

*“Somewhere between Puerto Rico and
New York”*: The Representation of Individual
and Collective Identities in Esmeralda
Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* and
Almost a Woman

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“I’d always been Puerto Rican, and it hadn’t occurred to me that in Brooklyn I’d be someone else,” meditates the protagonist of Esmeralda Santiago’s memoirs *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) and *Almost a Woman* (1998).¹ *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman* (henceforth *WIWPR* and *AW*) portray the development of Santiago’s subjectivity as the author’s younger self attempts to discern what it means to be Puerto Rican in the island and in the continental US. *WIWPR* covers her childhood in Puerto Rico until her departure for New York in 1961, whereas *AW* picks up her story depicting her adolescence in Brooklyn and focusing on her relationships with her family until she is 21. This article studies the memoirs’ portrayal of the complex interactions between Santiago’s geographical locations, the changes in her understanding of class and ethnicity triggered by her physical displacements, and her fluctuating attitudes towards the various communities both shaping her sense of self and being reshaped by her narratives. I will also argue that these works demand a careful reading attentive to the ways in which her identity renegotiations involve the depiction of various communities – rural and urban Puerto Rico, economically deprived and upwardly mobile Puerto Ricans in the continent, and middle-class white America – the accuracy and contentiousness of which will depend on the reader’s own ideological positionings.

Having described *WIWPR* as “a way of starting a discussion about what is Puerto Ricanism,”² Santiago examines various elements grounding ethnic identity such as land, language, cultural referents, and social structures. By exposing these terms’ ambivalent meanings she destabilizes any notions of ready-made, monolithic collective identities. Although she recurrently defines herself as Puerto Rican, we will see that the manner in which this claim is

understood varies substantially throughout the narratives; this is particularly so after the journey from her mother country to New York forces her to re-evaluate her cultural heritage, her notions of color, poverty, job prospects and familial and gender roles, and the ways in which these intersecting factors affect the present and future opportunities available to her. Santiago’s identity is (re)presented throughout her memoirs and in subsequent interviews as a shifting set of heterogeneous – and sometimes contradictory – elements, some of which become more or less prominent depending on geographical, social, and cultural contexts as well as on the different stages of the author’s life. It is thus perhaps more accurate to speak of multiple identities or subject positionalities of Santiago that become (re)defined through contrast and negation, illustrating Betty Bergland’s statement that “the autobiographical self must be understood as socially and historically constructed and multiply positioned in complex worlds and discourses.”³

In her seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa offers the metaphor of the borderlands as a way to conceptualize the experiences of difference, contradiction, discrimination, and self-(re)construction of people who, like Santiago, participate simultaneously in various cultures. Although she is referring primarily to the borderland between the US Southwest and Mexico, Anzaldúa stresses that “[t]he psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest”: they are “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”⁴ *WIWPR* and *AW* portray such class, ethnicity, and culture borderlands as they depict how Esmeralda⁵ negotiates her sense of belonging to different environments and collectives that give her opposing messages: urban and rural Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico and the US, her Brooklyn neighborhood and her middle-class Manhattan drama school, the private sphere of her family life and the public sphere of schools and workplaces. The dilemmas in Santiago’s literary self-reconfigurations evidence that the borderland, a shifting landscape of contradictions, is “not a comfortable territory to live in” (Anzaldúa, not paginated).

Due to the gradual reworkings of her identity triggered by her conflicting allegiances living in the borderland, her subjectivities as a child in Puerto Rico show notable differences from her subjectivities as a young woman in New York. While in the island her Puerto Ricanness is not questioned, she soon becomes conscious of the contrast between the social differences and prejudices encountered in her everyday life and the idealized image of the country found in works of literature and promoted further at her school. Esmeralda’s awareness of social inequalities develops side by side with the discovery of the United States’ neocolonial interference in Puerto Rican

affairs. Once in the US, her ethnicity and nationality acquire different meanings and her ideas about social status and wealth change; while she encounters racism and economic discrimination, she finds academic and professional opportunities that she would not have enjoyed in her mother country. Due to these experiences, she has to re-examine her views on Puerto Rican and US culture as well as of her participation in both.

Understanding the terms in which this re-examination is undertaken in *WIWPR* and *AW* also requires an awareness of the implications of Santiago's choice to perform an act of self-representation by means of the specific generic frame of the memoir, a decision that affects substantially how readers receive her life narratives. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define memoir as a "mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant" and "directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator."⁶ Memoirs have also been traditionally considered as "offer[ing] only an anecdotal depiction of people and events" as opposed to "the evocation of a life as a totality" found in autobiography, as Laura Marcus points out.⁷ *WIWPR* and *AW* present Santiago as both a participant and a perceptive observer of her surroundings. However, while her interactions with family, neighbors, and acquaintances are shown as crucial in the development of her sense of identity, the focus of the narratives is clearly not on others but on herself.

Santiago's texts explicitly convey her resistance to allegorical readings of her work that would make her descriptions of herself and of those around her representative of Puerto Ricans in general. In *AW*, for instance, the author states: "I felt no obligation to 'our' people in the abstract, felt, in fact, weighed down by my duty to my people in the concrete [referring to her family]" (286). Her notions of community are thus affected by her personality as well as by her individual circumstances; that is, by her situation as the eldest child within an immigrant family in Brooklyn who struggles to pursue her academic aspirations and relationships with boyfriends while being a good role model for her siblings and trying not to disappoint her mother. Young Esmeralda's concept of community shows that race, ethnicity, and the imagined communities built upon them cannot be understood separately from other factors such as class, gender, and sexual orientation as well as age, geographical and social environments, and education.⁸

The redefinitions of the multifaceted identity of a person living in race and culture borderlands also imply a reconfiguration of the communities with whom she interacts. As Benedict Anderson shows in his *Imagined Communities*, nations are "imagined political communities" in that "even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members ... or even hear of them."⁹ Such communities are inherently limited since "even the largest of them ... has finite, if elastic boundaries"

(Anderson, 16) which are drawn differently by different people. Santiago’s narratives portray her struggles to negotiate her belonging to both US and Puerto Rican cultures, also showing that imagined communities are not imaginary: considering themselves (and being considered) members or outsiders of specific social groups strongly affects the identity construction of individuals and collectives. Emigrants like Santiago are claiming their Puerto Ricanness while also being members of other societies. In the process, they are both becoming themselves and re-imagining Puerto Rico as “a kind of ‘floating island’” embodying “a culture that does not depend so much on a geographic location as on a shared horizon of references” and which “deals not only with common origins but also with perceived differences that come to the fore only when they are far from the original ‘home’ and put into direct contact with a reality perceived as alien” (Hernández, 14). This redefinition of traditional notions of belonging is by no means exclusive to Puerto Ricans or Latinos, since “[m]igratory groups worldwide are conforming geo-cultures that, more than geo-nations, define them” (Hernández, 14).

The complex intersections of questions of ethnicity and class become particularly prominent in the case of upwardly mobile “ethnic” writers like Santiago, whose commercially successful memoirs portray her steps from her austere life in Puerto Rico to her admission to Performing Arts High School in Manhattan and, later on, to Harvard University. However, “[s]ocioeconomic success in multicultural situations thus often appears as a conversion to the dominant culture,” triggering the question: “does ‘making it’ mean ‘selling out?’”¹⁰ The production and reception of works by “ethnic” authors are greatly affected by how such questions are answered.

For mainstream audiences, much of these authors’ appeal and authority derives from their perceived status as insiders of “exotic” or “deprived” groups. They are thus assigned the role of ethnographers who make their backgrounds accessible for mass readerships and consumption. If US “ethnic” and “minority” authors achieved relative recognition after the struggles for self-definition and civil rights in the late 1960s and 1970s, the interest they generated in mainstream America also led to their commodification. Regarding US Puerto Rican literature,¹¹ “[t]he publishing industry learned to profit from civil rights-era texts that could be advertised as ‘ghetto’ testimonials, which helped create a new and lucrative pulp fiction niche during the mid- to late 1960s and 1970s.” In the 1980s and 1990s Latino culture reached a still-growing popularity. Among the new US Puerto Rican prose-writers in these decades, Sánchez Gonzalez highlights Ed Vega, Soledad Santiago, Oswald Rivera, Carmen de Monteflores, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Abraham Rodríguez, and Edward Rivera together with Esmeralda Santiago. Their works, “new utterances of ‘minority’ sensibilities,” give wide audiences “access to the American ‘Other’” and with it “the possibility of armchair cultural voyeurism.”¹²

As they describe the shifts in Esmeralda's self-perception throughout childhood and adolescence, *WIWPR* and *AW* recurrently highlight her acute awareness of class and culture contexts as well as her resistance to adopting communal imaginaries unreservedly both while in Puerto Rico and once in the US. In *WIWPR*, Santiago depicts her younger self's construction of her Puerto Rican subjectivity until her departure from the country in 1961 at age 21. Various experiences in her immediate environments lead her to grasp the ambivalences in Puerto Rico's national and cultural self-image, particularly regarding the country's contradictory attitudes towards two central elements in its identity: the figure of the *jíbaro* and the historical influence of the United States on many aspects of Puerto Rican life. Becoming aware of the unstable connotations of the iconic *jíbaro* and of the United States' transformative effect on Puerto Rico makes her realize the drastic changes taking place in her society.

"Jíbara," the first section of *WIWPR* after the prologue, presents a four-year-old Esmeralda arriving in Macún, a neighborhood in the region of Toa Baja, in 1952. The same year Puerto Rico became a Free Associated State to the US after its population had already been given American citizenship in 1917. The event, which placed Puerto Ricans in the ambiguous position of being American and not being American, had been preceded by a long history of colonization under Spanish rule and then under American control after the Spanish–American war and the US occupation in 1898. The austerity of the new family home in Macún does not hinder Esmeralda from admiring the beauty of the area, similar to the landscapes that had "inspired much of the *jíbaro* poetry."¹³ Her fascination with the *jíbaro* is born from stories and poems learned at school and music and poetry on the radio chronicling the peasant's hard life, also characterized by "independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism" (*WIWPR*, 12). This idealization of peasant life echoes the portraits of the *jíbaro* by "romantic and realistic Puerto Rican authors such as Alonso in *El Jíbaro* (1849) or the skit writer Manuel Méndez Quiñones."¹⁴ This image clashes with the one offered in works like Manuel Zeno Gandía's *La Charca* (1894), which shows the harshness of rural life at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ The *jíbaro* has become part of "a sort of mythology and social symbolism to represent the human and spiritual entity that was considered the substance of Puerto Rican culture" against the background of the country's industrialization and Americanization after 1898.¹⁶

Esmeralda's naive identification with the *jíbaro* is challenged by her mother Ramona's explanation that the city-born girl cannot be a *jíbara*, that "*jíbaros* were mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect" (*WIWPR*, 12), and that the epithet could cause offense.

Esmeralda’s construction of her Puerto Rican subjectivity is further complicated when she moves from rural Macún to the more urban Santurce and, despite her mother’s previous statements, her new classmates there mockingly call her a *jibara*, considering her poor and backward. This makes the girl doubt Ramona’s words as she reflects: “If we were not *jibaros*, why did we live like them?” (*WIWPR*, 12). Such contradictory attitudes towards the figure of the *jibaro* leave Esmeralda “[p]uzzled by the hypocrisy of celebrating a people everyone looked down on” (*WIWPR*, 13) precocious thoughts that demythify Puerto Rican “cultural identity, as well as . . . the authoritative wisdom of tradition embodied by the mother.”^{17,18} The girl’s words expose a “double cultural code”¹⁹ in the *jibaro*’s representation arising from the contradictions triggered when Puerto Rico became a US possession in 1898. Since then, “there has been a simultaneous institutionalisation of (Puerto Rican) national culture and (North American) nationality.”²⁰ A conflict arose “between an idealised autochthonous model and the modern metropolitan model [of economic, political and cultural dependency from the United States] which made the peasant referent already transformed into national myth seem poor, ignorant, and backward.”²¹

As she becomes increasingly conscious of Puerto Rican ambivalences towards its impoverished peasantry, she also realizes how the government’s policies are influenced by the US. This becomes particularly clear when a community center opens in Macún with facilities “provided by the Estado Libre Asociado, or Free Associated State, which was the official name for Puerto Rico in the Estados Unidos” (*WIWPR*, 64). Experts at the center, Esmeralda is told, would teach local mothers “all about proper nutrition and hygiene, so that [their children] could grow up as tall and strong as Dick, Jane, and Sally, the *Americanitos* in [the children’s] primers” (*WIWPR*, 64). The patronizing neocolonial undertones of the initiative are made evident as it is revealed that the “experts” are not familiar with local foods and customs at all.

A classmate of Esmeralda’s attributes the government’s initiative to the fact that “it’s an election year,” and calls Americans imperialist gringos (*WIWPR*, 72). Esmeralda’s father Pablo explains these new concepts to her, saying that many Puerto Ricans do not agree with the country’s political and economic dependency on the United States and thereby call “*Americanos* imperialists, which means they want to change our country and our culture to be like theirs” (*WIWPR*, 72–3). Connecting Pablo’s words to the fact that English lessons are compulsory at her school due to a US imposition of bilingual education, she decides not to become American by not learning the language – an attitude which she will abandon once in New York. Pablo, however, answers that “[b]eing American is not just a language . . . it’s a lot of other things . . . Like the food you eat . . . the music you listen to . . . the things you believe in” (*WIWPR*, 73).

If Pablo raises the girl's awareness of her status as a colonial subject, Ramona makes her conscious of the drastic socio-economic transformations that her country is undergoing. Ramona, "one of the first mothers in Macún to have a job outside the house," finds sewing work in a factory (*WIWPR*, 122). This alludes to the US-led economic development project Operation Bootstrap, which from the 1940s onwards attracted "many United States labor-intensive industries, such as the garment, textile, and leather trades" and "provided employment to thousands of women workers on the island."²² The country's drastic industrialization "had a great impact on Puerto Rican traditional values, on institutions associated with the old agrarian society, and on the role of women."²³ Women's growing visibility in the marketplace and in society has been seen by some as "part of . . . the process of Americanization of Puerto Rico and the acceptance of values that are detrimental to the preservation of a Puerto Rican cultural identity," instead of as "a natural consequence of socioeconomic development and consciousness-raising."²⁴ Ramona's husband and neighbors, for instance, react with "a visible, angry resentment" to her job outside the home which evidenced that she "was breaking a taboo" (*WIWPR*, 122). The strong-spirited Ramona, however, dismisses these reactions saying: "they can't imagine a better life for themselves, and they're not willing to let anyone else have it either" (*WIWPR*, 122–3).

After Esmeralda's family immigrates²⁵ to the US without Pablo, searching for medical treatment for one of her brothers, the referents according to which she (re)shapes her identity vary: new factors take prominence, and old ones change meaning. She quickly becomes aware of the relation of ethnicity and race to social status, as well as the fact that by entering the country she has automatically become "Hispanic." As regards the adolescent Esmeralda's conceptualization of her Puerto Ricanness, the main representatives of Puerto Rican culture in her immediate environments are her family – particularly Ramona – and her Puerto Rican acquaintances at Performing Arts School. As she realizes that her interests sometimes deviate from these groups' respective agendas, her understanding of her cultural and ethnic identity diverges from theirs too. A central point of contention is her "Americanization," evaluated diversely by Esmeralda, her mother, and fellow Puerto Rican students. If in the past she had held antagonistic feelings towards what she saw as Puerto Rico's Americanization, she now views her adoption of the English language and of some American ways differently.

Esmeralda faces the hierarchies dividing people both socially and geographically according to wealth, color, and culture immediately after arriving in Brooklyn. In her third day in her new neighborhood, a Spanish-speaking girl identifies her as *hispana* despite her assertion that she is Puerto Rican; that is what Spanish speakers whose parents are

“Puerto Rican or Cuban or something” become “here” (AW, 4–5). The term’s lack of clarity as an identity category is exposed as the girl adds: “[i]t has to do with being from a Spanish country. I mean, you or your parents, like, even if you don’t speak Spanish, you’re Hispanic, you know?” (AW, 5).

Esmeralda also realizes that Brooklyn, darker and dirtier than she had imagined New York to be (AW, 4), contrasts strongly with “the trim, horizontal suburbs of white Americans” that she admires in children’s comic books (AW, 26–7). Her experiences at the local junior high schools stress further how life in Brooklyn is conditioned by ethnicity. “[M]ost students were Puerto Rican, Italian, or black,” groups which do not mix; “[t]he few Americans,” the girl notes, “all white-skinned, lived and moved in their own neighborhoods and groups, closed to the rest of us” (AW, 57). She also faces language discrimination, almost being held back one grade due to her poor command of English. After rejecting this course of action since she “can do the work” and is “not stupid” (WIWPR, 226), she is finally sent to the lowest eighth-grade class with the learning disabled. This makes her determined to improve her English until her written abilities become far superior to her oral skills and she stuns teachers with her high grades in some subjects. She thereby becomes “a different person to the other eighth graders”: “they knew,” she says, “and I knew, that I didn’t belong there” (AW, 236).

When she joins Performing Arts she becomes still more aware of the divisions between the “disadvantaged” and the “advantaged,” as well as of the links between ethnic and economic backgrounds and career opportunities. Initially, the fact that the social hierarchies at Performing Arts are based on talent rather than on racial lines makes them seem fairer. However, Esmeralda soon notices the connection between wealth and the possibility to develop one’s talent: as a “poor kid in a school where many were rich,” she cannot have the “trips to Euro during vacations” or “extra classes on weekends” enjoyed by her better-off colleagues. Thus, while the terms are not fully interchangeable, there is a considerable overlap between “advantaged” and “white” and “disadvantaged” and “non-white.” Later, touring the country with a theatre company, she is “the darkest person in . . . town” wherever they stop (AW, 241), which makes her both determined “to educate people about Puerto Rico” (AW, 241) and “wary of venturing farther into the continent”: “In New York I was Puerto Rican, [which carried] negative stereotypes I continually struggled to overcome. But in other places, where Puerto Ricans were in lower numbers, where I was from didn’t matter. I was simply too dark to be white, too white to be black” (AW, 242).

Esmeralda, who tries to avoid confirming stereotypes about Puerto Ricans, feels strongly about the film *West Side Story*’s portrayal of the ethnic group. In “the *only* movie about Puerto Ricans anyone has seen,” “the only virgin . . . – sweet, innocent Maria – was always played by an American,

while the sexy spitfire was Puerto Rican" (AW, 121). However, when taking part in "a Broadway production of an Indian fable" (AW, 226), she reacts very differently towards clichéd cultural representations on stage. When an Indian friend complains that her costume "looks nothing like what Indian girls wear" (AW, 236), she answers that "[t]he designer took creative liberties" and "the costume works on stage, which is what matters" (AW, 236). This contrasts with her views on *West Side Story's* depiction of Puerto Ricans, arguably also due to "creative liberties." Incidents like these evidence that Santiago does not hide or apologize for the contradictions in her younger self's attitudes.

Within her family home, Esmeralda receives conflicting instructions about how to lead her life in New York. While "[i]t was good to learn English and to know how to act among Americans, . . . it was not good to behave like them"; she and her siblings "were to remain 100 per cent Puerto Rican" (AW, 25). However, she soon starts to question "where Puerto Rican ended and Americanized began" (AW, 25), sensing that no group or individual can offer a final definition of Americanness and Puerto Ricanness. A factor seen by Esmeralda's family as part of her Americanization is her upward mobility, despite the fact that Ramona herself had encouraged her children to get an education leading to better prospects than her job at a factory (AW, 210). Esmeralda's admission to Performing Arts High School comes as a reward for Ramona's sacrifices and ambitions, since there she "will be exposed to a different class of people" (WIWPR, 263). However, Ramona also accuses her of "wanting to go to a school for *blanquitos*" (AW, 57) – referring "to people of superior social status more than to skin color" (AW, 57) – and "reaching higher than she ought to" (AW, 55). The class abyss opening between them is stressed by Esmeralda's competence in English, which Ramona lacks. The latter's mixed reaction to the former's academic success suggests that upward mobility may be seen as a betrayal of the group, "opting out" of it or not belonging to it in the same way as before – the group here including Puerto Ricans in the island and in New York, her family, and their social class. Because of such conflicting messages, "[t]he home that had been a refuge from the city's danger was now a prison" that she wants to escape (AW, 10), "a pause between parts of [her] real life" (AW, 217).

Esmeralda arrives in New York in 1961 when she is approximately 13 years old, and becomes 21 at the end of AW. Her adolescence thus takes place during the time of the civil rights struggles, a crucial moment in the contemporary history of the United States when ethnic minorities and other groups marginalized by mainstream society gained visibility and took action against discrimination. The impact of the 1964 race riots on her family is vividly depicted in AW as the narrator describes how "the scariest thing to happen during that summer . . . was when whole neighbourhoods like [theirs] turned against themselves" (100). The other decisive event that shaped that

decade was the Vietnam war, and *AW* refers to both this topic and the civil rights struggles of the period. The social upheaval of the 1960s, however, does not seem to affect Esmeralda’s development except in tangential ways, perhaps because the memoirs are written in the 1990s from a position of awareness regarding the civil rights movement’s internal divisions and limitations, or an authorial acknowledgment that not every Puerto Rican was politically conscious and active to the same degree.

The ways in which Esmeralda’s understanding of her Puerto Ricanness differs from the politically active New York Puerto Rican community of the 1960s become evident in her discussions with Jaime, a New York-born fellow theater student. Jaime is “proud of his heritage, determined to do what he could to preserve Puerto Rican culture in New York” (*AW*, 286). While Esmeralda’s own relatives are also involved in different youth organizations in their neighborhoods or in Puerto Rican schools, her own social consciousness is described as having been “pathetically underdeveloped” (*AW*, 286) – a phrasing that distances the authorial and narratorial stances from those of Santiago’s younger self. Alluding to Esmeralda’s love for Indian classical dance, Jaime posits that Puerto Ricans should promote their own art forms and culture, and that “if we lose Puerto Ricans to other cultures, we lose Puerto Rican culture” (*AW*, 287). When she asks in turn “What do you think happens to us here? . . . Do you think we are as Puerto Rican in the US as on the island?,” Jaime answers, “More . . . We have to work at it here” (*AW*, 287). However, Esmeralda concludes: “I saw his point, but that didn’t make me want to rush down to the nearest community center to dance the *plena*. Why should I be less Puerto Rican if I danced Bharata Natyam?” (*AW*, 287).

The exhaustion of negotiating daily her multiple identities as a Puerto Rican adolescent in New York leads her to find shelter in reveries of Puerto Rico where she is accompanied by her father (*AW*, 29–30). The narrator acknowledges: “I yearned for my life in Macún . . . where I knew who I was, where I didn’t know I was poor, didn’t know my parents didn’t love each other” (*AW*, 31). As we have seen in the previous section, however, this idealization of her past on the island obliterates her identity struggles there. She also imagines having “no family . . . no loyalties, no responsibilities,” and not standing out from those around her (*AW*, 83), sometimes daydreaming that she is “a confident, powerful woman whose name changed” depending on her visualizations of the perfect Esmeralda (*AW*, 83). That “names not based on [her] own didn’t sound quite right” (*AW*, 83) suggests that she does not wish to be someone else altogether but to escape economic, linguistic, and racial discrimination as well as the pressures of being the eldest sibling in a large family under her mother’s close gaze.

However, despite the struggles derived from her multiple positionalities, Esmeralda knows that she cannot renounce a Puerto Rico associated with her

father for her Brooklyn home, or for the world “across the river, where [she] intended to make [her] life”: she must “learn to straddle all of them, a rider on three horses, each headed in a different direction” (AW, 153). Aged 21, she is “tired of the constant tug between the life [she] wanted and the life [she] had” and feels lonely “in the middle of [her] raucous family” while not blaming them for her unhappiness (AW, 210). She longs to hear her own voice, “even if it was filled with fear and uncertainty” (AW, 210). At the end of *AW*, it is not clear whether she has stayed with her family or has followed her first lover Ulvi, an authoritarian father figure who makes her choose between her family and following him to Florida. In the prologue, however, the author had already indicated that she did leave her mother’s house to travel to Florida (AW, 2). The prologue also offers a description of Esmeralda’s first visit to Puerto Rico in 1976 after leaving the country in 1961, a prolepsis that creates a tension between the older woman’s impressions of her mother country and the teenager’s nostalgic feelings after arriving in Brooklyn which open the first proper chapter of the narrative. As an adult, Esmeralda notices that the old family home in Macún “was no longer familiar” and did not evidence who she had been while there or who she will become in the future (AW, 2).

Santiago further examines the contrasts between both perspectives in interview statements, explaining how the islanders’ reactions made her aware that she was not seen as Puerto Rican “because [she] was so Americanized” (Hernández, 162). She remembers thinking: “How can *puertorriqueños* who have never left the island accuse us when they allow the American contamination I was seeing all around? There were McDonald’s, Pizza Huts, and so on. I used to think this was not our culture . . . We in the States at least have an excuse to be Americanized” (Hernández, 163). That “I used to think” hints at a later shift in Santiago’s stance; at the time, however, she had wondered: “if I’m not Puerto Rican enough and in my eyes Puerto Rico is not Puerto Rican the way it was Puerto Rican before, then what is Puerto Rican?” (Hernández, 163). Her memoirs constitute an attempt to examine from a personal point of view these questions for which no universal answer can be found (Hernández, 163).

However, this enterprise stops involving only the writer once her memoirs become published narratives with varied audiences and commercial success, a point thoroughly studied by Lisa Sánchez González in her *Boricua Literature* in connection with Santiago’s story of socio-economic success. Many of Sánchez González’s points of contention regarding *WIWPR* and *AW* arise from Santiago’s individualism, lack of representativity, and lack of overt social commitment which reflect, Sánchez González contends, Santiago’s works’ leanings towards mainstream values and expectations. But Santiago’s individualism and lack of representativity and social commitment can be related to the author’s process of becoming a middle-class US Puerto

Rican – arguably not necessarily the same thing as tailoring her work to a mainstream audience.

Sánchez González argues that the author’s memoirs offer a “solipsistic version of empowerment” which “performs in the public sphere as an outright denial of the structural inequalities . . . that the overwhelmingly working-class majority of Boricua women endure collectively as a colonial diasporan community.”²⁶ While acknowledging the limitations of critical strategies for reading ethnic narratives primarily as collective or national allegories, she also posits that contemporary writers of color writing about their ethnicity for public audiences are unavoidably involved in allegorical undertakings. For Sánchez González, works like Santiago’s undermine their authority as Latina feminist texts by representing Puerto Rican women either as victims of dysfunctional families, or as consciously assimilating youth; such clichéd figures “find contentment in their all but automatic stateside socioeconomic freedom.”²⁷

While the harmful effects of the commodification of “ethnic” women’s struggles are not to be underestimated, there are some points regarding Santiago’s memoirs that need mentioning. The main female characters in *WIWPR* and *AW* including Esmeralda can certainly be described as troubled, wounded, or angry in different ways and degrees. However, the impression they convey is far from being one of utter powerlessness or defeatism as implied by Sánchez González. Despite her flaws, Esmeralda’s mother Ramona provides a role model through her capacity to take initiative and change her circumstances. It is also worth noting that, while the Santiagos are “dysfunctional” in that the unmarried parents have a turbulent relationship marred by the husband’s infidelity and economic hardship which leads to Ramona’s journey to the continent with her children, they are certainly not more so than many white Anglo-Saxon families. Added to this, none of the characters achieve “automatic contentment” living in the US: if some difficulties experienced in Puerto Rico disappear in their new country, they have to face new hardships and dilemmas there.

Sánchez González sees works like Santiago’s as stereotyping Puerto Rican culture as *machista* in comparison to mainstream US culture, which facilitates the adult protagonist’s liberation, personal and economic independence, and subsequent class-motivated exile from the Puerto Rican community. Esmeralda’s identity dilemmas in the US are painful, she acknowledges, but the way her traumatic experiences are depicted presents her alienation as both the reason and the effect of her disaffection with a Puerto Rican heritage considered obsolete.²⁸ *WIWPR* and *AW*, however, make it clear that Esmeralda cannot or will not leave her Puerto Ricanness behind despite the difficulties of constructing a Puerto Rican identity in the US – certainly not utopic in her narratives – although her younger self sometimes wishes she were someone else. *WIWPR* explicitly states that even having graduated from Harvard she is

the “same *jíbaro*” with a “different horse” (269). As the proverb suggests, Esmeralda is and is not the Puerto Rican she was, just as Puerto Rico is and is not the country it was before 1898. Rodríguez Vecchini perceptively contends that contemporary Puerto Ricans on the island and on the continent “have also stopped being *jíbaros*, those who wished to be literary *jíbaros* as much as those descending from the *jíbaro* who worked the land” and adds that Santiago too is a contemporary Puerto Rican even if immersed in an anglophone culture.²⁹ Stressing the difficulty of stating accurately what Puerto Ricanness meant in the past and what it means nowadays, Rodríguez Vecchini points out “that Puerto Ricans are not identical to one another, . . . for better or worse they are more American than yesterday, more modern, because the model of change is still the American one.”³⁰

Writing about Santiago’s memoirs as well as other works, Sánchez González asserts that her analyses of US Puerto Rican autobiographies do not censure the writers’ lives per se but question the conscious stylization of these trajectories in their narratives. Santiago’s text, “aggressively marked as a memoir,” reads “more like a realist novel,” she adds.³¹ I believe that the attitude of both writer and reader towards autobiography and the novel are still substantially different, despite the contemporary awareness of the narrative invention and manipulations involved in the former which makes both genres impossible to delimit with clear-cut boundaries. Santiago takes a risk by not toning down her younger self’s ambition, individualism, prejudices, and flaws, as well as by not compensating these with an explicit, apologetic admission of past weaknesses and lack of social activism by the mature author. From an autobiographer’s point of view, having done so could have been conceived as being untruthful in the portrayal of herself, an ethical question not faced by the novelist in her construction of characters.

According to Sánchez González, the racist and sexist attitudes embedded in *WIWPR* do not let the novel function productively as an allegory for Puerto Rican communities. This statement most likely arises from several scenes in the memoirs echoing Santiago’s beliefs that Puerto Rican culture “has a lot to do with why Puerto Ricans are not further ahead than other groups” in the United States’ (Hernández, 167). Reflecting on this idea after returning to Puerto Rico, Santiago mentions noticing how she was different from people there: “I was assertive and if you’re assertive you’re not feminine in Puerto Rico. American women got rid of that thirty years ago” (Hernández, 167). She also adds: “[P]eople are taught to edit their thoughts . . . so as not to be disrespectful . . . in a way to be successful you have to be disrespectful to a certain point, especially in the American community, where the symbols of respect are very, very different” (Hernández, 167). The question posed by the contrasting views of Santiago and Sánchez González is whether and how an upwardly mobile US Puerto Rican can criticize the country she has left and

the working-class Puerto Rican environment that she has also “abandoned”: is she an insider, an outsider, or a “sell out”?

For critics like Sánchez González, the message communicated by Santiago’s memoirs is an incapability to present and represent accurately the communities on the island and on the continent from which she has exiled herself both in terms of class and of a cultural assimilation connected with her upwards mobility. The account of Esmeralda’s personal and academic achievements undermines any social denouncement in the narratives, as “the life this protagonist saves is exclusively her own.”³² Alternatively, other readers may interpret Santiago’s statements in the memoirs and in interviews as evidence of an awareness of how ethnicity, class, and culture are (re)constructed differently by different people; an unapologetic stance towards the views held by both her younger and her mature self; and a resistance to the automatic imposition of a political responsibility towards a Puerto Rican community imagined in terms which are not her own. In other words, these two conflicting standpoints differ on the truth that Santiago’s life narrative is conveying.

In Watson and Smith’s words, what autobiographical narratives offer is not factual history but “subjective truth,” “an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life.”³³ Using Leigh Gilmore’s phrase, autobiographical truth is “marked as a cultural production” that might be differently articulated by author and reader depending on their particular socio-historical locations and ideological positionings.³⁴ “Remembering” – as well as writing and publishing – “has its politics”; “[t]here are struggles over who is authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember, . . . over what is forgotten, both personally and collectively.”³⁵ Santiago and critics like Sánchez González differ in how they conceive the memoirs’ “truth” concerning their politics and their depiction of Puerto Rican culture.

Santiago tackles these matters by stating that *WIWPR* – and, by extension, *AW* – aims “to convey a sense . . . of the Puerto Rican experience in the United States from many different angles” (Hernández, 169). She believes that she will “be writing of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican women the rest of [her] life” (Hernández, 166). Her awareness of the collective repercussions of her work is also manifested when she states that, although she could write for herself in private journals, she “realized that it had to be public”:

It was not only my experience but an experience that a lot of immigrants are facing, not just in the United States but in any country that they go to: if you leave your “village,” your village is going to know you left and they are going to challenge you [Hernández, 163].

This “village,” apart from referring to a physical place in Puerto Rico, also serves as a metaphor for the working-class Puerto Rican environment in New York which she “abandons” with her upward mobility. However, despite the objections from these communities to Santiago’s participation in and representation of them, she still claims membership in them, thus refashioning the very nature of these collectives.

Santiago has realized that there are “degrees of Puerto Ricanness,” noting: “in Puerto Rico the people couldn’t tell me what a Puerto Rican was. They could tell me what a Puerto Rican was not, and I was one of those who wasn’t” (Hernández, 164). To her, in turn, Puerto Rico was “not Puerto Rican enough” (Hernández, 166). Santiago suggests that culture can often only be defined by contrast and that “the only way we can experience it is in relation to what we bring into it” (Hernández, 166). Accepting different degrees and ways of being Puerto Rican allows her to comprehend the varied experiences of Puerto Ricans on the island and the continent. She eventually decides that if someone does not consider her Puerto Rican, “it’s their problem”: “they’re going to have to deal with . . . the Puerto Rican that I am” (Hernández, 165).

While examining Santiago’s reassessments of her cultural identity, it is also worth noting that she considers herself Puerto Rican instead of adopting other self-defining terms used by US people of Puerto Rican descent. Despite living in Brooklyn and studying there and later in Manhattan until she is 21, Santiago does not consider herself “Nuyorican”³⁶ and stresses that her works are “about a different kind of Puerto Rican, who is not circumscribed to the ghetto or to New York” (Hernández, 166). She affirms: “people keep thinking of us as a group in the ghettos of New York or Chicago, yet we are all over” (Hernández, 166-7). As for her affinity with Puerto Rican writers in New York, Santiago states: “I don’t live in New York City. I’m not connected to a community of writers; I’m not even very connected to the general Puerto Rican community there” (Hernández, 161). She explains that after living in New York she went to Texas and Syracuse, places where she did not find already established Puerto Rican communities, and adds: “the Puerto Rican community was whatever I brought with me” (Hernández, 162).

Ultimately, the evaluation of Santiago’s memoirs depends greatly on the critic’s ideological stance regarding her textual refashioning of her class and ethnic membership. In particular, it depends on how one judges the author’s adoption of attitudes identified as middle-class in the context of literatures which, like that of Puerto Ricans in the continent, have been historically linked with migration and with a working-class, politicized consciousness. It is also crucial how one interprets her resistance to being integrated into wider Puerto Rican communities and the implied rejection of any agenda other than her own while showing, nevertheless, a marked concern with portraying her ethnic background. A third question is whether the reader considers it possible for

Santiago to speak only for herself when “ethnic” narratives are often read as collective allegories. Consequently, some will see *WIWPR* and *AW* as mainstreamed Latina texts, while for Santiago her works’ individualist streak is not incompatible with her Puerto Ricanness. Narratives like hers evidence the ideological tensions embedded in the reconceptualization of US Puerto Rican literature resulting from the inclusion of commercially successful and/or upwardly mobile writers in it. According to Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, and Bradford, both ethnic and racial groups and their literatures “are not merely static entities, but also products of labeling and identification *processes* [*sic*] that change and evolve over time.”³⁷

Perhaps the main point about socio-cultural identity posed by Santiago’s memoirs and the critical reactions to them concerns determining who has the authority to (re)define the criteria establishing community membership. Their divergences reflect the tensions generated by the increasingly conspicuous importance of transnational communities that have “spread across borders, have an enduring presence abroad, and take part in some kind of exchange between or among spatially separated groups.”³⁸ *WIWPR* and *AW* raise a debate about factors determining Puerto Ricanness such as presence in the motherland, specific linguistic and cultural practices, and social commitment, which will be deemed more or less crucial by different sectors within the imagined Puerto Rican community. Drzewiecka and Wong note that “[p]eople can imagine themselves into a community,” “imagine others into it and imagine others out” while “[t]hese same others may not even imagine themselves into this same community;”³⁹ as a result, there is no such thing as the authentic Puerto Rican experience. In Santiago’s memoirs, physical presence in the land from which one’s culture originally arose has been substituted by a powerful bond with that land as an iconic referent in the shaping of her Puerto Ricanness. With its deconstructions of the figure of the *jibaro* and her ambivalent use of Puerto Rican culture in general, Santiago’s writing suggests that islanders experience their physical presence in the land through collective ideological constructions as elaborate, idealized, or subjective as is her construction of her own Puerto Ricanness away from the country.

WIWPR and *AW* are arguably fairly conventional in structure and style. Their contents, however, show how controversial a woman’s reshaping of her identity – and, with it, of the very nature of the communities to which she claims membership – can prove even in these postmodern times. It is a basic theoretical tenet to acknowledge the subject’s multiple, shifting positionalities as well as the growing destabilization of traditional notions of geo-national belonging in the global landscape. Santiago’s writing exposes the potential problems of doing so in (literary) practice: being simultaneously cast as Other by mainstream America and as Americanized by Puerto Ricans, as an insider or an outsider, as a “hero” or a “traitor” by different collectives. *WIWPR* and

AW also highlight the problems in defining literary and identity parameters for an upwardly mobile writer in the context of a culture – such as the US Puerto Rican – historically connected to the working-class economic immigrant.

NOTES

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1. Esmeralda Santiago, *Almost a Woman* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 5. Although the work was originally published in 1998, for the purposes of this essay I will use the 1999 edition quoted above.
2. Carmen Dolores Hernández (ed.), *Puerto Rican Voices in English: Interviews with Writers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 165.
3. Betty Bergland, "Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the 'Other,'" in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 130–66, (131).
4. Gloria Anzaldúa, Preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).
5. For the sake of clarity, throughout the essay I will refer to the writer and author as Santiago, using "Esmeralda" to allude to the author's younger self depicted in the memoirs.
6. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 198.
7. Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 3.
8. Philip C. Wander, Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K. Nakayama, "Whiteness and Beyond: Sociohistorical Foundations of Whiteness and Contemporary Challenges," in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 13–26, (22).
9. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.
10. Barry B. Levine, "Salpicar and the Specter of Self-Hate among Puerto Ricans: On the Testimonial Literature of Modernization and Ethnicity," in *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Two World Contexts*, ed. Asela Rodríguez de Laguna (Oxford: Transaction, 1987), 89–95, (93).
11. I will use "Puerto Rican" to allude to people of Puerto Rican ancestry whether living on the island or the continental US. As for those of Puerto Rican ancestry living on the continent, the terminology most frequently used to refer to them presents serious problems. "Puerto Rican Americans" could be seen as inadequate since many would not consider themselves to be American. "US Puerto Rican" or "mainland Puerto Rican" – the most frequently used expressions – are also problematic: on the one hand, the terms could be considered redundant since Puerto Ricans hold American citizenship by birthright; on the other hand, they could be deemed highly inappropriate since some do not see Puerto Rico as a territory of the United States but as a separate country. Barbara R. Sjostrom, "Culture Contact and Value Orientations: The Puerto Rican Experience," in *The Hispanic Experience in the United States: Contemporary Issues and Perspectives*, ed. Edna Acosta-Belén and Barbara R. Sjostrom (New York: Praeger, 1988), 183. While acknowledging the terms' shortcomings, I will refer to Puerto Ricans on the continent as US Puerto Ricans or mainland Puerto Ricans.
12. Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 134.

13. Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 18. Although the work was originally published in 1993, in this essay I am using the 1994 edition mentioned above.
14. Arturo Morales Carrión, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1983), 329.
15. *Ibid.*, 330.
16. *Ibid.*, 327.
17. “... la identidad cultural, así como ... la sabiduría autoritaria de la tradición, que ejemplifica la madre.” This and the following translations from the Spanish original are mine.
18. Hugo Rodríguez Vecchini, “Cuando Esmeralda ‘era’ puertorriqueña: Autobiografía etnográfica y autobiografía neopicaresca,” *Nómada* 1 (1995), 151.
19. *Ibid.*, 151: “doble código cultural.”
20. *Ibid.*, 152: “se institucionalizan simultáneamente la cultura nacional (puertorriqueña) y la de la nacionalidad (norteamericana).”
21. *Ibid.*, 152: “entre un modelo autóctono idealizado y el modelo moderno metropolitano que hacía ver pobre, ignorante y atrasado ... al referente campesino ya convertido en mito nacional.”
22. Altagracia Ortiz, “Puerto Rican Women Workers in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Appraisal of the Literature,” in *Puerto Rican Women’s History: New Perspectives*, ed. Félix Matos Rodríguez and Linda C. Delgado (Armonk, NY, and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 38–61, (50).
23. Edna Acosta-Belén, “Puerto Rican Women in Culture, History and Society,” in *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History and Society*, ed. Edna Acosta-Belén (New York: Praeger, 1986), 1–29, (13).
24. *Ibid.*
25. While some scholars refer to the movement of Puerto Ricans to the US as “migration” since Puerto Ricans are American citizens, I will use the terms “immigration” or “emigration” to indicate that Esmeralda’s family’s journeys take place between two different countries as opposed to their internal migration in Puerto Rico from rural to urban environments and vice versa.
26. González, *Boricua Literature*, 141.
27. *Ibid.*, 159.
28. *Ibid.*, 141–2.
29. Vecchini, “Cuando Esmeralda ‘era’ puertorriqueña,” 159: “también ... han dejado de ser *jíbaros*, tanto los que han querido ser *jíbaros* literarios como los que descienden del *jíbaro* de la gleba.”
30. *Ibid.*, 159–60: “que los puertorriqueños no son, entre sí, idénticos, que para bien o para mal, son más americanos que ayer, más modernos, porque el modelo del cambio sigue siendo el americano.”
31. González, *Boricua Literature*, 12, 153.
32. *Ibid.*, 158.
33. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 10, 13.
34. Leigh Gilmore, “Policing Truth: Confession, Gender and Autobiographical Authority,” in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 54–78, (57).
35. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 18.
36. Nuyoricans was “[i]nitially a derisive word, popular among insular Puerto Ricans for demeaning mainland-born or -raised Puerto Ricans,” which was “appropriated in the early 1970s by avant-garde poets in New York City” (González, *Boricua Literature*, 1) under the initiative of Miguel Piñero and Miguel Algarín. The term has come to describe mainly “Puerto Ricans in and of New York,” although “[n]ot all of them favor being called *Nuyoricans*” (Hernández, *Puerto Rican Voices*, 14).
37. Judith N. Martin, Robert L. Krizek, Thomas K. Nakayama, and Lisa Bradford, “What Do White People Want to Be Called? A Study of Self-Labels for White Americans,”

- in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 27–50, (29).
38. Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (London: University College London Press, 1998), 242.
39. Jolanta A. Drzewiecka and Kathleen Wong, “The Dynamic Construction of White Ethnicity in the Context of Transnational Formations,” in Nakayama and Martin (eds), *Whiteness*, 199.

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