History in Literature: Esmeralda Santiago

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The literary text, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, by Esmeralda Santiago can be used as a significant historical source or reference when studying Puerto Rico's history. Literature reflects life and can be used as a vehicle to understand history; it conveys much more than just a story. Mario Valdés and Linda Hutcheon, in the article, *Rethinking a Culture's Literary History*, claim that by exploring the literature we retrace history and see it not through the study and perspective of a particular historian, but in an entirely new and enriching manner. We plow deeper and take hold of the voice of average people and perceive how they see themselves and make sense of the world around them in a given time and place.[1] Hayden White, a leading academic figure, has initiated the debate between literature and historiography. Historical discourse, according to White is "the interpretation of this archive of past events by means of narration. And it is here, by way of narration, that the techniques of literature and historiography overlap each other."[2] White's main concern is how the dialogue between both the historian and that of the creative writer overlap and speak with each other. For Hayden White, "life itself is merely a sequence of events without any narrative structure of its own. Narratives are made afterwards."[3]

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Esmeralda Santiago presents in *When I Was Puerto Rican* an autobiography of her memories of her Puerto Rican childhood and her migration to New York, as she lived it, and as she remembered it. Throughout the text she sketches portraits of Puerto Rico and she presents real people, ordinary, marginalized people who experienced and survived the difficult journey of the Puerto Rican migration of the early 1960s. Santiago traces and documents her real world quite as much as any historian would try to represent a given time and place. A close reading of Esmeralda Santiago's text provides significant historical evidence; an unofficial historical reading that would possibly remain unregistered or simply invisible because she tells not only what occurred to many Puerto Ricans at that time, but most importantly, what it felt like. It is this that makes the author so valuable to our understanding of the Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans of the time. Since the author is Negi, the very literary character of her writing, each story is richly detailed with passion and precision.

This paper will trace some of the most important accounts that Ms. Santiago has included in her text, *When I Was Puerto Rican,* which invite the reader to visit or revisit Puerto Rico and especially the typical, peasant family of the late 1950s and early 1960s. I will concentrate on what kind of cultural and historical knowledge can be extracted from a literary reading of it.

In 1961, at the tender age of thirteen, Esmeralda was uprooted from her small, familiar island and transported to the new, complex city of New York. Through the eyes of Negi, the reader embarks on a remarkable journey from the rural barrio of Macún to the cold, complex county of Brooklyn, New York. The economical problems her family encountered and her own personal struggle between two cultures capture the feelings and

events that affected the lives of thousands of Puerto Ricans who experienced the hardships of poverty and whose circumstances forced them to embark on their own diasporic journey.

The author divides her memoir into thirteen stories, each opening with a popular Puerto Rican saying or *refrán* that reveals many Puerto Rican beliefs and thoughts of good, wise judgment. The sayings are still a part of everyday life; they are part of the Puerto Rican culture and reflect many Puerto Rican traditions and values. Some commonly used sayings are: *Lo que no mata, engorda*, *De Guatamala a guata peor*, *Borrón y cuenta nueva*, *Con la música por dentro*, and *Dime con quien andas, y te diré quien eres.*

In addition, the author continues to capture the Puerto Rican culture by incorporating Spanish words throughout her narrations in their original form and context. Although Esmeralda Santiago writes in English she writes many words in Spanish which refer to traditions and things that are very unique to Puerto Rico's culture. According to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*,

> "The technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness. Such a device not only acts to signify the difference between cultures, but also illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts."[4]

When describing typical Puerto Rican foods cooked during the Christmas holidays Santiago uses words like: *pasteles, morcillas, Ron cañita*, *Aguinaldos* and *parrandas.* In

describing her experiences in Santurce she mentions: *boleros*, *guayaberas, botánica, público, piraguas, piraguero,* and of course what she was claimed to be a *jibara.* When her mother spoke of her father's other women, she used words like: *pocaverguenzas, jurutungo, sinverguenzas, and of course putas*. When the *Americanos* appeared in Macún it was: *Nueva Yor, gringo,* and the *Jun-nited Estates*. Finally, when her mother was having another baby she screamed: *"¡Ay! Ay Dios Mio Santo, ayúdame. ¡Ay!"*[5] These Spanish words and sayings are essential in Esmeralda Santiago's recounting because they capture and reveal a clearer picture of the unique Puerto Rican flavor and soul, thus signaling difference and separation from the American culture. Esmeralda chooses to leave numerous words in Spanish because it is the best way for her to express her Puerto Ricaness.

Esmeralda Santiago was born in 1948 in Villa Palmeras, the eldest of eleven children, who at the young age of four arrived to the countryside barrio of Macún, Toa Baja. It is the rural Puerto Rico of the fifties and she openly details her home as "a rectangle of rippled metal sheets on stilts hovering in the middle of a circle of red dirt. Our home was a giant version of the lard cans used to haul water from the public fountain."[6] When she describes her meager house she is taking snapshots of thousands of shacks in rural Puerto Rico at this time. Houses with wooden floors in small, metal shacks on stilts, inside the children's hammocks tied firmly to beams with a curtain separating one side of the small room from the area where the parents slept; on a bed protected with a mosquito net that hung like a massive veil overhead. The hammocks and nets were done and undone day after day. Also, there was the latrine behind the house, the kitchen shed with the *fogón,* the chickens, the fruit trees, the pigeon pea

bushes, the *moriviví* plants, the scent of cooking spices, and the many barefoot children running in and out, playing; perhaps totally unaware of how poor or disadvantaged they really were.[7]

When the author recounts her life in the countryside of Macún one can already sense a feeling of pride and identity with the symbol of the Puerto Rican *jíbaro.* This is clearly expressed when she states that she wanted to be a *jíbaro* more than anything in the world. There was not only respect and love for the Puerto Rican *jíbaro,* but for adults as well. Parents were especially respected and this is clearly seen time and time again in Ms. Santiago's stories. No matter what the circumstances were, *Mami* was always right and there was no arguing with her because there was something called *dignidad* that clearly meant that

> "you never swore at people, never showed anger in front of strangers, never stared, never stood to people you'd just met, never addressed people by the familiar tú until they gave you permission. It meant adults had to be referred to as Don So and So, and Doña So and So, except for teachers, who you should call Mister or Missis So and So. It meant, if you were a child you did not speak until spoken to, did not look an adult in the eye, did not raise your voice nor enter or leave a room without permission."[8]

This recaptures only some of the very strong and popular Puerto Rican values or rules of behavior of the Puerto Rican peasant. Respect, good manners, and *dignidad* were a major way of acting and raising children at the time.

Esmeralda Santiago's family, like many families, moved from the rural countryside to the urban center and when they saw that this didn't solve their many economical needs, they moved back and eventually migrated across the ocean to the mainland. Like many, these families first experienced internal migration on the island and later external migration to the mainland. Entire families were clearly affected by this displacement in the 1950s from a familiar, simple, comfortable environment to a new, complex, insecure one.[9] In the story, *Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap*, the author takes you on her journey from Macún to La Parada 26 in Santurce. Her detailed descriptions contrast the familiar, simple, innocent, country life with the unknown, new, complex, city life. In describing her new house she is taking numerous photographs of Puerto Rico, but this time of life in Santurce, in the early fifties. She presents a very pathetic scene of a fatherless family driven by a strong-willed mother, who like many, believed that life would be better in the city.

The author goes on to tell about her impression of the school in Santurce which was bigger, constructed with concrete blocks, and even had a playground. Yet what made a dramatic impact on her was the walk to school. The road was no longer the safe, picturesque, country road, full of trees and familiar places and faces. In the city, the walk to school was through muddy sidewalks, garbage, traffic, bars with jukeboxes, liquor and of course, loose women. She was constantly told of the endless dangers where she was not to look or talk to anyone.

Even more confusing was the contradiction of the rural vision of the *jíbaro* versus the urban vision. When Esmeralda Santiago was uprooted to Santurce she immediately discovered during her first days at school that it was shameful to be a *jíbaro.* Her teacher

signaled her out as being *jíbara* because she spoke louder, was wilder, and exhibited exaggerated gestures. She also humiliated Ms. Santiago when she addressed her in front of the entire class; "Didn't you learn fractions in that school for *jíbaros* you came from?" [10] Her classmates humiliated her and said what a *jíbara* when Christmas came around and she mentioned that she had never heard of Santa Claus, or even worse when she didn't know how to use a pencil sharpener. It was all so complex, in Macún she wanted to be a *jíbara*, but her mother said that she couldn't because she was born in the city, yet in Santurce she was referred to as a *jíbara* because she came from the countryside and consequently, acted like one. Ms. Santiago soon realized that being a *jíbara* was definitely not an honor. A jíbaro was definitely voiced negatively in Santurce and silenced in Macún and this young girl's confusion, like many peasants who experienced similar situations, soon recognized that they were shamefully signaled out as different, ignorant Puerto Ricans called *jibaros.*

Eventually, the family moved back to Macún where Esmeralda felt she fitted in and where she never wanted to leave. Here her narrations illustrate the important preparation and participation in the typical, sacred *velorio* or wake where Puerto Ricans participated with great respect, deep sentiment, and reverence. At the cemetery words were pronounced by *El Cura*, and the coffin was lowered while loud, upsetting cries were heard from family members and friends. The holy *novenas* followed at the departed man's house, where her father led the *rosarios* for nine days, and where mourners and friends joined in prayer.

That was the Puerto Rico of the 1950s and early 1960s that Esmeralda Santiago captured in her stories; the story of an island that since 1898 had been under strong political, social and economic United States influence and control. It is inevitable that under these circumstances Puerto Rico and its people could resist having been seriously

influenced by its power. This power is clearly evident in *The American Invasion of Macún,* where Ms. Santiago giftedly records the historical and social changes occurring on the island in the countryside. The author takes the reader to a typical English class recollecting the popular school song, "*Pollito chicken , Gallina hen, Lápiz, pencil y Pluma, pen,…*" where her new Americanized teacher, Miss Jiménez taught English through songs trying to encourage students to learn the language. The children learned the songs phonetically, and like her confused classmates, Esmeralda Santiago had no clue as to what the words meant, especially when they sang complex, patriotic American songs like "America the Beautiful".

Esmeralda goes on to narrate how Macún, in addition to being Americanized in the classroom, was also raided by experts from the *Jun-ited Estates.* They were sent to rescue and instruct their poor region about proper nutrition, hygiene, and health; so that they could grow up big and strong like the *Americanitos*: Dick, Jane and Sally in their school primers.[11] Already the barrio, and Negi, are confused and inquiring the Puerto Rican versus the American way of doing things. Esmeralda records that it was at the school and at the *centro comunal* that Macún's students and parents went to get educated by the American experts. Teachers demanded that parents attend meetings; Ms. Santiago recalls that only mothers went to the meetings because children and food were woman's work. Esmeralda humorously records,

> "The experts had colorful charts on portable easels. They introduced each other to the group, thanked the Estado Libre Asociado for the privilege of being there, and then took turns speaking. The first expert opened a large suitcase. Inside there was a huge set of teeth

> with white gums. A woman said, "Ay Dios Santo, que cosa tan fea, as she crossed herself."[12] "

They talked about hygiene and nutrition; displayed charts with strange, but very important foods, and even gave each family two bags of American groceries. The women were puzzled, yet amusingly asked how and where they could get: carrots, broccoli, iceberg lettuce, apples, peaches, and pears since they had never seen some of these foods. They also inquired why Puerto Rican foods like: rice, beans, salted cod fish, white *queso del país* wrapped in banana leaves, coffee, and fruits and vegetables that grew in Puerto Rico weren't on the chart. The *Americanos* gave up explaining the basic food groups and went on discussing head louse and intestinal parasites, which only made the women, shiver with disgust.[13]

Ms. Santiago goes on to document that it was the school nurse who administered polio shots to the school children in the *barrio* and Ignacio Sepúlveda explained that all of this was done because it was election year in P.R., and Don Luis Muñoz Marín, governor of Puerto Rico, wanted to be re-elected. Her classmate also continued to inform that *Eekeh Ayssenhouerr* was the imperialist President of the U.S. who wanted to change Puerto Rico and its culture to be like theirs.[14] Esmeralda remembers seeing pictures of the two politicians smiling at each other at the community center during the last meeting.

Since the 1940s Luis Muñoz Marín, founder of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) chose the straw hat, so popularly worn by the Puerto Rican peasants, as the party's symbol in order to gain the support of the ordinary Puerto Rican *jíbaro* and connect him with politics. [15] In fact, through her father, Pablo, who carried a battery-operated radio

with him everywhere, she is connected with the many songs about the *jíbaro* and with news outside of her barrio. The simple radio assisted in transmitting a love and respect for the symbol of the *jíbaro.* The island especially the rural population, religiously tuned in to listen to the well-liked "Day Breaker's Club" where they would get information about crops, husbandry, the weather, submarines, torpedoes, and the Puerto Rican men that were dying in the Korean War during the early fifties.[16]

Many Puerto Ricans at the time begin to detect an American way versus a Puerto Rican way of eating, speaking, acting, learning, and mainly of thinking. This is the beginning of the young girl's and of many Puerto Rican's, realization that there is a different way of seeing themselves and that this is a totally new, confusing, and unusual manner. When her mother mentions her relatives in New York and when she receives packages with clothes and gifts the young girl begins to believe that now her relatives have a lot of money like the *Americanos,* and that their lives are so much easier and better than theirs simply because they have gone to the *Jun-nited Estates of* América. This belief was shared with countless Puerto Ricans who also had family members or friends on the mainland.

The author continues to highlight many of the events and rapid social transformations that the traditional Puerto Rican woman was experiencing. "Operation Bootstrap" had converted the island's economy from an agricultural to a quick-growing industrial economy; textile, clothing, and other factories were established. Esmeralda's mother was part of these changes and in the author's narrations we can clearly see how these social and historical events altered the lives of many Puerto Rican women.

Monín was a changing woman, in a quick changing Puerto Rico; a woman who needed security, and commitment, and who was not willing to share her man with another woman and continue to live under an abusive *machista* man. Her beliefs in a better life were so adamant that she began working out of the home when Pablo was underemployed or unemployed. In Santurce she worked cleaning other people's houses and ironing their clothes and when she returned to Macún, she worked in the garment industry at a factory in Toa Baja. Everyone criticized her: Pablo, the neighbors, her children, and even other women who were just as abused and neglected as she. Santiago narrates that when her mother whet off to work it was perceived as a shameful act, an act of abandoning the family. Even though Monín had serious financial troubles, going to work outside of the home, wasn't seen as the proper choice at the time. In her narrations, *Mami Gets a Job,* this social change is excellently illustrated. Social issues arise like: who will be taking care of the children, how many days you will work, and who will be doing the cooking and cleaning, etc. These issues were all serious conversation pieces and Esmeralda's mother, like many women who were part of the work force, was being condemned for her immense effort.

All of these changes affected women and Esmeralda's mother was one of the brave, not only does Monín go out to work, but eventually she leaves Pablo and moves away with her children. The author continues to recount the countless hardships and experiences of the diaspora. Since the moment she arrived to New York, like most Puerto Ricans, she was homesick. Once there, they moved from one apartment to another in search of heat, more rooms, better living conditions, less cockroaches, and apartments closer to relatives and subways. In fact, her family moved five times during

the first year. These apartments were merely places not homes; home was Puerto Rico, and being so far away and in such a different environment was frightening. The author narrates that it was during winter that they suffered most because their apartment was lukewarm, no matter what the landlord promised or did, and like most Puerto Ricans, they deeply yearned for their green, tropical island more than ever.

During these years the many Puertorriqueñas mainly migrated to New York City, and as in Puerto Rico, they soon became a source of cheap labor for the city's needle and garment trades.[17] Women, like Monín left the island in search for employment and a better life, only to face the cruel reality that on the mainland they were just as exploited because of their gender and now because of their ethnicity as well. Esmeralda Santiago excellently records her mother working in the garment industry in New York and how she proudly brought her daughters undergarments that she had sewed in the factory. She also depicts the many humiliating occasions that she had to accompany her mother to the welfare office because she was unemployed, or of her traumatic experience at a new school where she didn't know the language, and where she had to fight in order to not be put back a grade.

While living in New York she tried to maintain her cultural identity, but in order to survive and move on, she like thousands of Puerto Ricans, Negi had to incorporate old ways with new ways and begin to assimilate. The merging of the two cultures had its inevitable effect on the young girl. When her mother takes them to New York Esmeralda Santiago knows that her life has changed forever. She states in the story, *Dreams of a Better Life,* "For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical

afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting."[18] Later in life Esmeralda is confronted with the reality that she is a hybrid and that she would never be the same again.

The author and story go hand in hand; Esmeralda Santiago's stories are autobiographical. They are placed in the fast-growing Puerto Rico of the fifties and early sixties where she shares many personal experiences from childhood to adolescence, from Puerto Rico to New York. Her accounts record many important historical moments; like, the Americans invading Macún, women entering the work force, and the many difficulties and harsh realities and circumstances that propelled thousands of Puerto Ricans to leave the island they so dearly loved. In uncovering the complexities of this internal and external migration process, Ms. Santiago brilliantly exposes the arduous truth of family separation, rejection, racism, migration, and assimilation. Throughout the text she sketches portraits of Puerto Rico and she presents real, everyday people, who experienced and survived the difficult journey of the Puerto Rican migration of the early 1960s.

In her memoirs, Santiago traces and documents her real world quite as much as any historian would try to represent a given time and place. A close reading of Esmeralda Santiago's text provides significant historical evidence; an unofficial historical reading that would possibly remain unregistered or simply invisible because she tells not only what occurred to many Puerto Ricans at that time, but most importantly, what it felt like. It is this that makes the author so valuable to our understanding of the Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans of the time. Since the author is Negi, the very literary character of her

writing, each story is richly detailed with passion, precision and most importantly, captures the role of being a woman during this period.

Each story is much more then just a story; it is the unofficial history in literary writing; documenting and uncovering the enormous struggles and sacrifices of the marginalized, silenced, and often ignored Puerto Rican peasant in search for a better life. Kuisma Korhonen in her introduction of The History/Literature Debate states that,

> "Literary and artistic representations of history may not have enjoyed the same kind of official status as academic historiography has, but no one can deny that they have had a crucial impact on those mental images that we have formed from our past."[19]

This is particularly what makes Ms. Santiago's stories so extraordinary; no one can refute that in her simple storytelling manner she transports us to visit or revisit the way it was on the island, narrated by someone who lived it, and who journeyed home to document it. As Korhonen goes on to say, "In order to move on we must encounter our past, deal with our present and future and both history and literature force us to rethink the very nature of our relationship to the past."[20]

When I Was Puerto Rican, by Esmeralda Santiago definitely offers much to historiography because a literary reading of it can provide valuable cultural and historical knowledge of the past, a past vividly reconstructed from the other side of the dominant discourse in history; from the narrations of a double subaltern point of view.

End Notes

[1] Mario Valdés and Linda Hutcheon. (Fall 2000). "Rethinking A Culture's Literary History." EDGE Magazine, consulted 4/5/200 <http:/www.research.utoronto.ca/edge/fall2000/content4.html>
[2] Kuisma Korhonen, ed, Tropes from the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate (Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam- New York, NY 2006) 12.
[3] Korhonen 13
[4] Ashcroft, Bill, et al. The Empire Writes Back (London: Routledge, 2002) 63
[5] Santiago, When I Was Puerto Rican (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 57
[6] Santiago 7
[7] Santiago 12-13
[8] Santiago 30
[9] Sánchez 27
[10] Santiago 138
[11] Santiago 64
[12] Santiago 65
[13] Santiao 66
[14] Santiago 72-73
[15] Santiago 12
[16] Santiago 12-13
[17] Ortíz 44
[18] Santiago 209
[19] Korhonen 18
[20] Korthonen 20

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