

Introduction

Female Invisibility and Literary Representations of Puerto Ricans in the United States

*The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged,
caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for
300 years . . . For 300 years she was invisible . . .*

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

"I, as a Puerto Rican child, never existed in North American letters," declares Nicholasa Mohr ("Puerto Rican Writers" 113). She finds herself equally invisible in Puerto Rican literature. Her experiences are not unique. Roberto Santiago relates instances when primary schoolteachers told him and others that Puerto Rico had no history, no culture, nothing worth studying (*Boricuas* xiv). In spite of those efforts to erase the contributions, the impact, the mere existence of Puerto Ricans on the continent, there have been throughout the years fictional and nonfictional records of the journey and the lives of thousands of Puerto Rican immigrants in the United States. A quick historical overview of literary works about Puerto Rican migration and the subsequent process of acculturation will show that the female experience has been essentially overlooked. Gradually, *Puerto-riqueñas* have begun to write themselves literally into his/story.



This migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States dates back to the late nineteenth century when they sought refuge from the Spanish

colonial government. Eugenio María de Hostos, Ramón Emeterio Betances, and Lola Rodríguez de Tió were among the revolutionary leaders who spent time in exile in New York City. Their writings express the political ideologies of people struggling for independence. Although there are beautiful renditions of their patriotic love, not much is devoted to the everyday life of the Puerto Rican immigrant.

In 1898, Puerto Rico was invaded and declared a territory of the United States. At first, the island was ruled by a military government and later by a civilian one appointed by the U.S. Congress. In 1952, Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth of the United States, with its own gubernatorial and legislative powers. Although the Jones Act had granted American citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917, those living on the island still are not allowed to vote for U.S. presidents or members of Congress.

The change in colonial powers only facilitated emigration, which was usually sanctioned by both the island and federal governments. The agricultural economy of the island was transformed into an industrial one, leaving thousands of farmers without means of support. "Operation Bootstrap"¹ in the fifties helped consolidate the industrialization of the economy. An estimated 500,000 Puerto Ricans emigrated to the United States between 1947 and 1961 (Morales Carrión 288). Francisco Scarano points to the dramatic increase in the numbers from an annual average of 1,800 emigres in the thirties to 31,000 during the late forties, and 45,000 during the fifties (754). Such dramatic increases had a disastrous impact on the lives of the immigrants in the States.

Bernardo Vega, who arrived in New York in 1916, gives us one of the most detailed accounts of the life and trials of a Puerto Rican immigrant during the first half of the twentieth century. Edited and published a decade after his death in 1965 (Andrew Iglesias), Vega's memoirs chronicle the political and economic struggles faced by thousands like him. He also devotes two sections to "historical antecedents" based on the experiences of his uncle, who had been in the States since the late 1800s. The unusual historical breadth of the book provides a unique look at the changing circumstances of Puerto Ricans in the United States, from the prosperity of the cigar factories

at the turn of the century to the desolation of unemployment and underemployment that robbed them of human dignity, all the way to serving in the armed forces during World War II. His detailed descriptions of organizations that emerged, both social and political, are invaluable. His photographic memory and accounts of public events, political debates, and negative campaigns are amazing. What is missing in his memoirs is the private space where his wife, his family, and other women moved. References are made to women being present at some meetings, serving coffee and snacks. A few women, such as Lola Rodríguez de Tió, were at times in positions of leadership, but they were quite often absent from the narratives that have come down to us.

Like Vega, Jesús Colón arrived in New York in 1918 and went on to write his collection of sketches, *A Puerto Rican in New York*, during the fifties. Colón's vignettes depict the abject poverty and struggles for survival of Puerto Ricans. He had been a *tabaquero* (a cigar worker), the same as Vega. While both give a detailed look into the working environment of the cigar factories, with their readers and learned debates, Colón's work differs from Vega's in two important respects. As an active member of the Communist Party, Colón's writings are impregnated with a strong militant tone. As a black man, some of his sketches deal with double discrimination: for being Puerto Rican and for the color of his skin. Once again, this collection focuses on the public arena of politics, the job market, and social issues. Not much is said about the private lives of the protagonists. Aside from his wife's name, not much information is given about his family. The only episode dealing with a female describes the conversion of his mother-in-law, recently arrived from Puerto Rico, from Roman Catholicism to Socialism. The account does not reveal much about women's lives and/or roles in society.

While Vega and Colón were writing their biographical texts, a whole generation of Puerto Rican writers in the island were also recording in fiction the experiences of the emigrés. René Marqués, José Luis González, Pedro Juan Soto, and Emilio Díaz Valcárcel are among the members of what is known as the "Generation of the '40s." Except for Soto, who lived in New York for ten years, the others spent

only a year or two studying under the sponsorship of a grant or scholarship. As opposed to Colón, who made a deliberate choice to write in English during the 1950s (he had earlier written and published substantial work in Spanish), these writers' literary language is Spanish. Their short stories about the emigrés are considered classics of Puerto Rican literature, regularly included in anthologies and literary studies. Unfortunately, as outsiders, the works of these writers only register "the alienation, exclusion and traumatic desperation, an anguished culture-shock leading inevitably to existential nostalgia for the Island" (Flores, *Divided* "Foreword" xv).

In 1953, René Marqués produced his play, *La Carreta* (*The Oxcart*), about a poor family's migration from the countryside to the metropolis. It is divided into three acts, each of which depicts the misery of the family, first in the rural countryside, then in the slums on the outskirts of San Juan, and finally in New York. As they move, "modern life" seems to gnaw and bite chunks out of the family. The aging grandfather stays behind to die in a cave, knowing that he will never adapt to an urban setting. The youngest boy gets involved in drugs and goes to jail in San Juan. The daughter turns to prostitution in New York, and the oldest son is literally devoured by a machine at work. At the center is the mother, self-sacrificing and helpless to protect her family. At the end, she decides to take her dead son and her fallen daughter back to their home on the island.

González's and Soto's fiction share in the desolation and pessimism of Marqués' characters. In the short novel *Paisa* (1950) and the short story "El pasaje" ("The Airplane Ticket" *Veinte cuentos*), González depicts two Puerto Rican men who die while committing a robbery. Andrés, in the first work, sits in a dark room with his partner-in-crime. As he waits, he reminisces about his childhood on a farm in Puerto Rico and the starvation that forced his father to uproot them to the city in search of a better life. In the short story, Jesús confides to a friend at a bar that he has not been able to find a job and has decided to return to the island. The problem is he cannot afford the "airplane ticket." A week later, his friend goes into the bar, where the bartender shows him the newspaper with a picture of a man shot to death in front of a deli he tried to rob, armed with a small knife. With com-

plete mastery of a succinct, laconic style, González gives insight into the psyche of these men, who are not criminals, but are driven to commit criminal acts out of desperation and misery.

Soto published his collected short stories in 1956 under the title *Spiks*, co-opting the insulting term used to refer to Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, in order to emphasize the collective experience of his people: "seres abrumados por la tecnología, el aislamiento y la correspondiente inseguridad de los exploradores en cualquier selva" ("human beings crushed by technology, by isolation, and by the corresponding insecurity of explorers in any jungle" 9-10). "Garabatos" ("Doodles"), one of the most famous stories in the collection, echoes many of these sentiments, except this time it examines the impact on the soul of an artist. The protagonist, a painter, is not only struggling with poverty and unemployment but also with his frustrated creativity, especially as Christmas approaches and there are no gifts for his wife and five children. But he has a surprise; he will make a painting for her using the bathroom wall as a canvas. Painstakingly he traces the silhouettes of a naked couple embracing, making sure that the features are exactly those of his wife when he first met her. When he comes back from an errand, he finds that she has erased his "dirty drawings."

For the most part, the few women depicted in González's and Soto's stories are alcoholics and/or prostitutes. These women constitute one more affront that the Puerto Rican man has to suffer in this city-jungle that has robbed him of his dignity. Even "our women" are being corroded and destroyed. As they expose the atrocious circumstances of the immigrants' lives in the metropolis, their main focus is on the impact on the generic character, "the Puerto Rican male." Female characters are introduced as satellites, and their moral and economic ruin only adds to the ignominy of the male protagonists. "Garabatos" is a good example of this, as the wife's insensitivity and constant nagging for money and food only hasten the sealing of "la lápida ancha y clara de sus sueños" ("the clearly wide gravestone over his dreams" Soto 38).

A dissonant voice from the forties was that of Julia de Burgos, who lived the last twelve years of her life in New York, where she also wrote many of her poems. In contrast to the writings of the Genera-

tion of the '40s, Burgos' poems exist in the emotive world of love, death, abandonment, and isolation. There are a few poems lamenting the cold and inhuman atmosphere of the big city, but there is very little in terms of concrete experiences from daily life. On the other hand, her death on a street in New York has transformed her into an emblem of the tragic fate of many Puerto Rican immigrants.



During the sixties, more and more Puerto Ricans living in New York begin to record *their own* experiences. Most of them represent the first generation born in the States, who still suffer discrimination because of their parents' ethnic background. In 1967, Piri Thomas published his autobiography, *Down These Mean Streets*, a detailed account of a Puerto Rican boy in a ghetto plagued with drugs, gangs, and violence. The book provides an illuminating look at the issue of race for Puerto Ricans within the context of the United States. The son of a dark-skinned father and a white mother, Piri is the only one in his family who inherited the paternal African features, both in skin color and hair texture. Influenced by his friend Brew, an African-American from the South, Piri proclaims his blackness only to come into conflict with his father, who wants to be white, and his white siblings, who pretend to be blind to his dark skin. Piri chronicles his journey with Brew to the South and his encounter with Jim Crow laws and the ambiguity and irrationality of segregation: if he calls himself a Puerto Rican, they will let him in at commercial establishments; if he declares himself a black man, then he is denied entrance.

The female characters in Thomas' autobiography fall into two categories. One is that of the devoted mother who, from his perspective, accepts him as he is. While in jail and fighting drug addiction, the mother's unconditional love is his sole beam of hope. The other women are girlfriends, his and his friends. They are to be beaten into submission to ensure their faithfulness and compliance, while the men fool around with other women. Marta E. Sánchez explains that this violence against women is to some extent a means to cope with his own oppression:

Piri compensates for his tenuous Puerto Rican cultural identity by identifying as a predatory Puerto Rican male. By implication, he affiliates himself with the imperial conqueror, the racially and sexually "superior" male who penetrates and colonizes the racially and sexually "inferior" female. (122)

This bleak portrait of life in *El Barrio* became an instant best-seller and, together with *West Side Story* (1959), it reinforced some stereotypes of Puerto Ricans in New York which are still prevalent today. A few years later, during an exhibition of her work, Nicholasa Mohr was approached to write her own memoirs, accompanied with her own illustrations. When she submitted the manuscript that later would become *Nilda* (1973), the publishers rejected it because it was not what they had expected: a female version of Thomas' turbulent life.



The *Nuyorican*² poets that began to organize impromptu readings and poetry recitals in the sixties, found publishing outlets in the seventies. Pedro Pietri, Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Tato Laviera, Lucky Cienfuegos, Sandra María Esteves, and Victor Hernández Cruz are among the many writers whose work began to leave the imprint of a new aesthetic, to be reckoned with whenever discussing Puerto Rican literature in the States. Algarín's article "Nuyorican Aesthetics" summarizes their *ars poetica*. In his introduction to the groundbreaking *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*, Algarín describes the search for a new language because "raw life needs raw verbs and raw nouns to express the action and to name the quality of the experience" (19). Theirs is the language "of short pulsating rhythms that manifest the unrelenting strain" that the Nuyorican endures day after day (16). They appropriate the street language combined with the beat of their *Salsa* music to put the "raw" feelings of the Puerto Rican working class into words.

The verses of Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" (1973) are the "raw nerves" of an eulogy to all of those who have worked and died in the streets of Spanish Harlem and now lie anonymously in "long island cemetery" (Santiago. *Boricuas* 117-126). Pietri's mag-

num opus soon became the national anthem of the Nuyoricana, the epic poem of a collective consciousness fighting for cultural identity. Six years later, Tato Laviera reaffirms the presence and permanence of Puerto Ricans in the States with his visionary collection of poems, *La Carreta Made a U-turn*. While René Marqués' cart returned to the island with its defeated passengers, Laviera introduces a cart whose passengers turned around and planted themselves on continental ground, determined to fight against everyday hardship.

The work of these writers delves mainly into the public sphere of everyday life. There are highly emotive renditions of the daily sounds and smells of the streets in *El Barrio*. The struggles against poverty, unemployment, drugs, AIDS, racism, and other social problems are depicted with "raw" honesty. But the female perspective is either absent or unrecognized. For example, in his introduction to *Nuyoricana Poetry*, Algarín insists on using the generic "he" in references to the Nuyoricana poet in spite of the fact that women are among the "poets" included in the anthology. By the late seventies and early eighties, however, Latina *Puertorriqueña* writers begin to trace with indelible ink their own experiences.

This book looks at the contributions of six of them and their rituals of survival, the quest for creative expression, and the fight to assert their right to become artists. They are representative of Puerto Rican women writing in the United States but do not comprise the totality of them. The writers included here would be the first to acknowledge their indebtedness to other "sistas" such as Carmen Valle and Lorraine Sutton.

The women selected for this volume are of Puerto Rican descent who were either born or have lived most of their adult lives in the United States. Although many of them did live in New York, at some point or another, they do not necessarily consider themselves *Nuyoricans*. They write mainly in English, except for Umpierre-Herrera's first two collections. They are contemporary writers very active in the literary world. They have chosen to portray "the humdrum insignificance . . . the forgettable, unheroic little dramas that make up the lives of regular working people" (Flores, "Back" 53). In so doing, they also challenge traditional literary discourses, from both Puerto Rico and the United States, to author/ize their own voices at the margins and at

the center of the printed page.

The first chapter examines Esmeralda Santiago's autobiographical novels and how they echo the *bildung* or process of formation of the Puerto Rican community in New York. Chapter Two looks at the intrinsic tension of the mother-daughter relationship in Nicholasa Mohr's fiction, as it parallels a woman's struggle for a space of her own. Mother and daughter, Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales, are the subject of the next chapter that discusses the mechanics of liquids as a metaphor for their fluid identity. Chapter Four shows how Sandra María Esteves co-opts the rhythmic sounds of *Salsa* and the incantations of *Santería* to articulate a political discourse of liberation. The following chapter studies Luz María Umpierre-Herrera's systematic attacks on social and intellectual institutions with their patterns of racial and sexual discrimination. Finally, Chapter Six studies Judith Ortiz Cofer's notion of storytelling as a sacred ritual that brings about the transformation of experiences and reality.

The chapters can be read independently but there is a common thematic thread: the primal need of these Latina *Puertorriqueña* writers to give voice to their own experiences, to their creative spirits, to their souls. As the experiences of Puerto Ricans in the States have evolved, so has their cultural and artistic expression, and Nicholasa Mohr insists that it should be recognized as such:

We are no longer an island people. This reality has become increasingly incomprehensible to the Puerto Rican from the island. This new world, which we are still creating, is the source of our strength and the cradle of our future. ("Puerto Ricans in New York" 160)

In 1981, Ana Lydia Vega published in Puerto Rico her short story "Pollito Chicken," a satire that uses "spanglish" to depict the sexual liberation of a Nuyoricana woman. Mohr, among many others, took great offense to the story both for its language and the stereotypes depicted that had nothing to do with the reality of thousands of Puerto Ricans in New York. No longer will Latina writers allow others, especially those in the island, to record the experiences of those who live at the crossroads of the "here and there," of what Luis Rafael

Sánchez calls “*la guagua aérea*” (“the aerial bus”). When discussing her skills as storyteller, Nicholasa Mohr likes to say that “she must have ‘kissed the mango tree,’” (Flores, “Back” 52). The Latina *Puerto-riqueñas* studied in this book have done just that: they kissed and ate the forbidden fruit and in so doing, they have been anointed with the power of words that enables them to re/create “new worlds.” Their works are indeed the “cradle of our future” in that they place their “words” in front of our eyes as an offering of strength for our souls.

Notes

1. “Operation Bootstrap” was an economic plan to attract industrial corporations to open plants in Puerto Rico. The local government offered them cheap labor, physical plants, and other infrastructure at low costs, and above all, tax exemptions for up to 25 years (Scarano 743).
2. Term used to designate people of Puerto Rican descent living in the United States, mainly in New York.