

Diasporic Journeys: Memoirs by Puerto Rican Writers in the US

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago use their memoirs to explore issues of identity, race, and gender as essential components of a transnational subjectivity implicitly embedded in their development as women straddling two cultures, two languages, and two geographic spaces. In their works, Ortiz Cofer and Santiago come to terms with the experience of migration and with the implications this experience has on their relationship to family, culture, and the perpetuation of traditions in and outside of their homespace. The value of generational storytelling, heritage, history, cultural identity, bilingualism, and the development of a feminist consciousness are further scrutinized by each writer as they both question and embrace their bilingual/bicultural realities as a new form of being, rooted in their intrinsic connection to the island and their determination to insert their lived experience into the American literary tradition.

Keywords: Puerto Rican diaspora, Latina writers, transnationalism, transnational subjectivity, identity, bilingualism, oral history, feminism, race, gender.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo Judith Ortiz Cofer y Esmeralda Santiago utilizan la escritura de sus memorias para explorar temas de identidad, raza y género que son partes esenciales de su subjetividad transnacional y de su desarrollo como mujeres que traspasan dos culturas, dos idiomas y dos espacios geográficos. En sus obras, Ortiz Cofer y Santiago enfrentan la experiencia de la migración y las implicaciones que esta experiencia tiene sobre sus relaciones con la familia, la cultura y la preservación de tradiciones en y fuera de sus lugares de origen. El valor de la tradición oral, herencia, historia, identidad cultural, el bilingüismo y el desarrollo de una consciencia feminista son escudriñadas por cada autora a la vez que cuestionan y abrazan sus realidades bilingües/biculturales como una nueva forma de ser, enraizada en su conexión intrínseca con la isla y su determinación de insertar su experiencia vivida en la tradición literaria americana.

Palabras clave: Diáspora puertorriqueña, escritoras latinas, transnacionalismo, subjetividad transnacional, identidad, bilingüismo, tradición oral, raza, género.

Memoirs, autobiography, and *testimonios* have often been the genre of choice for writers who embark on the journey of committing their life experience to paper. In the process, many of these authors transform what can be perceived as an isolated or distinct venture into an emblematic and often inspiring life story. Their works are rich sources of anthropological and ethnographic material that provide glimpses into particular historical eras and cultural contexts, often including demographic data and close scrutiny of changing and evolving communities, cultural practices, and gendered experience of past and present times. The journey becomes much more nuanced and complex when diasporic, bilingual, and bicultural elements come into play. Such is the case of two diasporic Puerto Rican writers (Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago) and their literary texts. These authors juxtapose a transnational poetics directly related to socio-historical and linguistic merging with a new-found sense of cultural consciousness.

Primarily written in English but often including Spanish terminology, Ortiz Cofer's and Santiago's literary works characterize the fluid and flexible mobility between two geographic and linguistic spaces that blur the lines separating originary and host cultures. In so doing, they create a transnational subjectivity that integrates cultural discourses and elements from their birth place with those found in their newly settled

environments and social spaces. Their stories reveal a distinct form of diasporic experience that challenges traditional concepts of unidirectional migration. The authors showcase, through their life experiences in Puerto Rico, in the United States, and often in their journeys between both places, that identities are constantly renegotiated or recoded in the writing of their lives. The authors also address issues of language, race, gender, and reconceptualizations of the images of women from a diasporic perspective that reveal paradigmatic shifts in stratification and gendered practices.

To speak of Ortiz Cofer's and Santiago's writing, then, is to speak of a broader awareness of cultural and national identity, of historical merging and linguistic hybridity. The dialogue involves an understanding of their birthplace (Puerto Rico) as a commuter nation in constant transition and evolution, a "nation on the move" as sociologist and anthropologist Jorge Duany aptly describes (Duany 2). This study equally involves a closer look at the United States as a space increasingly transformed by the amalgamation of cultures, histories, and languages. Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa refers to this process as a form of *amasamiento* and defines it as: "the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet... an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that has produced... a creature that questions the definitions of light and darkness and gives them new meaning" (Anzaldúa 81). With increasing statistical and demographic information confirming that self-proclaimed Puerto Ricans living in the United States currently outnumber those living on the island,¹ issues of national and cultural identity remain at the forefront and often become the central force behind an author's initial impulse to write his/her life story. Yet coming to terms with these issues by no means defines the end all of their literary processes. Some authors also move beyond the confines or limitations of identity discourses. Rather, they focus on the transformative powers of diaspora and the constant shuffling back and forth between geographic spaces as influential elements in the development of their social consciousness, in their interactions with others in the larger US Latino community, and in their continued familial ties to and/or memories of Puerto Rico.

With these considerations in mind, I turn to Judith Ortiz Cofer and her intrinsically hybrid texts. Her writing defies traditional classifications of a work of art. Her first publications consist of poetry collections (*Peregrina*, 1986; *Terms of Survival*, 1987; *Reaching for the Mainland*, 1987). Yet some of her subsequent works can be seen as a combination of prose, poetry, and personal essays (*The Latin Deli*, 1993; *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*, 1998; *The Year of Our Revolution*, 1998). Then there are her novels (*The Line of the Sun*, 1989; *The Meaning of Consuelo*, 2003) and her two

collections of critical essays (*Sleeping With One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival*, co-edited with Marilyn Kallet, 1999; *Women in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer*, 2000). Her memoir (*Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, 1990) also contains narrative prose and poetry. Her prolific and multiple award-winning literary career showcases Ortiz Cofer as one of the most influential and widely read Latinas in contemporary American literature.

During the early 1980s, Ortiz Cofer appeared on the literary scene as a writer whose work juxtaposes the images of her birthplace with her experiences in the United States. As the daughter of a Puerto Rican career naval officer, Ortiz Cofer continuously traveled back and forth between Puerto Rico and the United States during her father's lengthy sea tours. This shuffling between two geographic spaces allowed Ortiz Cofer to become better acquainted with Puerto Rican culture, especially the Caribbean folktale tradition transmitted by her maternal grandmother's countless stories or *cuentos*. Ortiz Cofer credits the stories told by the women in her family (grandmother, mother, aunts) as important sources in her development as a writer. She points out that early in life, she knew that storytelling was a form of empowerment, "that the women in [her] family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life in a world where women led restricted lives." (Acosta-Belén 86).

As a result of her trips back to Puerto Rico and her interaction with family members, Ortiz Cofer increasingly noticed how aspects of the Puerto Rican culture were perpetuated in the Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. Life in Paterson, New Jersey, and later in Augusta, Georgia, served as the frame of reference from which to analyze the continuation of cultural and linguistic codes in staunch opposition to previous immigration patterns of the 19th and early 20th century. Traditional models of immigration and settlement often signaled a unidirectional movement toward the host country that meant severing ties with the homeland and frequently resulted in assimilation. Ortiz Cofer's migration, and that of thousands of Puerto Ricans like her, signals a rupture with monolithic interpretations of (im)migration and melting pot theory. In other words, Ortiz Cofer's family participated in a distinct type of circular migration or constant commuting made possible by several aspects (US citizenship, technological advances, social networks in both home and host cultures) which in turn allows greater access and proximity to the originary culture and keeps assimilationist tendencies at bay.

Ortiz Cofer's development of a "transmigratory consciousness"² allows her to create a contestatory culture of resistance. Her writing serves to debunk myths of an

uneducated, disorganized diasporic Puerto Rican community as it participates in the construction of a cultural and historical legacy initially begun by writers such as Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón.³ Their works focus on the evolving and kaleidoscopic lives of island-born Puerto Ricans, on Puerto Rican migrants, and on the generations of US-born Puerto Ricans that came after them. Most importantly, Ortiz Cofer's writing adopts a characteristically feminist perspective and stance that allows for a reexamination of the images of women both in the originary and host culture. She constantly confronts the stereotypes of Latina women, questions the parameters of marriage customs, and critiques the stifling gendered relationships that women are subjected to. She also simultaneously provides alternative spaces of resistance and female empowerment. Ortiz Cofer comments:

My personal goal in my public life is to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities. Every time I give a reading I hope the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get the audience past the particulars of my skin color [and] my accent... (1993:154)

Ortiz Cofer's writing embodies the migration process of Puerto Ricans to the United States⁴ and particularly highlights women's participation in the settling process as inspiration for her writing. Her literary development also involved a decision regarding her "literary language." Ortiz Cofer often resented the pervasive attitude (initially, though to a lesser extent still, espoused by island authors) that Puerto Rican writers should only write in Spanish. She points out that her education was primarily conducted in English in American schools; that she lacks the syntactical knowledge to write in Spanish; and that English is the vehicle for her artistic expression.⁵ Yet, though she technically writes in English, her poetry and narratives constantly include Spanish vocabulary and popular *dichos* (idiomatic expressions). This ability allows Ortiz Cofer to move freely from one language to the other. It also helps maintain the authenticity of certain *dichos* (in both languages) lost during the translation process. In relation to language, Ortiz Cofer has found a middle ground: "I plant my writer's flag on both shores. There are exclusivists who would have me choose sides: I do not find such a choice necessary... nor beneficial to me as a writer and individual to give up anything that makes me a whole person" (Acosta-Belén 84).

Juan Bruce-Novoa provides an interesting perspective on Ortiz Cofer's use of dual languages as more than just code switching from one language to another. He refers to the "interlingual space" created in her writing not as a result of the juxtaposition of two independent codes but as:

a mixture of two or more codes to form a linguistic practice impossible to break down into independent constituents. She is... forcing the codes into a communication that shifts the point of signification away from either pole and into the space between, the inner space where meanings are negotiated in a process of synthesis. (Bruce-Novoa 96)

The interlingual space becomes a space of transculturation where a new language is created that borrows from both Spanish and English and is not reducible to either. The monolingual reader might see the practice as a mere code-switching because of the lexical shift, but the reader who is fluent in both English and Spanish recognizes the “continual kinetic interplay” (97) between languages mentioned by Bruce-Novoa in his article. By fusing island customs with U.S. encounters, Ortiz Cofer manages to create an interlingual space where her characters can explore the dualities, similarities, and contradictions of a bilingual, bicultural existence.

Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood (1990) became the means through which Ortiz Cofer delineates and recreates her migration process. A collection of autobiographical essays and poems, the work was awarded the 1991 PEN/Martha Albrand citation for nonfiction. The work begins with a preface, “Journey to a Summer’s Afternoon,” in which Ortiz Cofer reveals how Virginia Woolf’s notion of the selective process of memory in reconstructing the past helped her to understand and appreciate “precious moments of being” and to reconfigure these instances into the literary representation of her life experience. Ortiz Cofer writes in her Preface:

I wanted the essays to be, not just family history, but also creative explorations of known territory. I wanted to trace back through scenes based on my “moments of being.” (12) I am not interested in merely “canning” memories... and Woolf gave me the focus I needed to justify this work... I wanted to try to connect myself to the threads of lives that have touched mine and at some point converged into the tapestry that is my memory of childhood. (13)

Ortiz Cofer begins this work as far back as her memory reaches, in the idyllic setting of her maternal grandmother’s house in a countryside village in Puerto Rico. The matriarchal essence of Mamá Cielo, a composite of caring tenderness and overriding authority, astonishes the young Judith who yearns for the privilege of taking a siesta in her grandmother’s massive mahogany four-poster bed. Everything about this small yet vigorous woman mesmerizes her granddaughter, from her “symbols of power” (herb-filled jars, monstrous chifforobe locked with golden key, silver crucifix, and bible) to the

authoritative command of her words. But above all things, it is the eloquence of Mamá Cielo's storytelling voice that grips Ortiz Cofer's attention and opens up a world of possibilities.

The importance of oral history in the construction of a cultural legacy lies at the heart of Mamá Cielo's characterization. Her countless stories serve a dual purpose in the work: while they were meant to entertain and capture the attention of the family audience, they also function as cautionary tales directed specifically at the young women in the family. The spacious living room in Mamá Cielo's house on a summer afternoon served as a sanctuary for the women as captive audience for the matriarch's tales. Yet the place for storytelling could likewise be a shady area under a mango tree. The enchanting quality of the grandmother's alluring voice was enough to cast a spell over the silent listeners.

From these settings Ortiz Cofer gathers and memorizes Mamá Cielo's repertoire. She sympathizes with the pain and frustration of characters such as María La Loca, the woman whose insanity is caused by being left at the wedding altar. She learns about María Sabida's enchanting powers and her ingenious subjection of the town's fearful thief. She imagines Marina/Marino's cross-gendered existence that ends in a happy marriage. Moreover, the greatest *cuento* fashioned by Mamá Cielo is her own life story, the story of a hard-working, self-sacrificial mother who finally claims the right to control her body. Ortiz Cofer's tribute to her enigmatic grandmother is readily captured in the poem "Claims," placed at the end of the first chapter:

Last time I saw her, Grandmother/ had grown seemed as a Bedouin tent./ She had claimed the right/ to sleep alone, to own/ her nights, to never bear/ the weight of sex again, nor to accept/ its gifts of comfort, for the luxury/ of stretching her bones... Once she had made a pact/ with man and nature, and had kept it. Now like the sea,/ she is claiming back her territory. (29)

Mamá Cielo is the feisty personage who belongs to a generation of matriarchal women (Ortiz Cofer considers her the first feminist figure in her life) who taught her granddaughter strength of character and the power of the spoken word. It is from her grandmother, and from the women in her family who keep her legacy alive, that Ortiz Cofer inherits her storytelling vein. The matriarchal lineage of Mamá Cielo's evocative narrations comes full circle when Ortiz Cofer begins to create stories of her own. At the end of the chapter devoted to María Sabida, Ortiz Cofer claims: "And later, as I gained more confidence in my own abilities, the voice telling the stories became my own" (85).

With her new-found confidence and her ability to construct and tell stories, she completes the rest of the segments of her work. She tells of her *Mesa Blanca* spiritist

grandfather, who taught her gentleness with words and stimulated her appreciation for poetry with his own interest and love for the genre. She also charts the history of her parents' marriage when they were both very young, depicts details of her own birth and the birth of her brother, and recalls her father's lengthy military tours and her mother's return to the island. She particularly records life in diaspora, the confinement of El Building in Paterson, New Jersey where the family settled, as well as the memories of people and events that marked her life there.

Yet perhaps the most important part of the work as a whole appears in the title chapter, placed strategically in the middle of the book, which focuses on the selective power of memory. While watching a silent family film of short duration, Ortiz Cofer identifies scenes from her early childhood in the United States. The chapter's format consists of two parts. One is the description of the movie's silent revelers coming in and out of focus which is written in italicized stream of consciousness. The other part is the narration of events in her diasporic childhood marked by an assimilationist father and culturally unyielding Puerto Rican mother. The italicized narration brings forth images of transplanted Puerto Rican life, from the apartment's décor to the New Year's Eve celebration with traditional food, music, and nostalgia for the island. Within these segments, Ortiz Cofer describes three distinct women dressed in red sitting next to one another: her cousin's girlfriend, *la novia*, whose naiveté is evidenced in the formality of her body language and in the insecurity of her gaze; her Americanized cousin, a high school senior who smokes, speaks animatedly, wears tight clothes, and bleaches her hair; and finally, Ortiz Cofer's mother, sitting between the two other women, who stands for a midpoint between both extremes represented by *la novia* and the cousin.

As the chapter progresses, Ortiz Cofer superimposes dream imagery onto her memory of the silent movie, blurring the fine lines between what really happened in the film and the stories she imagined she heard about the people in it. The reader is left with a barrage of information hovering between the biographical account of her life and her artistic creativity. This inability to separate fact from fiction is reinforced by a scene from the final chapter in the book. Ortiz Cofer and her mother view a photo album of the father in military uniform. Her mother tells stories about Ortiz Cofer's father's tours away from home and remarks on his absence when she was born among other events in their lives. Ortiz Cofer then states:

I have my own memories about this time in my life, but I decide to ask her a few questions, anyway. It's always fascinating to me to hear her version of the past we shared, to see what shades of pastel she will choose to paint my childhood's "summer afternoons"... I want my mother to tell me that what I remember is true. But she is stubborn, too. Her memories are precious to her

and although she accepts my explanations that what I write in my poems and stories is mainly the product of my imagination, she wants certain things she believes are true to remain sacred, untouched by my fiction. (162-163)

The mother re-creates different incidents in Ortiz Cofer's life, claims that her depictions are "nothing but the truth," and insists that Ortiz Cofer accept her version of events without questions. Yet Ortiz Cofer concludes the chapter with a revealing line: "But that is not how *I* remember it" (165). In so doing, she aligns herself with Virginia Woolf's convictions that "in writing about one's life, one often has to rely on that combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion that may result in 'poetic truth'" (11). This is precisely the driving force behind Ortiz Cofer's work.

Esmeralda Santiago also participates in revealing how her life story connects to and aligns with the stories of other Latinas and other women writers in addressing issues of identity and literary representation, a story that also transcends cultural borders. In fact, Santiago's reliance on testimonial literary representation highlights the use of personal experience and critical observation as writing tools with which to examine larger issues of race, ethnicity, and gender as well as to further examine her particular social and cultural relationships with others. In this sense, Esmeralda Santiago participates in what critic Santiago Colas interprets as the essence and purpose of testimonial writing:

The testimonio speaks with a native voice... the testimonio speaks to establish identities: between protagonist and collective, between researcher and protagonist—and consequently, between reader, researcher, protagonist, and collective, between present subject and objective history, and between the written and the living, spoken language. (161)

In an article published in *Revista Foro*, in Puerto Rico's daily newspaper, *El Nuevo Día*, Santiago comments on the reasons why she writes memoirs and utilizes *testimonio* by referring to an encounter with a reader during one of her book presentations. The young woman had gone through a similar experience of moving to the United States that closely paralleled Santiago's own migration process. Reflecting upon this encounter, Santiago asserts that the writing of memoirs takes on dual purposes for her. First, her main concern is to insert her own experience as a diasporic Puerto Rican woman into the American literary tradition, a tradition increasingly becoming more multiethnic and multicultural as writers from diverse backgrounds publish their works. Second, Santiago's intent in writing is to show how the experience of migration, linguistic and cultural hybridity, and the preservation of customs/traditions outside of the country of origin is

shared by millions of im/migrants throughout the United States. She ends the article by pointing out that:

Somewhere in this country [referring to the US] there is a lonely girl or boy sitting in a classroom asking themselves if they should be afraid of the classmate sitting next to them without knowing that the classmate may be asking the same question. That's why I write memoirs: so that we can become visible to one another. (9)⁶

Santiago was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1948 and moved to New York when her parents separated. The eldest child in a family of eleven siblings, Santiago's life story, similar to Ortiz Cofer's experience, personifies a diasporic journey of self-revelation and encounter. Yet, unlike Ortiz Cofer, Santiago comes of age in a single-parent household where her mother, Ramona Santiago, would become a driving force and influential figure in her life as well as a looming presence in her writing, especially her first two books of memoirs. Interestingly, Santiago's incursion into writing comes from her experience producing documentary films alongside her husband, Frank Cantor. Together they founded *Cantomedia*,⁷ which has garnered numerous awards for excellence in documentary filmmaking. Santiago is also a community activist involved in several social organizations. One of the most important, which reveals her commitment to women's causes, is her participation in the foundation of a woman's shelter in the city of Quincy, Massachusetts called DOVE (Domestic Violence Ended)⁸ in 1978 while working for the District Attorney's Office under the governorship of William Delahunt. In addition, she is also a spokesperson for public libraries where she has developed community-based programs to encourage and support the artistic development of teens and young adults. Her hands-on involvement with these different agencies, alongside her experience as a bilingual/bicultural woman living and writing primarily in the United States, often influence the thematic concerns and the development of her literary works.

Santiago's first memoir, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), delineates her childhood in Puerto Rico up to the age of 13 and her forced migration to New York City. According to Santiago, "the person I was becoming when I left... was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jibara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting" (209). Yet in her subsequent experience as a young woman constantly stepping in and out of two languages, cultures, and world views, Santiago gains a newfound appreciation for the ways in which the duality of her life becomes much more enriching than disruptive. In 1998, Santiago published her second memoir, *Almost a Woman*. This work covers the eight-year period after she arrives in New York and marks her development as a young

bilingual, bicultural adolescent. It charts her years of study at the School for the Performing Arts in New York City and the difficulties of living up to her family's expectations. She tries to negotiate and balance her life between two opposing extremes: being what she considers a respectful Puerto Rican *señorita* on one side and becoming an overly "Americanized" young woman on the other. During these crucial formative years, Santiago meets Ulvi Dogan, a Turkish filmmaker who later transforms her life in unexpected and pernicious ways.

It is precisely the seven-year relationship with Dogan that Santiago explores in her third memoir, *The Turkish Lover* (2004). Yet what emerges in this text is a different depiction of her life story than the one presented in her earlier works. During the course of her experience with Dogan, a more defiant Santiago comes to light, one who explores her social environment and her own sexuality with a certain degree of abandonment. Despite the possessive and at times abusive relationship she endured with Dogan, the inhibitions and restrictions systematically imposed by gendered discourses are left behind by Santiago's increasing need to explore new grounds and to assert her own subjectivity and voice. She develops a strong sense of self-confidence, further influenced by her studies at Harvard University which, in turn, enhances the emergence of an assertive feminist consciousness and her eagerness to lead an independent life.

Out of the three biographical works, *When I Was Puerto Rican* remains the most widely read, anthologized, and reviewed though perhaps not the most mature in terms of literary technique and narrative development.⁹ Santiago approaches various thematic concerns in this work that closely parallel Judith Ortiz Cofer's experience and that of other Latinas within the United States. One of the key issues in Santiago's work is her depiction of racial stratification both in the originary and host cultures. Discussions of race and incidents of racism prove particularly difficult when addressing diasporic Puerto Rican writers and the communities that surround them. Ebenezer López Ruyol's 2005 self-published study, *El racismo nuestro de cada día*, presents a well-documented and researched analysis of the implications of racial constructs in different spheres of Puerto Rican society. López Ruyol examines the intricate relationship between discourses on race in Puerto Rico and the social, cultural, and political counter-discourses that have historically silenced, ignored, or down-played racial categorizations in what he calls a covert "blanqueamiento de la raza y de la historia" (98). López Ruyol's major premise, that "Puerto Rico es un pueblo negro, mulato y mestizo" (13), is further substantiated by his critical appraisal of the origins, effects, and consequences of racism on the island and the insidious practices of silencing and denying its very existence. The strong indictment that lies at the center of his arguments is that silence and negation of racism

in Puerto Rico aligned with the more convenient and politically correct discursive formulations of “la gran familia puertorriqueña,”¹⁰ which gained force with the rise of Puerto Rican nationalism in the decades after the US takeover in 1898, and which helped promote the notion of an egalitarian, non racist Puerto Rican society.

The works of many diasporic Puerto Rican writers address the forces behind racism fueled by culturally inscribed and socially sanctioned practices and codes of behavior that involve family upbringing, the educational system, mass media, and religion. Racial categorizations, constructs, and discourses likewise carry over into the experience of diasporic Puerto Ricans in the United States and other countries of the world. Puerto Ricans who leave the island are confronted with a new set of racial categories and unexpected or unfamiliar tensions and realities that mark their existence in a different geographic setting. The question then becomes how incidents of racism on the island compare to those experienced in the United States.

Though racial and ethnic identification in sources like the US Census are increasingly changing to better reflect the realities of different demographic groups (Latinos/as, African Americans, Asian Americans, mixed races, etc.), skin color continues to be the overriding racial marker within the United States. Thus, when Puerto Ricans move abroad, they confront a different construction of racial identity, one that tends to lump dark-skinned Puerto Ricans with African Americans and fair-skinned, blue-eyed Puerto Ricans with Anglo Americans, though the latter practice does not necessarily ensure their acceptance or upward mobility within the larger North American society. This image analysis does not seek comforting binaries or reversals of black and white, good or bad, but rather scrutinizes the use of racial categorizations alongside Homi Bhabha’s discussion in “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” in which he states that “the point of intervention should shift from identification of images as positive or negative to the understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible through stereotypical discourse” (Bhabha 1990: 71). These inquiries have been consistently addressed by scholars and writers alike who seem to agree that it is much easier to be Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico than to be Puerto Rican in the United States where your racial identity, ethnicity, and linguistic practices are constantly questioned.¹¹

Esmeralda Santiago’s work includes depictions and manifestations of race and racism from different perspectives and vantage points. Unlike Ortiz Cofer’s depictions of an upbringing where color was practically never questioned, Santiago, from the very beginning of her work, acknowledges her siblings’ different skin tones (ranging from light to yam colored to nutty brown and sun ripened). These shades correlate to their

identifiable nicknames (Muñequita, Colorá, Negi). Santiago's mother tries to explain the significance of their nicknames by asserting, "We all have official names, and then our nicknames, which are like secrets that only the people who love us use" (14). Santiago's confusion leads her to believe that it all seemed "too complicated, as if one of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not" (14). When Santiago questions the meaning of her name, she accepts her mother's explanation that it stems from her skin color and is used as a term of endearment, though she is left to deliberate on the dubious dialectics of constantly shifting double personalities. Santiago's experience of racial identification contrasts enormously with the narrations of previously published writers such as Piri Thomas and his struggles with racial identity. Santiago accepts and feels at ease with the designated racial signifiers used by her family members while Thomas constantly questions and confronts perceptions of racial signification.¹² As Arlene Dávila comments in *Barrio Dreams* (2004), "idioms of race and ethnicity signal opposing forms of insertion into the nation: ethnicity is recognized to index a 'safer' kind of inclusion, whereas race is always about hierarchy and historically persistent and unredeemable difference" (Dávila 2004: 18). The small rural childhood community of Macún (Toa Baja, PR) and site of Santiago's upbringing provides a protective environment with no apparent divisions or considerations of racial difference. There is a world devoid of racial tension primarily because skin color differentiation is not perceived as disruptive. Negi's nickname correlates to Nuyorican poet¹³ Pedro Pietri's idealization of the island and the exhortation at the end of his famous poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary," in which he encourages migrants to return to the island where "to be called negrito means to be called love" (126). Yet this view can likewise respond to the notion of the "whitening of the race" where color is simply and consistently unacknowledged as pertinent or part of their reality,¹⁴ or to the systematic silencing of racial issues denounced by López Ruyol's work, which does not necessarily indicate an absence of racism or racial tensions.

Puerto Rican migration to the United States shatters this seemingly inoffensive racial haven for Santiago. Upon arrival in New York, like so many other migrants before and after her, Santiago feels and experiences a different level of racial subjectification as she comes to terms with her increasingly bilingual, bicultural development and formation. The first incident of racism the family experiences is upon their arrival at the New York City airport, where two taxi drivers refused to take them to their destination:

The first one looked at us, counted the number of packages we carried, asked Don Julio where we were going, then shook his head and drove along the curb toward a man with a business suit and a briefcase... The second driver gave us

a hateful look and said some words I didn't understand, but I knew what he meant just the same... Don Julio said it was illegal for a driver to refuse a fare, but that didn't stop them from doing it. (216)

The discrimination and racial profiling that Santiago is subjected to on her first day in the United States is further exacerbated by instances of rejection and segregation in her experience in the public school system, where students bonded on the basis of ethnicity (Italians, African Americans, etc.) and also on the basis of arrival. There was a perceptual chasm between the newly-arrived Puerto Ricans who came from the island and the ones born in Brooklyn of Puerto Rican parents. Santiago states: "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). She strove, on the other hand, to forge a place between these two opposing extremes where she could negotiate an equally contestatory identity that would reflect her developing hybridity. This merging and deterritorialization results in what Edna Rodríguez-Mangual refers to as "a hybrid space and self that is hard to categorize—a richer self because it incorporates two cultures and identities in one... and criticizes those who retain a myopic view [of] Puerto Rican identity" (Rodríguez-Mangual 987).

Another concern for Santiago in her memoir is the depiction of the images of women, the realization of their subjugated position, and a reconceptualization of these images from a feminist perspective. Early on in the work, Santiago recognizes strategic realms based on gender differentiation and strict patriarchal order. Like Ortiz Cofer, she identifies how the women of the family operate within the realm of the home while the men inhabit the space outside. Gender roles are clearly defined and often go unquestioned, while any intent to deviate from these prescribed gendered practices is rejected as disruptive and unbecoming. Yet, also like Ortiz Cofer, Santiago learns how to form her own convictions and to confront and defy limitations imposed by these gender constraints. At one point, Negi summarizes her understanding of these two realms in the following terms:

Men, I was learning, were *sinvergüenzas*, which meant they had no shame and indulged in behavior that never failed to surprise women but caused them much suffering. Chief among the sins of men was the other woman, who was always a *puta*, a whore. My image of these women was fuzzy, since there were none in Macún, where all the women were wives or young girls who would one day be wives. (29)

Yet Santiago's experience and maturation process help her counteract both the image of the suffering, dejected woman (usually obedient housewives and mothers living in Macún) and the representation of the liberated, indulgent excesses personified by the whore/other woman or *puta* who "wore lots of perfume, jewelry, dresses cut low to show off their breasts" (29) and who were reputed to live in an indecent place called "el Jurutungo" that Negi never managed to precisely locate. What she comes to realize is that the doting mother versus home-wrecking whore dichotomy set forth a binary opposition under patriarchal standards that was impossible to uphold in her development of a female consciousness.

This realization is also connected to a subsequent chapter where Santiago presents yet another image of women: the *jamona* or spinster. Described from the perspective of the male gaze (her father and a male bus driver), the *jamona* resembles a disheveled, sad woman on the brink of insanity. The men declare that "no one wants her. Maybe she's too ugly to get married. Or she has waited too long. She ends up alone for the rest of her life" (89). The men dismiss her presence as something annoying whereas they applaud and consider a man who never marries as "lucky." Yet the most revealing lines at the end of this chapter signal a clear counterargument against the men's depiction. After careful scrutiny of the double standards associated with gendered behavior and what is and not permissible within patriarchal society, and after witnessing countless incidents of infidelity and deceit perpetrated by the men in her family and neighborhood, Negi comes to the following conclusion:

It seemed to me that remaining *jamona* could not possibly hurt this much. That a woman alone... could not suffer as much as my beautiful mother did... I packed my bags and stepped into the room where Mami and Abuela sat. When they looked up at me, it seemed as if we were all thinking the same thing. I would just as soon remain *jamona* than shed that many tears over a man. (104)

This assertion marks the beginning of the awakening of a feminist consciousness in Negi that questions and rejects the limitations of gender constructs and that will help her create her own individual sense of womanhood. The realization also brings forth a sense of female solidarity and strength, an image that also reverberates in Ortiz Cofer's writing. As Enrique Morales-Díaz points out, Santiago:

writes to denounce the mandated gender dichotomy and establishes instead a platform from which others can speak and share their own experiences and development of their identities. The author breaks with the notion of categorizing women based on their relationship with phallogocentric society. (Morales-Díaz 134)

This conscious break from predetermined gender roles will also heavily influence her experience in diaspora as she strives to find balance in a world of conflicting agendas and expectations that often disrupt and complicate, but ultimately strengthen, her maturation process.

In addition to racial and gendered stratifications and their influence on the development of a transnational subjectivity, another aspect that Santiago explores in her memoirs is the use of popular *dichos* or idiomatic expressions in Spanish that are often, though not always, translated into English. Reminiscent of Ortiz Cofer's grandmother (Mamá Cielo), who interjected these popular phrases in her stories and conversations, Santiago primarily inserts them at the beginning of each chapter and sporadically within the narration. According to Maribel Garza, *dichos* are "phrases or sentences that are said as a way of giving advice, giving an example, and also, some are used negatively... Most commonly, dichos talk about good morals and positive ways that we should live our lives." Wendy Devlin also points out that:

Dichos (aphorisms or proverbs) are found in all cultures. They express universal truths in just a few words, easily remembered, and they strengthen our ties to our own culture by reminding us where we came from. These verbal treasures help to give a culture its richness.

Dichos are more honest, accurate and wise than any one of us because they have travelled through the soothing whisperings of years. They can be relished, memorised, quoted in Spanish and English, tested on friends, and finally evaluated in one's own life. They are meant to put us in our place and then console us as we feel the weight of mortality.

Manuel Burgos provides an even more critical/theoretical study on the significance and use of *dichos* as he comments that:

One of the most important characteristics of the *dichos* is that they are collectively shared. These verbal constructions are conventional, and related to this notion, their natural environment are the casual conversations. They are transmitted in social talk and some of them are preserved in time from generation to generation. In this way, we can find *dichos* used in current conversations in Latin America that also can be found in text from the XVI century in Spain as *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*.

In Santiago's work, some of the popular expressions she uses easily translate from one language to the other, yet some lose their meaning within a different cultural context. It is precisely this loss of referentiation that signals the difficulties Santiago encounters as she tries to navigate the intricacies of a transnational body politic. There are a total of

fourteen *dichos* in Santiago's work, including those placed at the beginning of the Prologue and Epilogue. Some may prelude the events of the narrative to come while others serve as cautionary signals, similar to the use Ortiz Cofer imparts to these expressions in her writing. Most of them can be grouped into two categories: those that refer to endurance in troubled times and those that display reaffirmation of cultural identity. Because Santiago's life story is similar to that of many im/migrants like herself who strive to improve their knowledge and living conditions, the expressions in the first category represent her development from an island-bred Puerto Rican girl to a multifaceted Latina living in the United States. Thus, phrases such as "*barco que no anda, no llega a puerto*," "*borrón y cuenta nueva*," "*con el agua al cuello y la marea subiendo*," "*de Guatemala a guata-peor*," "*escapé del trueno y di con el relámpago*," and "*ahí fue donde la puerca entorchó el rabo*," attest to the harsh difficulties encountered both in home and host societies as well as the diverse strategies employed to overcome them. The other category that refers to cultural identity includes expressions such as "*al jíbaro nunca se le quita la mancha de plátano*," "*con la música por dentro*," "*dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres*," "*te conozco bacalao, aunque vengas disfrazao*," and "*el mismo jíbaro con diferente caballo*." In the chapters that follow these phrases, not only does Santiago showcase and celebrate island traditions, but also reaffirms her allegiance to her Puerto Rican heritage, roots, customs, music, food preferences, and language in ways that transcend national/geographic boundaries into diaspora. The preservation of many of these cultural traits and traditions is precisely the focal point of her transmigration and prove to be crucial in her ability to balance both histories into a holistic sense of selfhood.

On the other hand, the untranslatability of some of the *dichos* from Spanish into English also signals an uprooting of sorts and an ever-present rupture in the merging of two languages, cultures, and worldviews that indicate the inevitable sense of loss experienced by those who traverse between two worlds. Part of Santiago's prowess lies in her determination to integrate different aspects of her transnational experience in ways that minimize this sense of loss through an act of reconciliation between past and present, between Puerto Rico and the United States. This effort means coming to terms with the racial baggage, gendered stereotypes, and linguistic practices inherent in her upbringing, discarding that which is no longer useful or relevant to her current reality and forming new ways of honoring those aspects that have positively nourished her existence.

Through the writing of their life stories, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago delve into the convoluted spaces of transnationalization that orient (and at times disorient) the literary representation of bilingual/bicultural realities. Their strong

belief in the power of storytelling, and in the important role of culture and history in the construction of a narrative voice, lies at the core of their development as writers. Their solidarity to women and the circumstances that affect their lives as artists/creators feed into an evolving feminist consciousness intrinsically embedded in their writing process. Acceptance of their racial and ethnic realities comes forth within an increasingly multiracial and multicultural social milieu. Discipline and persistence inform their writing, while memory, cultural affiliation, and a transmigratory subjectivity bring forth the literary images. In this sense, Carmen Aguinaco rightfully states that Latina writers

... journey back to their origins to find out the same thing: their true home and their true language. In doing this, they give us characters—particularly women—who assert their identity in an integration that is neither resignation to the reality around them nor an indiscriminate idealization of their cultures of origin. It is, rather, a syncretism free enough to be critical of all their different cultures—original and adopted.

Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago are authors who will stand the test of time, vibrant and enduring voices that enrich the interlingual spaces between identity and art in the American literary landscape.

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NOTES

- ¹ See: Falcon, A. *Atlas of Stateside Puerto Ricans*, 2004 and the US Census Bureau 2006 American Community Survey, among others.
- ² See: Suero-Elliott, M. J. "Subverting the Mainland: Transmigratory Biculturalism in U.S. Puerto Rican Women's Fiction". *Writing Off the Hyphen: New Perspectives on the Literature of the Puerto Rican Diaspora*. Seattle and London: U of Washington P, 2008.
- ³ For detailed analysis of the models of cultural deficiency perpetuated against Puerto Rican communities in the U.S., see Acosta-Belén, E. and C. Santiago. *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2006; among other works.
- ⁴ For a historical survey of the Puerto Rican migratory process, see Sanchez Korrol, V. *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City*. Berkeley: U of California P, 199; Flores, J. *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Houston: Arte Público P, 1993; Duany J. *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*. Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 2002 and Whalen, C. T. and V. Vázquez-Hernández. *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005; among other sources.
- ⁵ See Acosta-Belén, E. "A MELUS Interview: Judith Ortiz Cofer." *MELUS* 18.3 (1993): 83-97.
- ⁶ Author's translation from the original text published in Spanish by *El Nuevo Día*.

⁷ Cantomedia specializes in motion pictures, public service announcements, and audiovisual services for government, industries, and schools. It has produced over 40 public service announcements, three educational films, and numerous theatrical shots. It has also been awarded several prestigious awards. For more information, see <http://www.thefreelibrary.com> or <http://www.esmeraldasantiago.com>.

⁸ For more information on this Center, see <http://www.doveinc.info/history.html>.

⁹ See Morales-Díaz, E. “Catching Glimpses: Appropriating the Female Gaze in Esmeralda Santiago’s Autobiographical Writing,” *Centro Journal*, XIV, no.2 (2002): 131-147.

¹⁰ See Duany. *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* and Rivero, Y. *Tuning out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican television*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005 for further discussion on this topic.

¹¹ See Morales, A. L. and R. Morales. *Getting Home Alive* as well as Acosta-Belén, E. and R. Santiago. *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2006; among others.

¹² From a less socio-historical perspective and writing more about urban realities of some inner city youth during the 1940s and 50s, Piri Thomas’ autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets* was published in 1967 and became one of the most influential texts by a Puerto Rican writer. Depictions of race and racial tensions inform his representation of lived experience both in and out of his home space. At home, Thomas deals with the contradictions between acceptance and negation of himself as a racially subjectified individual. On the one hand, he relates to his light-skinned Puerto Rican mother who endearingly refers to him as “mi negrito” (similar to the nickname used by Esmeralda Santiago) and tells him stories of an idealized Puerto Rican island paradise he has never visited. On the other hand, he faces the systematic negation and denial of blackness (*negritud*) perpetuated by his dark-skinned Cuban-born father. Thomas’ subsequent journey to the southern US and then to other parts of the world as a merchant marine, help him come to terms with the perceptual dissonance associated to his racial experience as a black Puerto Rican in the United States.

¹³ The auto-denominated Nuyorican Poets’ incursion onto the literary scene during the late 1960s and 70s was initially marked by explosive social protest poems—for example, Pedro Pietri’s “Puerto Rican Obituary”—influenced by political unrest but gradually developing other concerns related to issues of race, identity and language. For Pietri, in particular, the poem calls for a physical or metaphorical return to Puerto Rico as a safe-haven where you are not judged by your skin color and where you will live a more productive and socially conscious life than the one lived in diaspora. The legacy of the Nuyorican poets (Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Sandra María Esteves, Pedro Pietri, Tato Laviera, and Willie Perdomo, among others) lives on in the works of a new generation of contemporary diasporic Puerto Rican writers such as María “Mariposa” Fernández, Caridad “La Bruja” de la Luz, Urayoán Noel, Emmanuel Xavier, and Jaime “Shaggy” Flores, among others.

¹⁴ This assertion relates to a cultural and demographic study conducted by Isar Godreau in the barrio San Anton in Ponce, PR where one of the residents, concerned over the possible implications of being labeled black in Godreau’s study, tells her “most people here in San Anton are not black, black. If you want to study black culture you should go to Loiza. People are *really* black over there” (*Missing the Mix: San Antón and the Racial Dynamics of Nationalism*. Ph.D. Diss. U of California, Santa Cruz). This response indicates that even in Puerto Rico, blackness is always located elsewhere.