the title of that chapter: “It must be a sin to be so disrespectful to the Virgin.” Finally, Mami always insists that Negi not leave the house to live elsewhere unless she first marries, just like it is done on the island. Interestingly, Mami, Tata, and Don Julio – those that should be filling the position of role model for Negi and her siblings – do not represent themselves in the image of perfection that they propose to the children. Despite hoping that the children grow in their image of the perfect Puerto Rican, their memories of the island have been idealized and falsely petrified in their memories forever, a symptom of generation 1.

This completely false representation of the Puerto Rican culture creates problems for the communication between generation 1 and Negi, of the 1.5 generation, because both groups have

different experiences and occupy different roles within their own social groups. Hans Mol explains that “the objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive (‘We are this’) or in a negative (‘That’s our opposite’) sense,” making it almost impossible to find shared ideas between Negi and Mami in regards to the expectations that they have for each other (qtd. in Assmann 130).<sup>11</sup> Now that Negi is taking classes at Performing Arts, she has a completely different set of rules to follow in addition to those of her family and those of society.

As soon as Negi comes to terms with the difficult position she is in, she realizes that even though she has the opportunity for many new experiences in her new country, her experiences are not those of her mother’s. Yet, despite their difference of opinion, it is her mother who will always be supportive of her and her siblings because, in the end, Negi was brought to New York to capitalize on the available opportunities that she would not have had in Puerto Rico. Negi decides for herself the elements she needs in order to solidify her identity in a way that is most beneficial for her personal needs and beliefs. For her, an indisputable element that must remain present is her mother because it is within her memory and her spirit that lie Negi’s ties with the past and her personal family history. Although Santiago does not specify at the end of the novel if Negi decides to move to Miami with Ulvi or to remain in Brooklyn with her family, Negi admits that “[she]’d already made [her] choice” much like “Ulvi knew when he asked,” alluding to the fact that the ties already were in place between Negi and her mother, between Negi and her past, between Negi and the ability to choose her own escape from the space of the continuously revolving door where she defines herself as a combination of generation 1 and generation 2 (311).

Now that Negi is comfortable with her ties to the past, she must find her links to the future. In contrast with the closed doors of opportunity that Negi has found in the past due to her inability to take advantage of the proposed opportunities at the time they arose, she is now faced with the metaphorical revolving door that will not only offer her new opportunities, but can also serve as her salvation if she has learned how to use the extraordinary space within the revolving door. That being said, while the function of the revolving door is the possibility of various points of entrance and various (although distinct) points of exit, Jorge Duany explains that this circulatory motion – both literal and metaphorical - “does not entail major losses in human capital for most Puerto Ricans but rather often constitutes an occupational, educational and linguistic gain” (Duany “Mobile” 355). In Negi’s case, it seems that this theory maintains an element of truth because, due to her new experiences, she has had access to a good education. She has had theater experiences that she would not have had if it were not for the instruction that she received in the use and pronunciation of English that allow her to relate to her good friend, Shoshana, as well as the many men and/or boyfriends that she has had. In short, her non-traditional education left her with the valuable resources of language assimilation and language choice.

Then, if the door leading to identification with the dominant culture were to ever shut on Negi again, she would have no other option but to enter the revolving door yet again and exit at a different opening, while identifying herself in a distinct manner. This “circular migration [whether across geopolitical borders or cultural borders] implies a broader definition of cultural identity for Puerto Ricans in the United States and in Puerto Rico itself” (Duany, *Nation* 215). Since Negi’s identity is based in time, space, and circumstance, the revolving door is the only space in which her identity can reach its most pure form. The revolving door serves as the “hard core” of the identity to which Duany refers, while all the possible exits serve as “rough edges”,



and will change depending on the three elements of time, space, and circumstance. Due to the seemingly magical characteristics of the interior space of a revolving door, I propose that we treat it as an *encrucijada mágica*.

The written word is one way in which a woman can seek out her identity while at the same time achieving a position of power. This *encrucijada* or crossing in which the woman can encounter her true being, offers yet another opportunity. Hintz admits that while “women carry great responsibility for the future of mankind,... mankind’s legacy to them does not always include a revered place in the social hierarchy” (Hintz 1). The search for identity that Negi is experiencing throughout the novel suffers a double oppression – being a cultural minority and being a woman. According to Hintz, “patriarchy defines a woman and then oppresses her; thus to Kristeva woman exists only in a negative fashion within a patriarchal society because she is always struggling against it” (Hintz 39).<sup>12</sup> Negi subverts the traditional systems through her theatrical performances; in those moments when Negi is completely conscious of her identity and her circumstance she chooses to behave in a different way.<sup>13</sup> For Negi, this site of performance where time, space, and circumstance cross is her personal *encrucijada mágica* – the revolving door that appeared when she closed the previous door of opportunity with the dominant culture. In the same way that the act of telling her own story serves as a magical crossing over for Negi, the author, Santiago herself, is rewriting her own experiences.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout history it has been apparent that “for the most part cultural nationalism in Puerto Rico has not welcomed women – particularly black and mulatto women – in its definition of the nation, except perhaps as subservient spouses, mothers, and housewives” (Duany, “Rough” 183). For this reason, through her written works, a woman writer has the task of realizing the function of her own revolving door and of creating a new role for other women of the same circumstance. In the case of Santiago, she must forge the path for other women through her writings. It is through writing her story that she becomes able to be herself and to define herself as she likes.

The act of learning to be oneself is a magical act in which one must omit the importance of time and space in order to experiment with the possibilities of the revolving door. It is through the formation of new identities and through learning which of each of the identities function in each situation, while holding tightly to the elements of the “hard core” that defines someone of the 1.5 generation and leaving behind the elements of the “rough edges” that will continuously change and fine tune one’s identity over time and space.

A woman of the 1.5 generation transgresses the social and personal barriers of identity by passing through the revolving door that meanwhile affords her the opportunity to take on new behaviors of the dominant culture while holding tight to the memories of and ties to her past. By making these geopolitical frontiers erasable, just like their respective cultures that in the past have trapped those who attempt to pass through in a concurrent state of understanding and misunderstanding of their own identity, Negi can come to a clearer understanding of her own self. With a more fluid definition of what is expected of a *casi mujer* of the 1.5 generation, Negi (and in turn, Santiago) serves as a model of how those women who enter the revolving door, as well as those who leave the space of the revolving door, can continue to value their personal experiences, all the while questioning themselves and reassigning a new meaning to personal identity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>3</sup> Duany. "The Rough Edges of Puerto Rican Identities: Race, Gender, and Transnationalism."

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Stuart. "Negotiating Caribbean Identities"; Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the migration and the revolving door migratory pattern between Puerto Rico and the United States beginning in the mid-1960s and lasting through present day, see: Green, Derek. "Puerto Rican Americans." *Countries and Their Cultures*; Rodriguez, Clara E. *Puerto Ricans: Immigrants and Migrants*; Whalen, Carmen Teresa and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández, eds. *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*.

<sup>6</sup> In the Santería religion, there are certain planes that overlap. This area where the time-space continuum overlaps is the site where the divine and human planes intersect. This interstice is referred to as the *encrucijada mágica*.

<sup>7</sup> For further reading on border studies, see: Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*; Blades, Rubén. *Chicago Sunday Times*.

<sup>8</sup> The term *1.5 generation* was coined by Rubén Rumbaut in 1976. According to Rumbaut, the 1.5 generation is made up of individuals that were born abroad but were brought to the United States at an early age. In his 1976 articles titled "The Family in Exile: Cuban Expatriates in the United States," Rumbaut specifically defines the 1.5 generation as individuals who "arrived between the ages of 6 and 10" whereas the 1.25 generation is used to define individuals who "arrived between the ages of 11 and 15" (65). This theory of Rubén Rumbaut is explained and popularized in the introduction to *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* by Gustavo Pérez Firmat. The conclusion is made by Rumbaut through the telling of the story of Janus, the Roman god of beginnings: "Janus was always depicted at the gate of the cities and had two faces, which enabled him to see in opposite directions simultaneously. This image illustrates the plight of the refugee. The face that looks back sees displacement, separation, uprooting, loss, nostalgia, and, in a certain sense, even death, because some things die inside us when we are forced to abandon our homeland without the possibility of returning at will. The face that looks forward sees new horizons, unknown environments, strangers with unfamiliar customs and languages, real and imaginary perils, a vigorous challenge to survive, adapt, and grow, and even the opportunity of constructing a new identity in sudden anonymity" (Rumbaut 396). For further reading, see: Rumbaut, Rubén D. and Rumbaut, Rubén G. "The Family in Exile: Cuban Expatriates in the United States."

<sup>9</sup> Although Rumbaut's theory specifies an age group for both 1.5 and 1.25 generations, identity theory takes into account the psychological and emotional development as a greater determiner of a child's ability (or inability) to auto-identify than their age in years. Rumbaut's theory, however, is used here in general terms (1.5 generation) to refer to the in-between status of these individuals (e.g. 1.25 is a subset of 1.5).

<sup>10</sup> For further reading, see: Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*; Portes, Alejandro and Rubén G. Rumbaut. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*; Portes, Alejandro and Rubén G. Rumbaut. *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*.

<sup>11</sup> Mol, Hans. *Identity and the Sacred*.

<sup>12</sup> For further reading, see: Kristeva, Julia. "Oscillation Between Power and Denial."

<sup>13</sup> For further reading on performance theories, see: Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology*; Schechner, Richard. "Foreword: Fundamentals of Performance Studies"; Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*.

<sup>14</sup> The author was born in 1948 in Villa Palmeras, Puerto Rico. She came to the United States in 1961 at the age of thirteen.

<sup>15</sup> The author mentions in her final notes at the end of the text that this story that she has just told, although potentially autobiographical, she states that "this is what I remember, as I remember it," although it is possible that "sometimes [my family may] disagree with my version of the events" (Santiago 313-14). The fact that Santiago has included a written disclaimer in the text in and of itself makes stronger the argument that memory is the element that has the strongest hold on individuals of the 1.5 generation.