

## Nostalgic *Jíbaro*:

### A Structure of Loss in U.S. Puerto Rican Literature

By Edrik López

If we extend Ann Cheng's hypothesis in *The Melancholy of Race* (2000) posed in the question "what is the subjectivity of the melancholic object?" (Cheng 14) to Puerto Rico, one of the world's last remaining colonies, we encounter the ways racialized identity in America operates melancholically. On the one hand, a melancholic identity signifies a certain sadness or state of acknowledgement of a particular loss. On the other hand, in what Cheng sees as the trap of nostalgia, melancholia binds one to a catechesis whose first instruction is to make sure the identity is lost forever so that the recovery of the loss is not the goal of melancholia, but rather as Cheng puts it, "the melancholic eats the lost object – feeds on it, as it were" (Cheng 8).

Racial melancholia incorporates subjects through the institutional scripts that constitute identity in relation to the nation. In Puerto Rico, the colonial project the United States embarked on as both a bastion of Enlightenment ideals of democracy and the very anti-thesis of its textual constitution, points to the way "diasporic Puerto Rican" identity is structured around a system whose incorporation is based on a desired but un-incorporable loss. There is a specific body that is the site of identification and desire found in U.S. Puerto Rican literature. Yet, because identity for people of color in the U.S. works within a colonial social structure (Cheng's definition of racialization), Puerto Rican migration, as evidenced by its imaginative literature, adds a significant nostalgic element to Puerto Rican racialization. Cheng argues that melancholia is already a part of racialization:

Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. (Cheng 10)

The argument that I make in this paper is that Puerto Rican literature in the United States has found a very specific figure through which racialization "is processed"—with its undertones of melancholia—in the historical and mythical persona of the *jíbaro/a*.

Take the following scene from Esmeralda Santiago's semi-fictionalized memoir *When I was Puerto Rican* (1994) as apotheosis of the bind that U.S. colonial racialization places on a diasporic Puerto Rican. The passage that appears in the first chapter in the book, "How to Eat a Guava," takes place when Santiago is an adult living in New York. While grocery shopping, Santiago is in front of a fruit stand and she picks up a guava that sends her in a flashback to her childhood in Puerto Rico:

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 it 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 a \$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. . . . I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet. (Santiago 4)

As she goes towards the “apples and pears,” the book heads towards the scenes of alienation as she experiences the new foods, sensations, autumn, old age and its accompanying memories. If Anne Cheng is correct that racial melancholia is structured around a loss, then the passage by Santiago provides a vivid scene of how diasporic Puerto Ricans structure their self in relation to a lost homeland, particularly a lost self which is the “un-incorporable loss” of her piece.

### **The trope of the nostalgic *jíbaro***

Located within U.S. Puerto Rican literature is a system of rhetoric that is evidence of U.S. Puerto Rican writers like Tato Laviera and Esmeralda Santiago in dialogue with representational forms originating on the island of Puerto Rico, initiated by the likes of Manuel Alonso (1850s) and continued by others like Antonio Pedreira (1930s), becoming embedded within a racialized sense of how the U.S. Puerto Rican community sees itself. The specific trope that U.S. Puerto Rican writers have decided to seize and reconfigure, and through which a frame develops around their work, is that of the *jíbaro/a*.

In an essay on the *jíbaro/a* as symbol of Puerto Rican identity, Carmen Torres-Robles expresses an intellectual sentiment that has been generally agreed upon by most Puerto Rican scholars. She notes that for many Puerto Ricans “la figura del jíbaro representa la esencia de la nacionalidad puertorriqueña” (Torres-Robles La mitificación 241). This figure is a Puerto Rican who is a rural mountain farm worker, generally more of Spanish descent than African or mulatto. Enrique Laguerre’s book *El jíbaro de Puerto Rico: Símbolo y figura* (1968) points at the inability to locate the historical origins of the *jíbaro/a*:

No se sabe qué origen tiene la palabra jíbaro, según se aplica al campesino puertorriqueño. Como ha sucedido en circunstancias similares—gaucho, para el resero de la pampa, o guaso, para el campesino chileno—quizá la palabra tuvo en un principio concepto peyorativo. (Laguerre IX)

According to Laguerre, the word *jíbaro* appears for the first time in the *Diario Económico de Puerto Rico* on June 17, 1814, “cuando se escindía la política . . . que dieron paso al nacimiento de los conceptos políticos que se han debatido en Puerto Rico desde entonces: asimilismo, autonomismo, separatismo” (Laguerre IX). The physical portrayal of the *jíbaro/a* is of someone that has “settled,” one who has to work on the earth in the coffee and tobacco fields of Puerto Rico in the early 1800s. It would appear that U.S. Puerto Rican writers appropriated this figure of the *jíbaro/a* as their center of national and cultural identity and, therefore, transfigured it into race on the arrival to the U.S. Efraín Barradas mentions this idea in an essay

on Esmeralda Santiago's book *When I was Puerto Rican*: "...para muchos [neorricans] ser puertorriqueño es ser el arquetípico jíbaro..." (Barradas *Partes de un todo* 202).

Examining the archetype of the *jíbaro/a* enables us to witness the extent of intertextuality's effect on racialization at work in these first periods of twentieth century U.S. Puerto Rican literature. The first Puerto Rican writer to use the *jíbaro/a* was Manuel Alonso, considered the father of Puerto Rican literature, with the publication in 1849 of *El jíbaro*. In *El jíbaro*, Alonso gives us a picture of what the prototypical Puerto Rican looks like. His poem entitled "El Puerto-Riqueño" is that portrait:

Color Moreno, frente despejada,  
Mirar lánguido, altivo y penetrante  
La barba negra, pálido el semblante,  
Rostro enjuto, nariz proporcionada. (Alonso 196-7)

Alonso's description of a "good Puerto Rican" initiates the privileging of the *jíbaro/a*. According to Edgar Martínez, Alonso is representative of the *costumbrista* period in which "se ha tratado en el plano meramente pintoresquista, destacando sólo el costumbrismo externo" (Martínez 52). According to Antonio Pedreira in *Insularismo, Ensayos de interpretación puertorriqueña*, Alonso is situated in part one of what he calls the first of two *jíbaro/a* cycles. This cycle, which is interested in the *costumbrista* aspect, gives "categoría humorista al tema" and searches for the essence of what is puertorriqueño in the linguistic expressions of the *jíbaro/a* (Martínez 52). The *jíbaro/a* is admired at a distance for his/her distinctly essential Puerto Rican features.

### **Becoming the nostalgic *jíbaro/a***

In the U.S., the *jíbaro/a* more than any other symbol is at the center of the tensions of cultural identification with the "new" world that surrounds U.S. Puerto Rican literature. H/she has left his/her land and writes about it and the local surroundings from the perspective of a Puerto Rican *campesino/a*. This is the dominant trope of twentieth century United States Puerto Rican literature, and it is through this trope that race and migration are situated in the geopolitics of race misidentification. The *jíbaro/a* is the figure by which U.S. Puerto Rican writers measure their cultural and national identity.

Esmeralda Santiago's *When I was Puerto Rican* provides an opportunity for analysis of the trope of the nostalgic *jíbara* because a historicized reading of the text reveals the process of becoming that dislocated *jíbara*. Santiago's book is rich with nostalgia for a past life that was lived in another country in another language. The back cover to the first edition sums the nostalgia up perfectly: "Esmeralda Santiago's story begins in rural Puerto Rico...growing up Esmeralda learned the way to eat a guava . . . but just when she seemed to have learned everything, she was taken to New York City, where the rules—and the language—were bewildering different."

*When I was Puerto Rican* is overwhelmingly read as a memoir of alienation and nostalgia caused by the dislocation of emigrating. The "was Puerto Rican" in the title of the book is normatively seen by others as pre-migration. Joan Torres-Pou describes Santiago's book as a search for a new identity after migration has occurred, "un cuestionamiento (¿si ya no soy puertorriqueña qué soy?)" (Torres-Pou 414). The position can be summed up as follows: Esmeralda Santiago was Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico; she changes when she moves to the United

States, and so she looks back at a time when she felt she was something whole in order to explore exactly what she lost.

Closer examination of the memoir reveals how much the “story of immigration” is lacking in the actual text. Esmeralda Santiago does not move to the United States until near the end of the book, yet alienation and nostalgia are very much a part of the narrative of her lived experience *in* Puerto Rico. Why is Santiago nostalgic? For her loss of homeland? Her loss of original self? Her relocation both on the island as well as to the mainland? What Esmeralda Santiago experiences is not the direct effects of immigration, but rather the effects of a *jíbara* that is modernizing. The book is full of moments where contact is made between something old and new, passing and coming. Moments that lead people like Lola Aponte Ramos to say that “define quién está adentro, quién afuera . . .” (Aponte Ramos 33). For Santiago, what is “in” the circle of identity is the *jíbara* of Puerto Rico.

Nostalgia and alienation are problematic in Santiago’s *When I was Puerto Rican* because a conflation, a blurring, an entanglement occurs between a longing for a lost *patria*—a lost *país*—and a longing for a lost lifestyle—a rural setting—*el campo del jíbaro/a*. Nostalgia appears throughout Esmeralda’s childhood, and the alienation is as present in the chapters where she is in the middle of her rural Macún, Puerto Rico, as when she is in the United States. *When I was Puerto Rican* poses a before and after. Before X she was Puerto Rican, after X she was no longer a *jíbara*, thus not a Puerto Rican. Santiago’s book is the ur-text of the trope of the nostalgic *jíbara* because it narrativizes the formation of that trope, the process by which the U.S. Puerto Rican arrives at that position.

The book situates Santiago at the critical moment when development drastically sped-up in Puerto Rico. Santiago witnesses the Puerto Rican government’s movement toward development and the resistance to it at the local *campesino* level in the meeting between experts and the locals of the town after the government opens up a community center. The government officials come into the town to modernize healthcare and to give a nutritional lesson to the residents of Macún. The public health officials introduce the now common “triangular food chart” in a meeting with the adults of the community:

In heavily accented, hard to understand Castilian Spanish [the expert from the U.S.] described the necessity of eating portions of each of the foods on his chart every day. There were carrots and broccoli, iceberg lettuce, apples, pears, and peaches. The bread was sliced into a perfect square, unlike the long loaves Papi brought home from a bakery . . . There was no rice on the chart, no beans, no salted codfish . . .

“But señor,” said Doña Lola from the back of the room, “none of the fruits or vegetables on your chart grow in Puerto Rico.” (Santiago 66)

A subsequent dialogue is exchanged between the experts and the locals to whom the suggestion is made to substitute the recommended food with native foods. However, this proves to be problematic:

“Is an apple the same as a mango?” asked Cirila . . .

“Sí,” said the expert, “a mango can be substituted.”

“What about breadfruit?”

“I’m not sure . . .” The *Americano* looked at an expert from San Juan, who stood up . . .and spoke in a voice as deep and resonant as a radio announcer. “Well, I believe so,” he said, “but it is best not to make substitutions for the recommended foods. That would throw the whole thing off.” (Santiago 67)

The overt reading of this passage is that of Americans coming into Puerto Rico privileging their way over the local way, replacing the local with that of the foreign. What is particularly interesting is the second exchange of that passage—that between the San Juan Puerto Rican and the local Macún woman.

Throughout the chapter, the distinguishing features between the American experts and those from San Juan are blurred. At times, it is impossible to differentiate which expert is recommending the proper nutritional or hygiene system to the people of Macún. Something *more than* an American invasion of Macún occurs. It is also an invasion from San Juan—the urban mecca of Puerto Rico—into the *jíbaro/a*’s community.

During this period, Puerto Rico had been transformed dramatically. A speech given in 1956 by Luis Muñoz Marín to the Association of Harvard Clubs entitled “An America to Serve the World” demonstrated the change in Puerto Rico:

A few figures may tell you what . . . Puerto Rico has accomplished in the last 15 years. In 1940, our net income was 230 million. It is today a billion, with a real increase of 107 per cent. Production has been doubled and our income per capita is now . . .higher than all of the Latin American countries. . . We had 300,000 students in 1940; now we have more than 600,000 (“America . . . Serve World.” (Muñoz Marín *An America* 10)

This transformation occurred primarily in the cities of the island. San Juan, being the capital in both economic and governmental aspects, had achieved the greatest gain from modernization. The essential quality to which Santiago clings, the Puerto Rico she lost, is Macún itself which is a small town that today is another suburb in the metropolitan area known as San Juan that houses one million people. The Puerto Rico that Esmeralda Santiago has lost is the Puerto Rico of the *jíbaro/a*. Santiago longs for a lifestyle during the years she was growing up, a lifestyle that is being left behind. It is important to note that Macún, as opposed to San Juan or other urban areas, becomes the synecdoche for Puerto Rico and the representative site of difference between Puerto Rico and the United States which is represented in Santiago’s work by New York.

Macún as a site of nostalgia and utopia is ironically enabled by modernization itself. Macún and the *jíbaro/a* are pre-modern origins that anchor diasporic Puerto Ricans’ sense of a national and cultural self. The modern intrusion of the metropole of the U.S. and San Juan are ultimately the agents that diachronically split the *jíbaro/a*, placing him/her on a nostalgic past that must be recaptured in a future utopia where his/her self is centered. Anne Cheng’s contribution to the nostalgic project is to place racialization as an affect experienced as loss. This modern notion is important because Macún and the guavas of Santiago’s childhood are origins of authenticity, becoming the markers of genuineness for any future experience.

Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I was Puerto Rican* is a eulogy for the *jíbaro/a*. It is the historicizing and fictionalizing of the trope of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a*. Santiago herself points to the *jíbaro/a* as the idealized image of the Puerto Rican as she names the chapter following the

prologue, “Jíbara.” She frames the chapter with a folk saying: “Al jíbaro nunca se le quita la mancha del plátano” (Santiago 7). The drive of her memoir is a delineation of the events that transformed this *jíbara*. The frame of “How to Eat a Guava” shapes the critical moments of the text. She is in New York in a supermarket where she remembers her idyllic childhood in Puerto Rico. However, the struggle that occurs in the rest of the book is not a conflict of movement away; it is a resistance to the process of modernization. The vehicle to that process is assisted by the United States, but this is where her disdain for America appears more recognized: during the moments where they interrupt Santiago’s rural community, not when she is told that she will move to the United States. In effect, Santiago is privileging the life of the *jíbara* as the life of an authentic Puerto Rican.

To conclude that *When I was Puerto Rican* falls within a conventional genre of exile literature is limiting and wrong. To do so would exclude the historical forces that are specific to U.S. Puerto Rican writing. The book is considered exile literature because it seems that Santiago wrote it as such: it evokes a vantage point of exile from an idyllic, coherent, pre-exile past that is shattered by a force, events, of her time, and these events caused the dislocation that Esmeralda Santiago is feeling. This story is “read over” uncritically because it fits very well with the United States’ imagining of itself in relation to Latin America. Latin America and Puerto Rico are the primitive to the United States modern. Consequently, the dislocation is not from Puerto Rico to the United States; instead, the dislocation is the migration from country to the city. This is the story of the *jíbara* becoming increasingly urban, culminating in the grand event of moving to the biggest metropolis on the United States mainland.

The United States in this book is a medium through which Santiago experiences urbanization, modernization, and development. These are the causes of her alienation. The book is an attempt to project back and imagine a time in which she did not feel dislocated. Naturally, since she is writing from the United States and in English, the conclusion that she makes is that her dislocation is the result of the lost homeland. However, the lost homeland is only a secondary product of a much bigger force that Puerto Rico has been facing in the twentieth century: modernization. In the Center for Puerto Rican Studies’ “Labor Migration under Capitalism” Puerto Rico is called a “unique case in development” in the world because it is the only country which experienced such great economic growth (the years 1940-60s) while at the same time it was experiencing dramatic losses in its labor force (CUNY 119). In part, Puerto Rico was able to gain great steps in its development because it was able to offer the United States as a choice for jobs to its poorer citizens. This is the choice made for Esmeralda Santiago by her mother. *When I was Puerto Rican* illustrates the movement of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a* to a major city of the United States to work in a modern economy and have increased opportunities.

### **Nostalgic *jíbaros* write**

After this analysis of Santiago, we can explore the ways the trope of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a* works its way inside other U.S. Puerto Rican literature. Especially important is a look at the major wave of that literature that began in the late 60s and early 70s with the “Nuyorican Poets” which predate Santiago’s memoir yet are interestingly elucidated by using her text as a lens. Writers such as José Angel Figueroa, Miguel Piñero, Sandra Maria Esteves, Tato Laviera occupy the same space as Esmeralda Santiago. These, too, are mostly the product of what has been colloquially called “muñocismo,” a result of the cultural works project by Governor Luis Muñoz Marín that created the idea of the *jíbaro/a*. Consequently, these writers also attach

themselves to the *jíbaro/a* as the figure by which a specific cultural identity is propagated. A direct evidence of the trope of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a* found in their writing is the way the Nuyorican writers have constructed the spaces of their poetry: New York and Puerto Rico. Nuyorican poetry constructs a social space as though the writers were nostalgic *jíbaros* longing for a return to utopia. In numerous essays, critics like Efraín Barradas have identified the way these writers construct Puerto Rico, imagining it as an Edenic paradise from a distance. Through the specific representation of space in Nuyorican poetry an intrapolation can be done that points to the *jíbaro/a* as the producer of the Nuyorican spatial construction.

In “ ‘De lejos en sueños verla . . .’: visión mítica de Puerto Rico en la poesía neorrícan,” Barradas outlines the way that these Nuyorican writers have constructed their lost homeland in comparison to the United States. He says that the Nuyorican writer “se encuentra en las grandes ciudades estadounidenses y por ello ése es el mundo que refleja en su obra. Ese mundo es siempre negativo, violento, destructor” (Barradas *Partes de un todo* 63). The surrounding environment is an alienated, degenerative space to the *jíbaro/a* because the earth has been lost. In turn, Puerto Rico takes on utopian qualities.

Nuyorican poets describe the construction of Puerto Rico as a mythic view of the island similar to the way early exile poets of the late nineteenth century such as Hostos and Gautierrez-Benitez wrote of Puerto Rico from New York and Spain. For example “Sky People” by Tato Laviera manifests the nostalgic *jíbaro* in a poet who imagines utopia in Puerto Rico:

Eye-scratching mountain view  
 Puerto Rico counting houses  
 upon houses, hill after hill,  
 in valleys and in peaks,  
 to observe: la gente del cielo

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who prayed in nature’s candlelight,  
 galaxies responding with milky way guinaítas  
 winked in tropical earth smile (Laveria in *Aloud* 333)

There is the characteristic alignment with Nature as it speaks of mountains and galaxies and a sense of a cosmic harmony with an approving God. Finally, there is a sense of a racial and cultural harmony as he reduces Puerto Rico to that mythological, harmonious number: *one*—one culture, one race, one God, one people. The sky people, living in the mountains, parallel the *campesino jíbaro*. Laviera externalizes what has been called an *actitud interior* of imagining Puerto Rico as a displaced *jíbaro/a*.

A poem by José Angel Figueroa entitled “Puertorriqueña,” goes further and argues that the *jíbaro/a actitud interior* of the U.S. Puerto Rican must not be hidden:

jíbara  
 por qué  
 te  
 pintas la cara?  
 don’t you know  
 you have offended the  
 true complexion of the sun

that you have assassinated  
 the soft canela skin  
 of borinken's mother pure (Figueroa in *Aloud* 65)

The locus of identity recognized by the poet is that of the *jíbaro* hiding underneath a “front” she projects to the U.S. The *jíbaro/a* is exposed in the poem in the line that speaks of “flashbacks to unseen landscapes” or as Victor Hernández Cruz would call “that imaginary place called Puerto Rico” (“Three Songs from the 50s” in *Aloud* 314). On the other hand, Pietri’s inner utopia distorts his social space as a way to escape it. The distortions caused by the memories of “unseen landscapes” address the nostalgia of the *jíbaro/a* manifested by most U.S. Puerto Rican writers. Pietri’s most famous poem, “Puerto Rican Obituary,” can be read as a cry for those U.S. Puerto Ricans that have lost the bearing of their origin. In “Obituary,” the regret is the forgetting of the *jíbaro/a* roots of the transplanted Puerto Ricans. In “Wet Hands . . .,” the poet tries to cope with his surroundings by somehow manipulating the visual landscape, yet recognizing the futility of this exercise. What becomes a small but significant point toward the end of the poem is that the poet feebly realizes that it would have been so easy to have that imagined landscape in front of him: “All we had to do . . . /was take . . . the plane.” Some Nuyorican poets, in fact, attempt this.

Martín Espada, a more recent addition to United States Puerto Rican poetry, is one *jíbaro* that travels back. Espada’s poetry appeared after the Nuyorican poetry wave with the publication of his *Immigrant Iceboy’s Bolero* in the 80s. Espada’s poem “Coca-Cola and Coco Frío,” from *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* shows the effects of the nostalgic view of Puerto Rico as a virginal Eden through the eyes of a *jíbaro* visiting his island:

Then, at a roadside stand off the beach, the fat boy  
 opened his mouth to coco frío, a coconut  
 chilled, then scalped by a machete  
 so that a straw could inhale the clear milk.  
 The boy tilted the green shell overhead  
 and drooled coconut milk down his chin;  
 suddenly, Puerto Rico was not Coca-Cola  
 or Brooklyn, and neither was he.  
 For years afterward, the boy marveled at an island  
 where the people drank Coca-Cola . . .  
 while so many coconuts in the trees  
 sagged heavy with milk, swollen  
 and unsuckled (Espada *City of Coughing* . . 26)

The beauty of the poem lies in the line where the boy realizes that “Puerto Rico is not Coca-Cola,” nor is he, but rather it is the coconuts that hang from the palm trees. It is at this moment that the poet realizes the *jíbaro* in himself. The *jíbaro* is upset at the injection of American consumer products at the cost of forgetting about the abundance of natural resources coming from the land that the boy sees the island having. It suggests that the natural state of Puerto Rico is the mythic Eden he saw from the distance of the United States. This recognition leads to the sadness at the end of the poem when the little boy, the *jíbaro*, marvels at the island where people choose *Coke* over the swollen and unsuckled coconuts. Puerto Rico is a forgotten Eden where nature is left fertile and wanting, waiting for the *jíbaro/a* to actualize the land’s use.

### Older jíbaro writings

More recent examples of United States Puerto Rican literature show evidence of the trope; however, this trope could be extended backwards beyond what Juan Flores calls the “third wave” of U.S. Puerto Rican writing (the Nuyorican poets) and into first and second wave of writings. In his landmark book, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*, Flores wrote an essay that provides a chronology of the writings of U.S. Puerto Ricans. Flores points to Bernardo Vega as a pioneer, one of “the first Puerto Ricans to write about New York as one who was here to stay” (Flores *Divided Borders* 145). He arrived in New York in 1916 where he wrote *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega* as an account of the three decades of his life up to the aftermath of World War II. Margarite Fernández Olmos reminds us that “this early period of the Puerto Rican community in the United States was virtually neglected until Vega’s account—published in 1977, more than a decade after his death in 1965—stimulated scholars to research this period” (Fernández 165). Vega is an important figure in U.S. Puerto Rican studies for he extended the studies further back than it was previously thought and reshapes the thinking of this literature.

Bernardo Vega is important for the study of the trope of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a* because it presents a case that is distinct from the ones examined thus far in this study. If Vega wrote as a *jíbaro*, then it can be argued that the trope is even more pervasive than previously thought, extending beyond a specific generation of writers who had similar concerns and similar social experiences. Vega shows that indeed a dialogue occurs in the U.S. Puerto Rican community as to the issue of cultural identity, and that in fact, this community has been conscious of the *jíbaro/a* since the first move.

Vega himself demonstrates the self-portrait of the Puerto Rican diasporic community by describing himself as a *jíbaro*:

In those days I was taller than most Puerto Ricans. I was white, a peasant from the highlands (a *jíbaro*), and there was that waxen pallor to my face so typical of country folk. I had a round face with high cheekbones, a wide, flat nose, and small blue eyes. As for my lips, well, I’d say they are rather sensual, and I had strong straight teeth. I had a full head of light chestnut hair, and, in contrast to the roundness of my face, I had square jaws. All in all, I suppose I was rather ugly, though there were women around who thought otherwise.

(Vega in Olmos and Augenbraum 165 )

We should not forget while reading Vega that the main point of his description is that he “is a *jíbaro* from the coffee and tobacco mountains. Vega will repeat this point many times in his book; he will never let us forget that, despite what may happen to him, he is a *tabaquero*” (Vega in Olmos and Augenbraum 79). Despite how much migrating to the United States affects him, the locus of identification will be as a *jíbaro/a* like Esmeralda Santiago. Evidence of this trope is shown in the way that Vega wrote his memoirs and the metaphors he uses that reference the *jíbaro/a* lifestyle. For example, when talking of meeting his friend one day he writes, “One day I found Pepe gloomier than a rooster after a cockfight” (Vega in Olmos and Augenbraum 166). Another example of these expressions is when there was a discussion on the readings by the *tabaqueros*: “should dates or questions of fact provoke discussion, there was always someone

who insisted on going to the *mataburros* or ‘donkey-slayer’—that’s what we called reference books” (Vega in Olmos and Augenbraum 169). The metaphors and analogy are related back to the experiences of a *jíbaro/a*. Nature, and specifically the farm life, is employed as the mechanism through which Vega understood his new environment. Vega translated the United States to us through things that are analogous with an essential Puerto Rican experience: the *jíbaro/a*.

The important figure in this period of U.S. Puerto Rican writing is Pedro Juan Soto whose *Spiks* (1956) many consider to be about language and the defamation received because of it:

Decir “I no spik English” en Estados Unidos es ofender el espíritu  
de una nación de inmigrantes que dijeron lo mismo al llegar, cuestionar  
la pronunciación del nuevo prójimo, revelar los nexos que lo unen  
a usted a unos vínculos culturales extraños. (Soto 9)

Juan Flores describes Soto as occupying the “second stage” of U.S. Puerto Rican literature. To Flores, “in contrast to the primarily testimonial writings of the previous period, this was the first ‘literature,’ in the narrow sense, about a community here.... It was a literature *about* Puerto Ricans in the United States, rather than *of* that community” (Flores *Divided Borders* 148). Soto’s *Spiks* employs the trope of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a* as its locus of linguistic identity.

Soto offers seven stories and eight “miniaturas” that range in issue from crime and drug abuse to the problem of love and cultural alienation. However, the thread that connects all these stories is the issue of language. In Miniatura IV, Soto recreates the *jíbaro/a* speech pattern in the United States:

--Ca veh que m’encuentro con perras en loh bolsilloh, como que  
m’entra el Diablo.

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--Loh chavoh prietoh me train mala suerte. (Soto 63)

Pedro Juan Soto’s recreation is similar to Manuel Alonso’s *costumbrista* recreation of the *jíbaro/a*’s style of Spanish form with dropped “s” and “d” hard consonants replaced by soft “h”. *Spiks* is the story of the *jíbaros* who already are looked down upon for the way they speak their specific Spanish, who migrate and move to speak “broken English.” The *jíbaro/a* appears in Soto’s book located in the identification with language. Soto writes about the community much in the same way Alonso wrote about the *jíbaro/a*.

The move in U.S. Puerto Rican literature in which the works become *by* that community rather than *about* it is made in the sixties by those who some would call the first Nuyoricans. This group of writers have become aware of the presence of the essences of the nostalgic *jíbaro/a* and they break with the scrim of utopia. Puerto Rico is seen in less Edenic terms in a few works while in other works New York is becoming that Eden. They realize the longing for a homeland and choose to relocate home to their New York setting. New York is celebrated yet, only in so far as they can recreate the *jíbaro* Puerto Rico in it.

The nostalgic *jíbaro/a* returned to his land and found it unwelcoming to his vision of it. He was rejected and realizes that his home is in New York, centering the “nuyorican” experience there at the heart of the *casitas* that appear throughout the Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New

York City. Nuyorican poets no longer need Puerto Rico. The *casitas* solve nostalgia because they parallel the *casitas* that in Puerto Rico were often clustered at the mouths of rivers. Rural Puerto Ricans built them starting at mid-century in the beginning of industrialization (Operation Bootstrap), along the riverbanks and marshy deltas—the only land available for them to settle (Flores *From Bomba* 73). In them lived the Lalao's of Esmeralda Santiago's lost Macún. The *jíbaro* lives in the *casitas* of El Barrio, in relocated Puerto Rico. The *actitud interior del jíbaro*, his poems and his art, moves to the exterior world in the reenactment of home. As such, Pietri no longer needs to surreally morph his environment. Vega and Figueroa will never forget what they are. Laviera will point to them as the true presence of Puerto Rico. Piri was home all along. Sandra Maria Esteves has given birth to her *jíbaro/a* desires. Esmeralda Santiago can finally eat guavas and be once again puertorriqueña. All need a space inside the Barrio *casita*.

### Neorican Literature

As seen in the examples taken from different works of U.S. Puerto Rican literature, the trope of the *jíbaro/a* is the dominant figuration that appears across the range of that literary tradition. U.S. Puerto Rican literature has refigured the use of the *jíbaro/a* by relocating that figure and positioning him/her outside of the great attachment to the land and together with the affective dimension of nostalgia (and alienation). U.S. Puerto Rican writers could be seen as revising that trope used since the inception of Puerto Rican literature through Antonio Pedreira, Miguel Meléndez Muñoz, Virgilio Davila, Luis Lloréns Torres and others.

Today *jíbaros* are only emblems. Sometimes they may be seen in the heart of the island, machete in hand, wrinkled leather-bronze skin tugging you back to some lost memory, even if you've never been to Puerto Rico, never pulled a ripe, yellow guayaba from its tree. Nearly all have stopped being the *jíbaro auténtico* of Pedreira and today in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century they have become *jíbaros postmodernos*, walking through New York City, writing poetry about the beautiful palm trees in Loisaida. Usually questions of authenticity are bad ones, useful mainly for pushing us beyond them. Yet, the *jíbaro* for these writers seems to be a sign of strategic essentialism, formulating a resistant solution to the constant assimilating forces crowding Puerto Ricans, invading Macún.

This may be why U.S. Puerto Rican writers have located authentic Puerto Rican identity from the vantage point of a displaced *jíbaro/a*. Esmeralda Santiago offers the best work to be analyzed on these grounds because she uses migration, nostalgia, alienation, and relation to the land in the most pronounced fashion. Santiago's text narrativizes the construction of this trope in U.S. Puerto Rican literature for her generation of writers as the result of certain political, social, and economic factors that occurred in that island since 1898. Efraín Barradas' essay on Santiago conceptualizes other U.S. Puerto Rican writers within this frame as he states that for many "neorricans ser jíbaro es ser puertorriqueño" (Barradas *Partes de un todo* 202). For Barradas, this is the use of one of the oldest myths in Puerto Rican culture. The other writers in this study show that this myth is part of their identification with a specific cultural identity. From Bernardo Vega to Pedro Juan Soto to the Nuyorican poets, all have employed and reconfigured this mythic trope in one way or another. The ultimate reconfiguration appears in the physical presence of the *jíbaro/a* in the form of the *casitas*.

The trope of the *jíbaro/a* identifies a chain in Puerto Rican literature that reshapes the way we think of that specific tradition. I wonder if Antonio Pedreira, when he wrote that "De Martín Peña para allá, todos son jíbaros," imagined his *allá* would not only signify a place

beyond the brook that separates San Juan from the rest of Puerto Rico, but also a place beyond the island itself. United States Puerto Rican writers have shown that even in the *álla* of Puerto Rico, they are still *jíbaros* (Pedreira 26).

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