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## **Redefining Puerto Ricanness in Esmeralda Santiago's *When I was Puerto Rican***

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Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1994) is an autobiographical work that addresses Puerto Rican Identity from a female immigrant's perspective and experience. Puerto Ricans have become an interesting field of study. The fact that Puerto Rico has a long history of colonization and migration as well as its situation as a country that is still part of the United States, yet culturally and linguistically different, invites research. This essay approaches the elements involved in establishing contemporary Puerto Rican identity through the analysis of Esmeralda Santiago's *When I was Puerto Rican*. She calls into question what it means to be "Puerto Rican" and the traditional criteria to define that Puerto Ricanness while she presents her own life-story as an example of the struggle and difficulties Puerto Rican immigrants encounter when they try to define their own ethnicity and culture. She proposes a Puerto Ricanness composed by a bicultural hybrid identity as an ultimate option, especially in the case of immigrants in the United States.

Esmeralda Santiago brings center stage this problem of definition combining in her narrative the dramatic experience of being an immigrant with her previous life in Puerto Rico where considerable transformations were taking place under American tutelage. Negi, Santiago's nickname, narrates her story in a simple style and from the viewpoint of a precocious adolescent girl thus giving the narrative a distinct emotional tone, a sense of ingenuity and apparent lack of judgement. Negi spends her childhood in the poor but beautiful countryside of Puerto Rico. It is the 1950s, and the Americans are trying to "Americanize" the island. She enjoys an idyllic life in the country though soon her life shakes by the many moves caused by the conflicts between her parents. Finally, Mami decides to go to the United States with her children where she hopes to find a better life. While suffering from the uprooting Negi bravely learns to adapt to the new life and she soon leaves Brooklyn escaping from the ugliness of the marginalized barrio to find the ultimate success accompanied by nostalgia and hunger of memory.

The title of her memoir is the first thing that strikes the readers, especially those who take for granted their Puertoricanness without wondering what it really implies to be Puerto Rican. The title suggests that the author is not Puerto Rican anymore, that she once *was* but she would assimilate later, becoming American. However, the title reads as an ironic defiance to the static idea of Puertoricanness.

The 1990 Census Bureau counted 2.7 million Puerto Ricans in the States, and another 3.5 million in Puerto Rico. Between 1980 and 1990, the Puerto Rican population outside Puerto Rico grew by 35 percent, and in Puerto Rico it grew by 7 percent. If these population growth rates continue through the year 2000, the

population of Puerto Rico will be 3.8 million, while the Puerto Rican population in the United States will number 3.7 million. By the end of the decade, therefore, the equivalence in size between the Stateside and Island populations will no doubt change the dynamics of the relationship between them. These figures come to reinforce the necessity for a redefinition of Puerto Ricanness. The term "Puerto Rican" has traditionally presumed identity fixed to location and geography especially from the times when the first creole intellectuals such as Manuel Alonso, José Gautier Benitez, etc. began to emphasize the local distinctiveness of Puerto Rico in contrast to the Spanish culture. However, the transformations that Puerto Rican Population has undergone by being colonized by different cultures and by becoming a migrant people demands a new analysis of national and cultural definitions.

First, it is necessary to take under consideration the validity of the term "Puerto Rican" and the alternate terms proposed mainly by the immigrant community whose demographic influence cannot be ignored. The problem of naming is an existential one for these people. Anything has to have a name to exist and this is especially true for second-generation Puerto Rican immigrants who felt invisible, *nameless* not only within American culture but also in Puerto Rico where they can be anything but "Puerto Rican", as Nicholasa Mohr points out:

Later, when some of us returned to the island ... those children of the poor and dark migrants who had been forced out over two generations before and who returned either with intentions to relocate or merely to visit, were not always

welcomed. They were quickly labeled and categorized as outsiders, as 'gringos', and 'Newyoricans' (267).

First-generation immigrants take for granted their ethnic identity and they subscribe to traditional values transmitted in Puerto Rico. They usually think that some day they will come back to the island. However, second-generation immigrants need to come to terms with American society as the place where they must live and survive as minority members. For this second-generation Puerto Ricans living in the States, several terms have been proposed: the term "Puerto Rican Americans" was rejected by those who felt they did not find completely comfortable as "Americans"; others consider it redundant since Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth. The term "Nuyorican" was coined due to the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in New York. The term "AmeRican" coined by the Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera, attempted to reach beyond the New York area and it also implied a dual reading. Frances Aparicio explains both readings: "The basic word, disregarding its capital letters and written accent, would read "American," as in a person whose origin is America (either North, Central or South). A second reading implies a more specific nationality within the context of the United States society" (155). "Mainland Puerto Rican" has been widely used to mean a person born or reared on the U.S. and it is the term I will use henceforward.

There is still a debate over deculturation and loss of traditional values between Puerto Rican scholars and mainland Puerto Ricans, but this is a complex debate where many issues related to history, culture, language, race and politics are involved. Santiago's concept of Puerto Rican identity is similar to that of Nuyoricans

in her emphasis on the dual nature of their identity. As she says in her book: "For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara* who longed for green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a *hybrid* who would never forgive the uprooting" (my emphasis 209). She finds a comfortable place for herself in the term "hybrid" but there is a distinct feeling of nostalgic sadness about her Puerto Ricanness that we will analyse in relation to her critique of island and American views on immigration, language and cultural heritage.

Negi's story is a process of transformation of a traditional concept of Puerto Ricanness into one that though based on the previous one, reflects the fluctuations of Puerto Rican identity to become eventually a "dialectically composite, multiple creole Boricua identity" (Márquez 32). This process is composed by a series of disappointments dealing with national symbols, cultural values, family life, language and by challenges she has to face in her new life. The first disappointment she experiences is the decay of the *jíbaro*, a country peasant, as an idiosyncratic symbol of local culture. At the beginning of her story she considers the *jibaros* as people who were

rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism. I wanted to be a *jíbara* more than anything in the world, but Mami said I couldn't because I was born in the city, where *jibaros* were mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect (12).

She is even told not to call anyone a *jíbaro* "lest they be offended" (13). The *jíbaro* became a national symbol in the 19th century, when Puerto Rico was still a Spanish colony. A group of creole intellectuals such as Manuel Alonso and Luis Lloréns Torres began to emphasize the local distinctiveness over the Spanish culture. The Puerto Rican country dweller, the *jíbaro*, was a perfect symbol for their purposes. However, this figure began to decay as the island was transformed by the subsequent changes. It not only became an American colony after the Spanish-American war in 1898 but the Americans did their best to americanize and transform the island. When Negi moves to the city, she feels like an outraged *jíbaro*: 'What a *jíbaro*, ' children jeered when I recited a poem in the dialect of Doña Lola. 'What a *jíbaro*,' when I didn't know how to use the pencil sharpener screwed to the wall of the schoolroom. 'What a *jíbaro*,' when Christmas came around and I'd never heard of Santa Claus. 'What a *jíbaro* ... What a *jíbaro* ... What a *jíbaro*.'" (39). Little by little she realizes how the decay of the *jíbaro* as a symbol is also the decay of Puerto Rican culture under American influence. Right before leaving the island her father tells her he will not go with them . She is hurt by his attempts to make it easier for her by substituting their culture by another one:

He brought me magazines with pictures of Fabian and Bobby Rydell and encouraged me to accept what was coming with no questions, no backward glances. As if these teenage idols could ever take the place he was so willingly giving up. I tacked the pinup photos on my wall next to Don Luis

Lloréns Torres, whose poems had inspired me to love my country, its *jíbaros*, and the wild natural beauty that could be found even in the foul air of El Mangle. (208)

At the time when the story begins, the 1950s, the Americans began transforming the island from plantation to industrial economy by means of the "Operation Bootstrap". Industrialization was brought about primarily by attracting subsidiaries of American firms that promised the population better jobs and better life. However, the rural emigration to the cities and the increasing number of proletarians who were not used to capitalist ways implied new options at the expense of losing traditional aspects of the native culture. Negi's family experiences all these changes taking place in the island. Her family moves several times before finally leaving for the States. They follow a common pattern among immigrants during the 1950s: they lived in the rural countryside but as the economic transformations were taking place from plantation to industrial economy, people have to leave their lands and go to the cities looking for jobs. But, life in the city does not result in an improvement in life quality and there are not so many jobs as the Americans promised. The only available alternative is to emigrate to the United States.

Recent studies point out that economic factors fostered migration to the United States more than demographic factors (overpopulation). Virginia Sánchez Korrol supports this theory, which coincides with Santiago's personal experience:

The search for economic opportunity once again became the motivating factor propelling numbers of Puerto Ricans to migrate, first to the island's urban centers and then across the ocean. The internal migrant in Puerto Rican cities often became part of a pool of unskilled labor working for low wages, and family earnings were frequently supplemented by women's work. Chronic unemployment seasonably rose to alarming levels. The pressure of a labor surplus created a group geared for emigration. (28)

It is also common that islanders are seduced by the story or experience of other family members already living in the States. Negi's grandmother lives in New York with other daughters. She "had left for New York to join her sisters in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, a place said to be as full of promise as Ponce de León's El Dorado" (37). Her grandmother writes to Negi's family and sends them money and clothes their cousins do not use anymore. They believe their relatives are rich simply because they can afford things they cannot in the island. The bad situation of immigrants in New York is even better than that of Puerto Rico: "'Our cousins must be rich to give up these things!' Norma said as she tried on a girl's cotton slip with embroidered flowers across the chest. 'Things like these are not that expensive in New York,' Mami said. 'Anyone can afford them'" (79).

But when they go to the States, Negi realizes life in New York is not always better than in Puerto Rico. Her first impression is a foreboding of what would come next: "I didn't expect the streets of New York to be paved with gold, but I did expect them to be bright and cheerful, clean, lively. Instead, they were dark and forbidding,

empty, hard" (218). The first stop for immigrants used to be New York ghettos like Brooklyn, a dangerous barrio full of gangs, crime, etc. Negi has less freedom than she had in Puerto Rico. They live in fear "separated by thick doors with several bolts... No one dropped in unannounced chat. An unexpected knock would set our hearts thumping" (254). When her mother gets fired, Negi has to go with her to the welfare office, which Negi sees as a failure to get her mother's dream of prosperity even though she works hard to give her children a better life:

Since we'd come to Brooklyn, her world had become full of new possibilities, and I tried very hard to share her excitement about the good life we were to have somewhere down the road. But more and more suspected Mami's optimism was a front... Sometimes I lay in bed, in the unheated rooms full of beds and clothes and the rustle of sleeping bodies, terrified that what lay around the corner was no better than what we'd left behind, that being in Brooklyn was not a new life but a continuation of the old one. That everything had changed, but nothing had changed, that whatever Mami had been looking for when she brought us to Brooklyn was not there, just as it wasn't in Puerto Rico. (247)

Life in the island does not escape the devastating consequences of American influence on Puerto Rican culture. Cultural imperialism is dramatically exposed in Santiago's book as in the following passage where Americans try to impose American food. But this irresponsible and unjustifiable event is an evidence of the

shocking effect the substitution of a foreign culture for a native one can provoke. The chapter "The American Invasion of Macún" reflects this situation: "he described the necessity of eating portions of each food on his chart every day... 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'" (66).

In school, Negi has to eat American food in the community center which serves the purposes of americanization: "The *centro comunal* had been decorated with posters. Dick and Jane, Sally and Spot, Mother and Father, the Mailman, the Milkman, and the Policeman smiled their way through tableau after tableau, their clean, healthy, primary-colored world flat and shadowless" (74). With the ingenuity of a child, Negi already delineates what is really happening when she asks her father: "If we eat that American food they give us at the *centro comunal*, will we become *Americanos*?" (74) She is so confused about imperialist ways to americanize Puerto Rico that she feels unconsciously outraged. Yet, as a child, she does not understand what it really happens to Puerto Rico. In the Community center she makes a mess when she throws up some powdered milk: "I couldn't help it! ' I cried. 'That milk tastes sour! ... It's *repugnante*!' 'I suppose you'd find it less repugnant to go hungry every morning!' 'I never go hungry!' I screamed. 'My Mami and Papi can feed us without your disgusting *gringo* imperialist food! '" (82).

However, life in New York transforms Negi so much that in the very prologue of her memoir she plays with the image of the guava and the apples as symbols of different cultures:

I had my last guava the day we left Puerto Rico... 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 ... The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet. (4)

Americans also tried to impose English as requirement in primary and secondary schools in Puerto Rico though not always achieving their goal since the children were not prepared to suddenly speak a foreign language as an official one: "Miss Jiménez liked to teach us English through song, and we learned all our songs phonetically, having no idea of what the words meant" (77). Language was (and is still) a political issue as Rafael Cancel Ortiz comes to corroborate: "the English language imposition upon Puerto Ricans was a coordinated effort from the start in a larger process of "americanization" or acculturation to North American ways with a view to annex Puerto Rico culturally as well as politically" (104).

Santiago presents two different stances towards the issue of language, those who favour English as a language of progress and those who believe that English is going to destroy their Spanish linguistic heritage. An example of the first group is Miss Jiménez, Negi's teacher in Macœn, who teaches English to the children and is clearly pro-American as Negi lets us know:

Miss Jiménez came to Macun at the same time as the Community Center... Our parents, Miss Jiménez told us, should come to a meeting that Saturday, where experts from San Juan and the Jun-ited Estates would teach our mothers all about proper nutrition and hygiene, so that we would grow up as tall and strong as Dick, Jane, and Sally, the *Americanitos* in our primers. (64)

Later on, in El Mangle, Negi has another teacher who clearly belongs to the second group: "Unlike every other teacher I'd had, my new teacher, Sra. Leona, insisted on Spanish and refused to answer when we said "Mrs." "It is a bastardization of our language," she said, "which in Puerto Rico is Spanish"(137).

These different attitudes toward language have a disturbing and violent influence on little Negi who instinctively favours Spanish and rejects English fearing to become American. At that time English becomes a symbol of deterioration of the language and culture she feels so proud of. Negi discusses the changes she sees at school with her father who tries to explain to her the situation:

"In 1898, *los Estados Unidos* invaded Puerto Rico, and we became their colony. A lot of Puerto Ricans don't think that's right. They call *Americanos* imperialists, which means they want to change our country and our culture to be like theirs." "Is that why they teach us English in school, so we can speak like them?" "Yes." "Well, I'm not going to learn English so I don't become American." He chuckled. "Being American is not just a language, *Negríta*, it's a lot of other things." (73)

The issue of language is still an open wound among islanders and it is reflected in their literature where there is

a constant cultural tension which reflects the Puerto Rican experience. Part of this persistent conflict is the perception of these writers that Puerto Ricans carry, like an albatros upon their backs, the heavy burden of learning a language that they, consciously or unconsciously, associate with their still ambivalent and unjust social reality. (Cancel 106)

On the other hand, for Negi language becomes a determining aspect for struggle and survival in the United States. She realizes that learning English will open doors that would remain closed otherwise. In clear contrast with her strong rejection of English when she was still in Puerto Rico, in New York she makes her best to learn English to prove she is as good as the other American students:

I figured that if American children learned English through books, so could I, even if I was starting later. I studied the bright illustrations and learned the words for the unfamiliar objects of our new life in the United states... at midterms I stunned the teachers by scoring high in English, History and Social Studies. (237)

Furthermore, she begins to develop a bicultural and bilingual personality as it is demonstrated by her Spanglish:

On the way home, I walked with another new ninth grader, Yolanda. She had been in New York for three years but knew as little English as I did. We spoke Spanglish, a combination of English and Spanish in which we hopped from one language to the other depending on which word came first. (258)

There is much debate over the use of Spanglish among mainland Puerto Ricans. As Helen I. Safa wonders, "is code-switching (using Spanish and English interchangeably) evidence of deculturation or of a failure to learn either Spanish or English adequately, or does it represent an expansion of communication of expressive potential?" (143). In any case, this phenomenon comes from a necessity to communicate in an environment different from that of the island but where concepts and experiences are not always translatable.

Immigration also consists of loss of cultural values and traditions. Santiago tries to give an almost anthropological aspect to the details of some popular traditions and customs like the *refranes*, popular sayings which introduce each chapter, the description of religious rituals such as the conventions of Christmas season, funeral processions religious or frequent allusions to native culinary customs. Another issue that Santiago stresses in her memoir is how the experience of migration transformed those cultural values she was transmitted in the island. Regarding moral values and manners, she is aware of the positive effects of leaving

the island. In Puerto Rico, she was bombarded by a set of rules for proper behaviour in Puerto Rican society such as respect for adults, honesty, etc. :

*Dignidad* was something you conferred on other people, and they, in turn gave back to you. It meant you never swore at people, never showed anger.. It meant, if you were a child, you did not spoke until spoken to ... It meant men could look at women any way they liked but women could never look at men directly. (30)

Some of these rules applied directly to women's behaviour. Negi is all the time reminded that she is almost a *señorita* (a decent woman) and she should behave like one. In the island women are not supposed to go to bars where men drink and play, they are not supposed to work but in the house chores, etc.

But in the States everything is different. Women are not so restrained by cultural and moral behaviour. Machismo is not as oppressive as in the island where even a single woman is ridiculed and mocked at. Negi and her mother experience a series of transformations which affect the system of values they had in the island. For instance, Negi's mother comes back from New York transformed: "But besides her appearance, there was something new about her, a feeling I got from the way she talked, the way she moved. She had always carried herself tall but know there was pride, determination, and confidence in her posture" (189). It is also in the States where Negi realizes she can do things she was not allowed to do in Puerto Rico and she discovers her own strength and boldness. In this passage she does not accept the

school's principal's decision to take her to the seventh grade: "'Seven gray?' I asked Mr. Grant... 'I have A's in school Puerto Rico. I lern good. I no seven gray girl.'" Mami stared at me, not understanding but knowing I was being rude to an adult" (226). After arguing with Mr. Grant about her academic level, she finally convinces him to let her go to eight grade: "I was so proud of myself, I almost burst. In Puerto Rico if I'd been that pushy, I would have been called *mal educada* [rude] by the Mr. Grant equivalent and sent home with a note to my mother. But here it was my teacher who was getting the note, I got what I wanted, and my mother was sent home" (227).

Another important issue that briefly appears in the book is racial and ethnic classification. It is a very important aspect for mainland Puerto Ricans and subsequently has a direct influence in their self-definition. They not only arrive in the States already suffering from economic and psychological dislocation and from cultural confusion but they also have to face racism and a different attitude towards skin color. Puerto Ricans are a product of multiple miscegenation from the times of Spanish domination. They have Indian, Spanish, and African ancestry so there are many different hues regarding skin color. Negi's family is an evidence of this mixture of races among Puerto Ricans: "Delsa was darker than I was, nutty brown, but not as sun ripened as Papi. Norma was lighter, rust colored, and not as pale as Mami, whose skin was pink" (13). For Negi, her being dark-skinned does not imply anything negative in the island as her mother comes to support: "'Why does everyone call me Negi?' 'Because when you were little you were so black, my mother said you were a *negrita*. And we all called you *Negríta*, and it got shortened to Negi.' ... 'So *Negi* means I'm black?' 'It's a sweet name because I love you, *Negríta*.' She

hugged and kissed me" (13). The problem is that for Americans dark-skinned Puerto Ricans become simply blacks despite the fact that they were called *Trigueño*, or wheat-colored in Puerto Rico. As J. Jorge Klor de Alva explains:

...light-skinned Puerto Ricans sometimes tried to pass for "Spanish," "Jewish," or, more commonly, "Italian," but black Puerto Ricans were regularly forced by American race classifications into the Afro-American community- often defending their "Puerto Ricanness" to no avail. Mestizo or *trigueño*-looking Puerto Ricans, who could not pass for white but lacked a predominance of black features, resisted attempts to acculturate into either community by highlighting their distinct hispanicity. (114)

The answer to this situation of color-based racism is the different systems of racial classification in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Clara E. Rodríguez tries to clarify this issue: "the primary point of contrast is that, in Puerto Rico, racial identification is subordinate to cultural identification, while in the U.S. racial identification, to a large extent, determines cultural identification.. While in the U.S. racial/ethnic minorities have traditionally been segregated, there has never been any such tradition in Puerto Rico" (27).

The realization that black people do not find commonalities with Puerto Rican but instead reject them is a shock for Negi at a time when she feels uncomfortable with anyone:

They were black , but they didn't look like Puerto Rican *negros*. They dressed like *Americanos* but walked with a jaunty hop ... and didn't like Puerto Ricans. 'How come?' I wondered, since in Puerto Rico, all the people I'd ever met were either black or had a black relative somewhere in their family. I would have thought *morenos* would like us, since so many of us looked like them. (225)

In the States she faces racism and ethnic clash. Puerto Ricans are at the bottom of the scale; they are marginalized by everyone, even blacks, not only because of their language and culture but also because of the color of their skin.

Another problem Negi encounters is to find a place among other groups of students but she faces interracial tensions and racism as she relates: "The Italians all sat together on one side of the cafeteria, the blacks on another. The two groups hated each other more than they hated Puerto Ricans... I stayed away from both groups, afraid that if I befriended an Italian, I'd get beta up by a *morena*, or viceversa" (230).

But the worst thing is that she doesn't feel comfortable with anyone. Santiago wisely transmits the dramatic experience of immigration for a twelve-year-old child in this environment. She feels abandoned in the middle of a battlefield where she cannot even identify herself with Puerto Rican immigrants like her. The following passage perfectly portrays the crisis, dislocation and estrangement that immigration represents:

I felt disloyal for wanting to learn English, for liking pizza, for studying the girls with big hair and trying out their styles at home, locked in the bathroom where no one could watch. I practiced walking with the peculiar little hop of the *morenas*, but felt as if I were limping.

I didn't feel comfortable with the newly arrived Puerto Ricans who stuck together in suspicious little groups, criticizing everyone, afraid of everything. And I was not accepted by the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans, who held the secret of coolness. (230)

The experience of immigration transforms Puerto Ricans in different ways. The clash of cultures and their experience of poverty and oppression can provoke insecurity, especially for the young migrants who end up having unstable personalities or eventually finding their place in constant movement, in a bicultural space. The next passage comes to reinforce the ambivalent feelings of young immigrants towards their Puerto Ricanness:

There were two kinds of Puerto Ricans in school: The newly arrived, like myself, and the ones born in Brooklyn of Puerto Rico parents. The two types didn't mix. The Brooklyn Puerto Ricans spoke English and often no Spanish at all. To them, Puerto Rico was the place where their grandparents lived, a place they visited on school and summer vacations, a place which they complained was backwards and mosquito-ridden. Those of us for whom Puerto Rico was still a recent memory were also split into two groups: the

ones who longed for the island and the ones who wanted to forget it as soon as possible. (230)

Santiago's story becomes the odyssey of a native Puerto Rican who suffers the whole process of transformation of identity. We can conclude that this transformation has to be reflected in redefinitions of national and cultural identity since it applies to all Puerto Ricans, those in the island and in the United States, though mainland Puerto Ricans have a more dramatic experience of geographical and cultural dislocation. Esmeralda Santiago addresses many issues involved in this transformation and she also calls into question the postulations on national infidelity and deculturation after having gone through the whole process. Her own view is "unapologetically symphistic and synergist" (Márquez 31).

As Ilan Stavans perceptively notes:

Culture and identity are a parade of anachronistic symbols, larger-than-life abstractions, less a shared set of beliefs and values than the collective strategies by which we organize and make sense of our experience, a complex yet tightly integrated construction in a state of perpetual flux. (Stavans 21)

Puerto Rican identity is among many contemporary identities in progress who challenge traditional concepts of nation, ethnicity and borderlands. It requires a

better understanding of a complex and sometimes dramatic experience of a people whose destiny has never been in their hands.

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