

Multiple Hybridities: Jíbaros and Diaspora in Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*

By Lorna L. Pérez

Esmeralda Santiago's first memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican*, published in 1994, chronicles the childhood and relocation of Santiago and her family from Puerto Rico to New York City. The memoir—the vast majority of which takes place in Puerto Rico—charts the ways that Santiago becomes a hybrid, an identity that she represents as being created in the belly of the plane that takes her family from Puerto Rico to the United States. While the trauma of relocation that Santiago articulates is profound, the hybridity that permeates this memoir is more reflective of the changes that marked mid-twentieth century life in Puerto Rico than it is of the trauma of relocation. Though the relocation in the memoir is certainly a traumatic experience, it is not *the* site of hybridity in the text, but is rather its culmination. Santiago symbolically represents multiple modes of hybridity in the memoir, including the hybridity implied by the title of the text, which speaks to the ways that Puerto Rican life is being drastically reconfigured in the years from 1950-1970. Reading the text in light of the multiple hybrid modes that Santiago employs points to an anxiety that lies in the heart of the current debates about Puerto Rican identity: what does it mean to be Puerto Rican and how do we represent a hybridity that is created through the borderland state that is the Commonwealth? The ambiguity that marked and continues to mark the Commonwealth status of Puerto Rico creates within Santiago's text a painful ambivalence, wherein the articulation of this identity manifests a borderlands subjectivity that is born from the legal ambiguity of the Commonwealth.

Ramón Soto-Crespo has argued that the Estado Libre Asociado (Commonwealth) is a complicated, hybrid position that can be best understood as an anomalous borderland state as Puerto Rico is neither an independent nation, nor an incorporated territory, nor a state, but rather an autonomous cultural and political entity within a U.S. federalist framework (Soto-Crespo, xxi).¹ As such, Puerto Ricans living on the island who are American citizens by birth find themselves trying to maintain a sense of cultural autonomy in the face of American hegemony while simultaneously recognizing their interconnectedness and inclusion within the United States' political and governmental system. On the other hand, Puerto Ricans choosing to live in the mainland United States face the racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination that too often attends to those groups or individuals that are socially marked as "Others." When we add the variety of diasporic experiences of the Puerto Rican community, hallmarked as they are by circular migration between the island and the mainland, the fact that questions of ethnic and national identity are contentious within the Puerto Rican diaspora is hardly surprising.² Indeed, no mean amount of criticism and theory in contemporary Puerto Rican studies has centered around trying to understand and articulate the often fluid ways that Puerto Rican identity can be articulated differently in various kinds of spaces.³

Even a superficial consideration of what Lisa Sánchez González has dubbed “Boricua” literature reflects this theme; writers as diverse as Bernardo Vega, Piri Thomas, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Rosario Morales, Aurora Levins Morales, Pedro Pietri, Miguel Piñero, and Esmeralda Santiago all offer up variations of this fraught relationship to identity and belonging in work that ranges from poems and plays to memoirs and fiction.⁴ Consistently, these writers articulate an in-between identity in which their bodies and ethnicity register as “Other” in the United States, while their movement within the diaspora, to varying degrees, casts suspicion on their cultural “authenticity.”

In light of the tensions surrounding authenticity and Puerto Rican experience, *When I Was Puerto Rican* engages in a discourse that is already saturated with questions about how ethnic authenticity and cultural legitimacy are measured within the diaspora. As José L. Torres-Padilla has noted:

For many Puerto Ricans who have spent a good portion of their lives in the United States, Santiago’s words resonate as validated truth. The title of her memoir attempts to describe the many complex nuances of that experience. Unfortunately, it is that title, with its suggestion of national and cultural abandonment, which irks some Puerto Ricans, especially those who cannot fully comprehend and accept a hybrid form of ethnicity that retains only traces of some perceived original “purer” form. (Torres-Padilla 183)

It is this implication of a “purer” Puerto Rican identity that Santiago’s title complicates. *When I Was Puerto Rican* wrestles with different registers of hybridity that are negotiated across various spaces within the diaspora, including rural Puerto Rico, urban Puerto Rico, and finally urban New York City, with each location having a different sense of what being Puerto Rican means. Consequently, the memoir poses the possibility of many different kinds of Puerto Rican identity, implying a growing sense of cultural hybridity that is present *before* the traumatic experience of relocation to the United States.

It is this dissonance that makes *When I Was Puerto Rican* a complicated text as it constantly destabilizes notions of a pure, cultural, political, and gendered identity, even as it equally reinforces these very notions. As Elizabeth Garcia has noted in “‘Degrees of Puertoricanness’ a Gendered Look at Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*,” Santiago constantly plays with binary oppositions in order to undermine them and draw attention to the ways that lived experiences cross these binaries in messy and contradictory ways. Garcia notes the ways Santiago does this through problematizing the virgin/whore dichotomy that marks Puerto Rican womanhood, and further states:

When she migrates to New York she laments the *jíbara* she is leaving behind and hints at the hybrid she will become. However, the hybrid cultural self she becomes in New York is really just a continuation of the hybridization process that was already taking place on the island. (Garcia 390)

The hybrid cultural self that Negi claims happens in the belly of the plane is a process that has been ongoing, though Santiago belies this point, by insisting on what Garcia notes is often called an “assimilationist” logic (Garcia 378). The central question

amplified by the title of the book is “When is one Puerto Rican?” The answer Santiago seems to provide in her first memoir is that one is Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico. Being Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico, however, is itself not an obvious or given process and is more complex than simply being delineated by geography. Perhaps the partial answer “to be Puerto Rican is to be in Puerto Rico” can best be understood as tied to geography in intimate ways because the cultural, intellectual, and psychic grounds for being Puerto Rican are being radically redefined. The struggle with identity is made more complex because there are dramatic and irrevocable shifts with regards to the context of the Commonwealth, Operations Bootstrap and Serenity, American citizenship, circular migration, and diaspora.

In an interview with Bridget Kevane, Santiago was asked about the controversial title of her text and explained her choice of title in the following way:

It was devastating to be denied an identity I had struggled so hard to uphold. It was especially difficult to understand why my own people challenged my sense of a self that was the only source of comfort when things were rough. When I titled my book in the past tense, I was answering those who disputed my right to call myself Puerto Rican—You said I was not Puerto Rican enough for you. Read this book. Tell me that this is not a Puerto Rican experience. (Kevane 131)

While contextualizing Santiago’s choice of a past-tense title as a resistant move against a particular kind of nationalist identity and ideology is helpful, her reasoning points to what is perhaps the hallmark experience of Puerto Rican life—the quest for the “authentic.” While in the rest of the interview Santiago contests the logic and indeed even the usefulness of thinking about “real” or “authentic” Puerto Rican identity, her text and its title are still to some very large degree a response to that logic. Santiago articulates the problem as follows:

How can we ever solve the problems we have as a people if we bicker about who is more Puerto Rican and who is less? And who is a “real” Puerto Rican? “Real” as opposed to what? Against whom are we measuring ourselves? The past tense in the title of my book is an attempt to provoke Puerto Ricans into examining what we mean when we call ourselves Puerto Rican? (Kevane 131-132)

Santiago, in her interview with Kevane, poses an interesting and powerful question that resonates throughout the Puerto Rican diaspora: why does the Puerto Rican community, both within the diaspora and on the island, spend so much time worrying about who “really” counts as Puerto Rican?

The proper response to this question may be nuanced and complicated in a variety of ways, but the source of the anxiety is perfectly obvious: for people who exist outside the space of the nation-state, and outside the space of the colony, there is no simple answer to the question of how to define what it means to be Puerto Rican. If the title of Santiago’s text were only a provocation to call into question these dangerous and

damaging paradigms that render one group “us” and another group “them” then the answer she provides in the interview would be satisfactory.

Santiago’s text, however, does not simply defy this logic of nation v. colony, or cultural nationalism v. imperial democracy; instead, at times it rejects these binaries, only to reaffirm them, a move that is perhaps inevitable in this anomalous diasporic space. The prologue to the memoir is a stunning example, as Santiago interacts ambivalently with the bittersweet space of diasporic loss. Entitled “How to Eat a Guava,” the prologue engages in a series of what Frances Aparicio and Suzanne Chávez-Silverman call tropicalizations, a concept that draws on Said’s Orientalism, wherein to tropicalize is to trope the tropics in a way that conforms to dominant culture’s already problematic assumptions, so that the tropics can be packaged, consumed, and even signified in light of the dominant culture’s perception of it (*Tropicalizations* 1). The section is worth quoting at some length:

I had my last guava the day we left Puerto Rico. It was large and juicy, almost red in the center, and so fragrant that I didn’t want to eat it because I would lose the smell. All the way to the airport, I scratched at it with my teeth, making little dents in the skin, chewing small pieces with my front teeth, so that I could feel the texture against my tongue, the tiny pink pellets of sweet. Today, I stand before a stack of dark green guavas, each perfectly round and hard, each \$1.59. The one in my hand is tempting. It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hopscotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I’m no longer a child. The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, towards the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet. (4)

In this prologue, Santiago establishes a tension that informs the rest of the text and, moreover, speaks back to the question that the title implies. In short, if the question that the title poses is “When precisely was Esmeralda Santiago Puerto Rican?” then the answer her prologue advances is that she was Puerto Rican in a childhood far away; a childhood filled with hop-sotch under mango trees. More concisely, the answer to the question is that the last time she was Puerto Rican was on the day she left Puerto Rico, the day she ate her last guava. Here the tropical fruit does symbolic double-duty, standing in for the ethnic identity she loses, even as it also becomes, there on the fruit stand in an autumn in New York, a symbol of cultural loss, a sad hybrid transplanted outside its natural boundaries. In this way, the guava also (and disturbingly) becomes symbolic of Santiago herself, the tropical signifier less authentic (and quite literally commoditized) for its displacement to New York, stacked together with other transplants under an exotic label that must be abandoned—here literally walked away from—even as that abandonment becomes bittersweet.

Moreover, the invocation of the guava as a symbol of particular, Caribbean identity, and as a symbol of loss (nibbling the guava on the way to the airport) again suggests the ways that geography becomes intimately tied into identity. The movement away from the guava helps establish a kind of dialectic in which movement—here

diasporic movement, but also movement more generally in the text— is transposed against stasis and rootedness. The hard guavas are something that Santiago must walk away from; they are a reminder. They smell *faintly* of summer hopscotch, but they cannot ultimately conjure that space or place in a New York autumn any more than nostalgia can recreate a space left behind. The guavas, even more so than the apples and pears, are symbols of dislocation and loss.

If we think of the prologue in light of the specificities of Puerto Rican diasporic experience, an experience that Soto-Crespo dubs “the mainland passage,” then we open up a very different reading of the text than we would if we read it terms of other immigrant narratives. Soto-Crespo defines the mainland passages as follows:

The mainland passage is primordially an actual historical event, but when examined seriously it elucidates a unique conceptual formation that changes the perspective we have cultivated up to this point on American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican identities. As such, the mainland passage refers not only to the new cultural mixture that formed as a result of the migration, but also to the formation of a borderland state—a state embodying a sustained deinstitutionalization of the nation-state form. The mainland passage creates a Puerto Rican borderland; that is to say it creates a culture that is a combination of Afro-Latino and North American, in the island and the mainland, and it creates a state whose influence extends beyond geographic borders. (Soto-Crespo xii)

Part of the ambivalence of the mainland passage, indeed the ambivalence that many Puerto Rican writers including Santiago express, is that the division of ethnic and cultural identity cannot be played out against “national” origins. This impossibility occurs, in part, because of the Commonwealth. In other words, there is no nation in the “national” origins of Puerto Ricans rather there is a complex configuration that does not necessarily pose questions of cultural expression in light of nation, since nationally speaking, Puerto Ricans are not Puerto Rican *or* American. They are always already Puerto Rican *and* American.⁵ Santiago is not necessarily rejecting her Puerto Ricanness in light of a particular mode of Americanness—a move that can, and in her case often is, read as assimilationist logic. She is asserting a loss that is scripted through the particularities of location. Her loss of Puerto Rico is a result of displacement, not assimilation. In part, this is precisely the ambivalence that writers of the diaspora must contend with, a loss that is neither national nor cultural *per se*, but is nonetheless palatable and profound.

A similar kind of ambivalence can be read in the way that Santiago utilizes the image of the *jíbaro* as a sign of uncontested Puerto Rican identity and how she articulates various modes of hybridity in the text. Though a multivalent, hybrid position is apparent throughout the memoir, Santiago links the singular creation of hybridity to departure, a moment which signals a displacement that cannot be overcome through nostalgic longings, but has to be negotiated constantly. Conversely, the *jíbaro*, functions symbolically as a representation of what an uncontested Puerto Rican identity could be though a close examination of the figure reveals yet another layer of complicated

hybridity that speaks directly to the shifting ground of what it means to be Puerto Rican in the mid-twentieth century.

In examining the *jíbaro*'s political and social implications, as well as the way it was politically used by Luis Muñoz Marín's Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), it becomes abundantly clear that the *jíbaro* is symbolic of a particular kind of politics that tried to assert a coherent idealization of Puerto Rican identity at the precise historic moment when it was under attack by various forces not the least of which was its continued political association with the United States. In adhering so firmly to this image, Santiago simplifies a phenomenally complicated relationship (between the nation and the individual, the rural and the urban, the diaspora and the homeland) and in so doing reinforces the fraught colonial relationship she seems to want to resist.

The *jíbaro* is a recurrent and fundamental figure throughout Santiago's text, and acts as the romantic vision of what a life structured around rootedness and stability could have offered and that her own experience of constant movement and chaos lacked. The *jíbaro* is at once the unified self she longs to return to and the imagined self she would have become.

The first full chapter of *When I Was Puerto Rican* is entitled "*Jíbaro*" and is a pastoral account of Santiago's early childhood in Puerto Rico that likens her family's impoverished but content life to that of the folkloric *jíbaros*. It is in the context of this pastoral space—a space that de-emphasizes the debilitating poverty that is omni-present in the rest of the text — that Negi first admits to wanting to be a *jíbaro* more than anything else in the whole world though her understanding of what it means to be a *jíbaro* and her yearning to be one is almost immediately contested. Santiago writes:

Early each morning the radio brought us a program called "the Day Breakers Club," which played the traditional music and poetry of the Puerto Rican country dweller, the *jíbaro*. Although the songs and poems chronicled a life of struggle and hardship, their message was that *jíbaros* were rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature, coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism. I wanted to be a *jíbaro* more than anything in the world, but Mami said I couldn't because I was born in the city, where *jíbaros* were mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect...Even at the tender age when I didn't yet know my real name, I was puzzled by the hypocrisy of celebrating a people everyone looked down on. (13)

Negi's desire to be a *jíbaro* is contrasted with the pejorativeness that is also associated with the word so that Negi is caught between trying to understand the negativity of the *jíbaro* even as it is a revered cultural symbol. In this instance, the space between the symbolic import of the *jíbaro* and the actual conditions under which a *jíbaro* lives serves to explain the oscillation that she is unable to negotiate. In a time in which Puerto Rico was rapidly industrializing, urbanizing, and Americanizing under Operation Bootstrap, actually living as a *jíbaro* was a backwards and hopelessly unsophisticated position. The

distance in this case between the romanticized past of this cultural icon, and the lived present of a “modernizing” people is precisely the factor that allows for simultaneous adoration and derision.

Perhaps even more problematic than the derision Santiago notes in the text, is the way that the *jíbaro* figure has been utilized as an icon in very specific and political ways. The question we as readers have to ask, and the question that Santiago never addresses, is if the *jíbaro* is supposed to be a national, iconic, folk figure, what precisely is it supposed to represent and to whom? Clearly the embodiment of the Puerto Rican national character within the figure of a *criollo*, light-skinned, rural, heterosexual, male, resulted in an interesting dissonance with a population that was increasingly urban, Americanized, migratory, and most definitively not all *criollo*, light-skinned peasants.⁶

The fact that Santiago so clearly associates herself time and again with this figure has interesting implications for her own sense of how Puerto Ricanness is generally understood and portrayed and how she fits into this categorization which, at least in its iconic form, can not stretch to encompass her. As Carmen S. Rivera notes, “The idealization of the figure goes back to Manuel Alonso y Pacheco’s *El Jíbaro*, where a *white*, male farmer is the embodiment of the Puerto Rican soul” (Rivera 15). Though the *jíbaro* figure may represent the impossible yearnings of a romantically inclined young woman, the figure itself is a site of contested meanings and representations which are embodied in discourses of a cultural nationalism that is both resistant and subject to colonial hegemony.⁷ Insofar as the *jíbaro* presents an iconic and resistant affront to the discourses and experiences of industrialization, modernization, Americanization, urbanization, and metropolitanism that emerge in Puerto Rico in the middle of the twentieth century, it must also be necessarily understood as a nostalgic re-imagining in response to those same forces. Moreover, the idealization of the Puerto Rican body into the *jíbaro* simultaneously maintains the hierarchies (notably racial hierarchies, but also gender and class hierarchies) that were created and perpetuated by Puerto Rico’s historic colonization.

This is a point that Santiago’s memoir makes clear. Her introduction to and longing for *jíbara-ness* is immediately followed in the text by a somewhat lengthy description of the racialized bodies of the members of Negi’s family, and the realization that her name indicates both a racial categorization and a private versus public distinction:

I thought I had no nickname until she told me my name wasn’t Negi, but Esmeralda... ‘Why does everyone call me Negi?’ ‘Because when you were little you were so black, my mother said you were a *negrita*. And we all called you *Negrita* and it got shortened to Negi. Delsa was darker than I was, nutty brown, but not as sun ripened as Papi. Norma was lighter, rust colored, but not as pale as Mami, whose skin was pink. Norma’s yellow eyes with black pupils looked like sunflowers. Delsa had black eyes. I’d never seen my eyes, because the only mirror in the house was hung up too high for me to reach. (13)

As Negi learns to mark the difference between the bodies of those in her family, she is also confronted with the knowledge that everyone around her seems to be two different people: “It seemed too complicated, as if each one of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not” (14). As she struggles to understand this concept of everyone’s seemingly doubled selves, she also comes to terms with the physicality of those around her, and the way their bodies signified differently. The plurality of colors and textures that compromise her family, while fairly typical of many Puerto Rican families, already hints at the way the *jibaro* as national signifier/symbol is representative of only a fantasized and whitened version of the *mestizaje* that typifies the Puerto Rican experience. While Negi/Esmeralda fantasizes about being the already fantasized *jibaro*, she is also simultaneously coming to terms with the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of that image.

That Negi/Esmeralda claims in this early stage that it seems that everyone is two people points to an important and telling literary technique that Santiago employs through her memoirs: she splits the speaking subject. Among other things, this splitting allows for any given subject, most typically herself, to occupy and negotiate two spaces simultaneously. Interestingly, Santiago chooses to express a single-subject occupying multiple positions as a multiple self, a doubled-hybrid. This doubling has interesting implications for how we think of a multiply positioned self, and it is telling that in the text, this multiplicity is represented as a split. The doubling of the self in the context of a private versus public distinction in family life — the official self who is unloved and the unofficial one that is loved — is an amputation, not an addition. Instead of thinking of a single self that operates as both a private person and a public individual, the two are cleaved from one another, each operating in a different register. While the doubling establishes a narrative device that allows the author to assume different versions of her own subjectivity, it also reveals a profound colonial melancholia in the form of a double consciousness that requires not the monumental negotiation that Du Bois (*Souls of Black Folks*) describes in a different context but rather a division and distancing.⁸

This distancing takes the form of Negi/Esmeralda watching herself move through her life. This split in the personal “I”— the doubling of the subject position — allows for the narrative voice to exist in simultaneity. Though this typically occurs in moments of confusion and/or pain (a moment where a united cogent self would perhaps be invaluable), the purpose of the doubling is to occupy two positions in the text at once: most often the position she is actually in, and the one she fantasizes for herself.

In this way, Negi/Esmeralda is able to fantasize about being a *jibara* even as she is included and excluded from that category. This is powerfully demonstrated when Negi/Esmeralda does finally become a *jibara* when the family relocates, leaving Macún and the countryside for the San Juan suburb of Santurce. In Santurce, it is, as the saying at the beginning of the chapter notes, impossible to wash away the plantain stain that marks the *jibara*:

‘What a *jibara*.... What a *jibara*... What a *jibara*.’ In Santurce I had become what I wasn’t in Macún. In Santurce a *jibara* was something no one wanted to

be. I walked to and from school beside myself, watching the *jíbara* girl with eyes cast down, the home-cut hair, the too large gestures and too loud voice, the feet unaccustomed to shoes. I let that girl walk home while I took in the sights and smells of the city, the noise and colors, the music, the pungent smells of restaurants and car exhaust. At night, in the bed I shared with Delsa and Norma, I listened for the *coquí* tree frog to sing me to sleep but instead heard cars backfiring, people fighting, music blaring, and Mami's moan in the dark. (19)

The fact that *jíbara*-ness then is simultaneously constructed as that which she longs to be and yet is only able to become outside of the countryside she loves calls to issue the way that this general identification shifts. It depends on who is using it and how, even when the figure hypothetically serves as a representation of the larger cultural space.

More to the point, the *jíbara* signifies a version of a unified and viable Puerto Rican national identity that is emblematic and iconic, and therefore not subject to the shifting cultural and social conditions that are engulfing the island. This is made clear in the passage above, as Esmeralda is longing for the sound of the *coquí* to sing her asleep, and is met instead with the sound of cars backfiring. It is not coincidental that the *coquí* is also a symbol that is closely associated with Puerto Rican national identity, as the tree frog is indigenous to and found solely on the island. The specific national space of the Puerto Rican countryside is replaced with generic urbanization. The sounds Negi/Esmeralda describes are general, replaceable, and transferrable. They will exist in New York, just as they do in Santurce and as such, urban space becomes common and lacking the specificity that is associated with the countryside.

The utilization of the *jíbaro* at this historic moment is an attempt to wed a stable and unchanging idealization of Puerto Rican-ness unto a people and culture that is undergoing a phenomenal change; Puerto Rico is shifting from a *criollo/afro-criollo*, Caribbean, Spanish speaking, rural peasant population, to an urban, industrialized, trans-migratory, multi-lingual, and diasporic people. The anxiety about the soul of the Puerto Rican people was profound in the middle of the twentieth century. The rise of the iconic image of the *jíbaro* in the context of this anxiety served as a way to posit a cultural identity that was fixed.⁹ Santiago certainly engages in this idealization. Her use of the *jíbaro* then becomes ambivalent, signifying both the idealization of Puerto Rican national/cultural body even as it also raises the specters of the social and cultural crisis that the use of the *jíbaro* was meant to address.

For Negi/Esmeralda, the *jíbara* girl becomes the embodiment of a lost possibility that Negi longs to return to, even though this uncontested self is only ever existent in the imaginative split she creates. It is the embodiment of the woman she may have become had she not been uprooted. It is that young girl of uncontested wholeness, a non-hybrid version of herself. The *jíbara* is symbolically already embedded in a profound anxiety about an emerging hybrid identity that is born from the conflux of historic events that leads to the Americanization and industrialization of the island under Operation Bootstrap. In the face of political and cultural hybridity that is rapidly becoming a fact of

Puerto Rican life in the middle of the twentieth century, the *jíbaro* emerges as a symbol of intact national ideology, and functions to both romanticize the past and conjure a cultural constant. Since the *jíbaro* idealizes a particular body and privileges, a particular kind of removed Puerto Rican experience (the historically distant Puerto Rican peasant of the mountains) is evidenced and confronted in the text both through Negi/Esmeralda's racialization within her family and her realization that she must be removed from the idyllic space of the countryside (the home of the *jíbaros*) in order to become one.

The fact that Negi/Esmeralda's *jíbaro-ness* is geographically dependent, or is determined not by her presence in the country but by her displacement to the city, is an irony that is not lost on Negi/Esmeralda. Yet this definition in movement, this stain by means of relocation, is seemingly not equated with her parallel relocation and subsequent definition in New York. Rather, this remains unexplored as Negi/Esmeralda insists upon the possible wholeness of her Puerto Rican self even in the face of its clear contradictions.

These contradictions, the affronts to an unfragmented identity that Santiago holds onto, are a direct result of the Commonwealth status. It is this status, and its continued association with cultural imperialism, that further cements Negi/Esmeralda's defiance, but also problematizes her eventual departure from the island. While her strategy of doubling is nearly always associated with instances in which her sense of herself as a unified individual are challenged, the site of this challenge is very often an attack on her own sense of what it means to be Puerto Rican. The first instance occurs in the context of learning her real name, and her coloring. The second is upon the realization of her own derisive *jíbaraness* while the third occurs within the context of learning about Puerto Rico's anomalous political status.

As Americanization begins sweeping the island and English becomes the legislated language of education, Negi/Esmeralda discovers through interaction with a classmate and a lengthy conversation with her father what imperialism and colonialism mean. At the end of this deeply ironic and biting funny section, highlighted by a nutrition meeting with mothers featuring all North American food, and phonetically learning the Star Spangled Banner, Negi/Esmeralda vomits after trying to swallow down the free breakfast she receives every morning at the community center. Though she had been choking down powdered eggs and greasy sausages all week, the chunky peanut butter in powdered milk was too much for her to bear:

'How can it taste sour?' she yelled as she wiped me down with a rag. 'It's powdered milk. We made it fresh this morning. It can't get sour.' I remembered a word Mami used for food that made her gag. 'It's...*repugnante!*' 'I suppose you would find it less repugnant to go hungry every morning!' 'I've never gone hungry!' I screamed. 'My Mami and Papi can feed us without your disgusting *gringo* imperialist food!' (82)

Negi/Esmeralda literally vomits up her feelings about imperialism, and the tyrannical nature of her Americanized teacher. Symbolically in this section, she cannot be nurtured

or provided for in the cold fluorescent space of the lunchroom and the condescending assumptions about the benefits of North American culture. She reasserts the ability of herself and her family to get along just fine without the help of a repugnant and inconsumable American interference.

Immediately following this section however, Negi/Esmeralda is terrified of her defiance and disrespect towards an adult, and on the way home, soiled by her own vomit, she allows herself to fly away:

Before she could push me, I pulled my arm from her grip and ran, not sure where I should go because the last thing I wanted to do was go home and tell Mami I'd been disrespectful to an adult. I dragged my feet down the dirt road, leaving my body behind, burying it in the dust, while I floated in the treetops and watched myself from above, an insignificant creature that looked like a praying mantis in a green and yellow uniform. (83)

Negi again leaves herself in order to cope with her feelings of anger and shame as well as her sense of indignation. In this imagination, she is again incorporated as a natural part of landscape, trans-mutating her body into a praying mantis. This doubling allows her to separate herself from the complications of her outrage, her fierce *jibara* nationalism manifested in her reference to *gringo* imperialist food, and her humiliation, by incorporating herself into the natural space of the land. The complicated maneuverings of her own identity within a growingly complicated anomalous national space is undermined by her insistence on being part of the natural as opposed to the political space of the nation. Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricanness, is not something that can be defined simply in defiance of American imperialist views; it is tied into the landscape, echoing back to the guavas in the prologue. To be Puerto Rican, for Santiago, is to belong to the land, to belong to a family, and to be a *jibara*. When any of these spaces are questioned or intruded upon, she literally fragments signifying that those ties that bind the self together become permeable. Her constant articulation of "uprooting," another metaphor from nature, further suggests that being grounded, laying roots, is not so simple as "transplanting" something outside of its natural space. For Santiago, transplantation and uprooting come to signify a loss. The guavas may sit in the Shop and Save in New York, but it is only a sad replication.

The separation and doubling of the self, while allowing her to function in multiple registers at once, is also symptomatic of an already apparent plurality that Negi/Esmeralda is unable to negotiate. Ironically, her earlier inability to see herself in the family's sole mirror has allowed her to re-imagine and position herself as the subject of her own gaze, a maneuver that complicates an easy reading of her unified subjectivity.

Though the movement from the island to the mainland is clearly a traumatic event for Negi/Esmeralda, the complications of her hybridity are already clearly formulated before her displacement from the island though this hybridity is obscured by the "double-selves" that populate the memoir. The shifting context of her cultural identity is now played out in the belly of the beast and the heart of the empire. Negi/Esmeralda has

shifted from a space of contested cultural citizenship into a space of invisibility and derision. Her Puerto Rican experience in New York shifts her identity as Puerto Rican to the forefront, even as this foregrounding is coupled with a general sense of social invisibility. Upon leaving Puerto Rico, Santiago declares:

Neither one of us could have known what lay ahead. For her, it began as an adventure with more twists and turns than she expected or knew how to handle. For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting. (209)

The creation of this hybrid identity is importantly linked to an involuntary uprooting, an uprooting which interferes with her own process of becoming. In the lines above, Santiago hints at a contingent identity, an identity which presumably would have left her less decisively divided. In this reading, Santiago's primary division, the force that has left her a hapless hybrid, is the movement from the island to New York.

In her need to obliterate the Negi of her familial commitments (the oldest sister of eleven siblings, the translator for her mother, the abandoned daughter, the granddaughter/cousin/niece of a seemingly endless cast of characters), Negi locates the moment of herself as a united subject of her own making within the static Puerto Rico that existed the moment before she boarded the plane to New York the day that she ate her last guava. The result of this location is an assumption that the misery of Negi's current moment is the exclusive product of her relocation, and not in fact, the product of an oscillating identity that was present even from her earliest moments. Instead, she locates herself within a particular national type and in doing so, holds on to the notion that there is a moment of return that is not hopelessly complicated by her departure and relocation.

The problem for Santiago, at least in trying to locate the genesis of her hybridity in the belly of a plane, is that this is an assertion that her own text simply does not support. Instead of reading her departure from Puerto Rico as *the* moment of hybridization, the very social conditions that forced Negi onto that plane — Americanization of the island, the Commonwealth Status, US citizenship, shifting social codes, and a cultural/national identity in massive flux — create that moment in the plane as the *culmination* of a process of hybridization that is both complicated and painful. Operating and writing within the diaspora creates its own set of codes and symbols, both of which function as a way of signaling an ethnic and cultural identity that is tied to a specific geography, the home space of Puerto Rico. Santiago's use of such images and codes, the guava of her prologue and the past tense of her title, are not so much gestures towards an assimilationist logic as they are one mode of understanding how to define an identity that is fragmented as a result of living in a borderland state.

While Gloria Anzaldúa encourages the “new mestiza” to “break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in

her work how duality is transcended” (Anzaldúa102), what we see in Santiago’s work is an inconsistent insistence on these dualities. While Santiago’s text may not ultimately transcend these dualities, she succeeds in cracking them open to reveal the ways in which they operate and obfuscate. Moreover, in a culture that is dramatically and radically reconfiguring itself, positing any identity as essential and unchanging is an impossibility that requires a rupture as opposed to a resolution.

Notes

1. Puerto Rico is technically a Commonwealth of the United States. As such, Puerto Rico, has a similar kind of relationship to federalism as does a state, but Puerto Rico lacks certain rights that states enjoy, such as representation on the federal level of government. Puerto Ricans, however, are natural born citizens of the United States and can move freely between the island and mainland though Puerto Ricans can only exert citizenship rights on the federal level—such as voting for the President of the United States—if they reside on the mainland. This in-between, Puerto Ricans voted in a plebiscite on the Commonwealth Status, and overwhelmingly voiced their discontent with current political association, with the vast majority of those voting favoring statehood.

2. For more on circular migration, see Jorge Duany’s *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* and Gina M. Pérez’s *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration Displacement and Puerto Rican Families*.

3. Arguably, the question of articulating different kinds of Puerto Rican identity is one of the foundational questions within Puerto Rican Studies. For more on this, see Juan Flores’s *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* and *From Bomba to Hip Hop*; Ramon Grosfoguel’s *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective*; Frances Negron-Muntaner and Ramon Grosfoguel’s *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*; Carmen S. Rivera’s *Kissing the Mango Tree: Puerto Rican Women Rewriting American Literature* among others.

4. Sánchez González makes a distinction between “Nuyorican,” a term that was originally used derisively by insular Puerto Ricans to denigrate mainland born Puerto Ricans and was later appropriated by avant-garde poets in New York City, and Boricua, a term that she argues more correctly names a diasporan community whose boundaries have historically been larger (though less well known) than New York City. I maintain that same distinction here.

5. The articulation of this disjunction as a conjunction helps, in part, to explain why Puerto Ricans do not tend to hyphenate their identities (Puerto Rican-American), as under the auspices of the Commonwealth one assumes the other.

6. For more on the analysis of the *jíbaro*, including further analysis of its class implications as well as the way the figure operates within the diaspora, see the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños’s *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*.

7. The term cultural nationalism here demarcates the fierce kind of identity politics that emerge from Puerto Rico, a place that Jorge Duany has called a “nation without a state.” In this sense, cultural nationalism refers to the intense ethnic and cultural identification that Puerto Ricans throughout the diaspora have, while acknowledging that Puerto Rico is not, in fact, a nation-state as such. Moreover, this cultural nationalism is precisely a product of Puerto Rico’s continued in-between political status as a Commonwealth of the United States, and points to a much larger political hybridity.

8. This refers to W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous claims about the double consciousness experienced by the “talented tenth” wherein the individual experiences understanding their own culture/race from the position of a member of that race, while simultaneously understanding and working against the vision of race that the dominant culture possess.

9. As Puerto Rico was industrializing under Operation Bootstrap, its twin project Operation Serenity was established to cement the cultural/spiritual essence of the Puerto Rican people in the face of these massive social and economic changes.

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