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María Acosta Cruz

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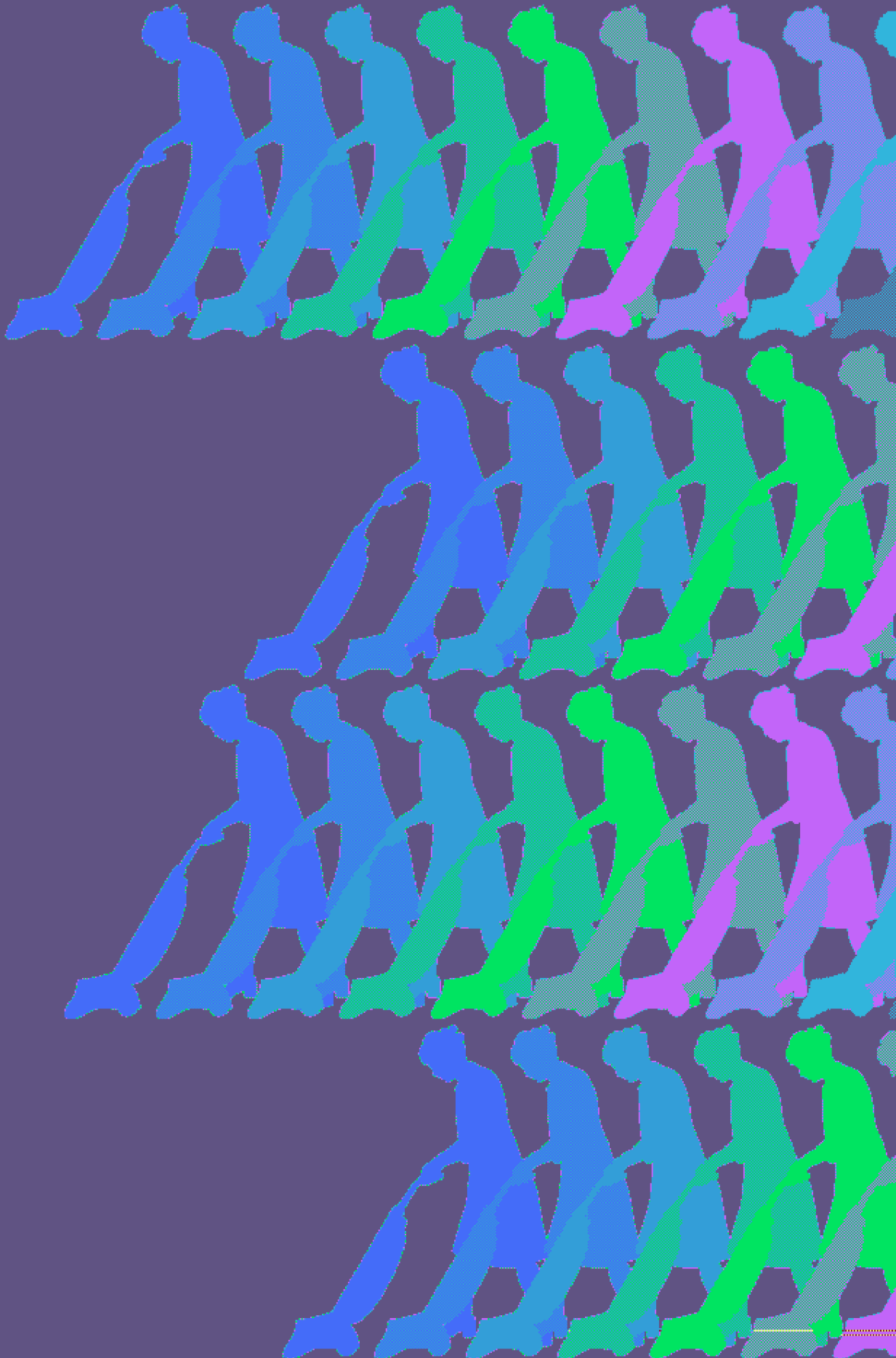
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# Esmeralda Santiago in the marketplace of identity politics

MARÍA ACOSTA CRUZ

## ABSTRACT

Esmeralda Santiago's *América's Dream*, with its ahistorical subjectivism and idealization of an agrarian past, offers a "Latino" docile Puerto Rican as the novel's central protagonist. This article explores the following: the marketability of Latinos, Puerto Rican literary history, and identity formation. Santiago's nostalgia positions her ideologically within 1930s–1950s Puerto Rican writing. Santiago's "terruño" presents a narrative model (exclusively working class characters, binary gender roles, an agrarian setting, a disconnection from contemporary culture) that reinvents the stereotype of the docile Puerto Rican. *América's Dream* offers no interplay of hybridity—one of the defining characteristics of Latino, and Puerto Rican identities. [Key words: Latino identities, docility, authenticity, market politics, stereotypes]

“Desde el fabuloso ‘retorno a la tierra’ de *La carreta*, [...] la añoranza e idealización de la sociedad agraria patriarcal de *La víspera del hombre*, hasta el subjetivismo ahistórico de ‘El puertorriqueño dócil’ y *La mirada*, la [...] obra de René Marqués constituye la [...] búsqueda de un ‘tiempo perdido’ e irrecuperable en definitiva por medio de la nostalgia militante.” (González 1989: 84)

This epigraph from José Luis González about René Marqués could apply to Esmeralda Santiago, whose oeuvre takes the traits of ahistorical subjectivism, nostalgia, and idealization of an agrarian past, into the Latino context and gives a new face to a well-known *über-Latino* stereotype: the docile Puerto Rican. The high visibility of her work makes for a repetition and reinvention of some of the most troubling stereotypes about Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rico.

### The marketplace

Santiago is a prominent member of the Latina boom in United States publishing of the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Common to their work (and that of their male counterparts) is the exploration of Latino identities. It is important to weigh the significance of a Latina being her own cultural agent and representing her worldview on her own terms. Yet it is equally important to remember the part Santiago plays in the cultural phenomenon of the U.S. “ethnic identities” market. Top Latina writers such as Santiago, Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Julia Alvarez, and Cristina Garcia have their works published by major houses, and are rewarded with literary prizes; and sometimes their works are made into movies, thereby institutionalizing them into canon-forming cultural products. Market forces turn their works into commodities that speak to the vogue for all things Latino in contemporary U.S. culture. Santiago is a star in that market—proof is the PBS presentation of *Almost a Woman*.<sup>2</sup> She is not a disenfranchised homegirl from the barrio. Her cultural clout is shown by the frequency with which her texts appear in high school and college-level readers and textbooks, proof of the access she has to the means of cultural production. She is visibly located at the center of a culture industry that thrives on representations of “Latinoness.”

For an author who came to prominence in the 1990s, it is striking how she deals in a kind of identity formation. For the most part her texts ignore alternate forms of Puerto Rican experience and values—except for her own—rendering a uniform identity that conforms to stereotypical expectations of a “certain” kind of Puerto Rican: i.e., uneducated and working-class. Ellen McCracken calls this kind of cultural production “successful ‘minority commodities,’ versions of the Latino Other that mainstream publishing companies authorize, market, and even, to some degree, foment” (5).

The working-class has rightfully occupied the lion’s share of Latino literature because great numbers of Latinos in the United States are from the working-class. Yet Santiago’s works present “Puerto Ricans” as synonymous *only* with members of the working class.<sup>3</sup> Compare for example Denise Chávez’s focus on “service” industry

workers and their interaction with people in other spheres of life; for example (teacher’s assistant) Tere Avila’s partnership with (over-educated and ambitious accountant) Irma Granados in *Loving Pedro Infante*.

I contend that in the marketing of Puerto Rican identity Santiago is what Renato Rosaldo called the “Lone Ethnographer” (31), i.e., someone who offers an “objective” overview of a culture as a homogeneous, unchanging monument. What gives one pause is the anthropological reading encouraged by the publicity surrounding her work: the reader is supposed to approach her “authentic” descriptions of Puerto Rico as if they were ethnographies. Some academic critics also support this view, for example Rodríguez Vechinni refers to her work as “ethnografic autobiography” (174).

As Lori Ween explains: “the appearance of authenticity and the belief in the truth of a created image are vital and are manufactured to create a bond of trust with the audience” (92). The culture industry ensures the reception of Santiago’s Puerto Rico as “authentic” because it is taken as grounded in autobiography, which is already a problematic viewpoint for identity projects. Her strategy relies to a great extent on authority of experience as the source of cultural and historical information pertaining to Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans with little or no references to other sources of authority. This means that Santiago is, in essence, true to herself. However, even a cursory glance at the paratextual (ancillary) material that promote Santiago’s works—such as web pages, reviews, jacket art, interviews, etc.—shows the stress laid on the authenticity of the works’ Puerto Rican and Latino experience. Cynical as it may seem, can we ignore in our reception of Santiago the commercial hype of, say, the web pages devoted to her life and work?<sup>4</sup> A publicity machine that promotes readings of her version of Puerto Ricans as ethnically “real” bypasses notions of accountability to historical facts and actually promotes a product that woefully disregards Puerto Rican complexities.

Critics have pointed out the centrality of Puerto Rican identity in her work. Aileen Schmidt affirms, “The problem of identity is the cornerstone of the narration” (136). Carmen L. Torres-Robles sees that cornerstone as tied to her *puertorriqueñidad*: “Su sentido de identidad nunca se ve amenazado con la influencia de la cultura norteamericana” (210). Keith Alan Sprouse restates this by saying that, in her memoirs, “although she claims to have once wanted to be North American, in the final instance, when she speaks of her island, her people, and her language, she refers only to Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans, and Spanish, finding no place for North America, North Americans, or English” (115). But he does not delve into what kind of “Puerto Rico” is at issue in her works.

### The problematics of authenticity

On a theoretical level Cervenak and colleagues state that “the very discursive practice of ‘authority of experience’ replicates, however oppositionally, the politics of state domination” (351). So if we set aside the belief in primacy of experience and focus on the culture represented in her works, Santiago’s rendering of Puerto Rico—taken as gospel truth by so many readers in the States because it “flows” from autobiographical expertise—is seen to be far removed from historical and cultural Puerto Rican reality. It amounts to authenticity by implication.

Santiago’s oeuvre should be identified with what José Luis González labeled *jibarismo literario* (González 1989: 37), by which he meant the mythification of the small town Puerto Rican peasant. The cultural appeal of this presentation of Puerto Ricans is exemplified by the long-held popularity of Rafael Hernández’s 1929 song “Lamento Borincano”

“Y triste, el jibarito va / pensando así, diciendo así / llorando así por el caminooooo”).

The impact (through massive marketing and exposure) of that vision, in the context of a Latino search for roots, is that Puerto Rico is perpetuated for, say, great numbers of high school and college students in the U.S., as a 1950s agrarian lost land. All of the island’s complexity, what José Luis González called “la compleja y conflictiva realidad puertorriqueña” (González 1987: 149), is also lost.

### Who in América?

I want to focus on Santiago’s one “pure” fiction novel, *América’s Dream*, in order to discuss the repercussions of her portrayal of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican identity even when not directly linked to “autobiography.” This novel, though cast entirely as “fictional,” characterizes Puerto Rico in the same terms as the two memoirs and represents itself as grounded in the “real” experience of Puerto Rico. For example: in the acknowledgments page Santiago states that “while this is a work of fiction, it takes place in Vieques, which is real.” Then the author thanks the owners of a real hotel in Vieques called La Casa del Francés, “for their hospitality and generosity in allowing a fictional América Gonzalez to work in their lovely hotel.” This sets the stage for the textual scheme that follows, to wit: naturalism mediated by melodrama. Her “picture” repeats and solidifies a specific view of Puerto Rico: a 1950s-like, patriarchal agrarian paradise spoiled by modernity in which an abused but beautiful working-class woman lives in a cycle of oppression from which she runs away (to the U.S.), only to be hunted by the macho man she sought to escape. The novel’s strategic underpinning, a mix of melodrama and naturalism, allows Santiago to revisit her project and sell to the reading public the “real” face of Puerto Rico (as she sees it).

In this novel Santiago repeats the mas s-appealing and melodramatic plot stratagem of a long-suffering working class heroine. Santiago, as a sort of ‘90s Corín Tellado, amply demonstrates the marketability of stereotypes when presented through a 1970s-flavored, Second Wave feminist viewpoint. I contend that Santiago’s use of patriarchal melodrama does not participate in a subversive use of melodrama as re-vision of Latin America (for example, how Denise Chávez throws into question filmic melodrama in *Loving Pedro Infante*). For Santiago, melodrama reflects Puerto Rican culture as a Manichean conflict of binaries. What is striking about Santiago’s work is the presence of unexamined dichotomies: male/female, and Puerto Rican/American.

*América’s Dream* offers a comforting view of old-fashioned puertorriqueñidad that reverts in most particulars to the stereotypes of poor, passive, docile, uneducated, and downtrodden Puerto Ricans (both on the island and in the States), who are seen as no threat to anyone in the established order.

Far from presenting the “big picture” of Puerto Rican society—which would make her a Nuyorican Balzac or even a Rosario Ferré—in *América’s Dream* Santiago depicts a univocal “Puerto Rico” bounded by strict divisions of class and educational level, and the working class protagonist remains as isolated from contact with other castes as any sub-continental untouchable. Santiago’s portrayal of Puerto Rico suffers from cultural essentialism, which Uma Narayan explains this way: “While culturally essentialist feminist representations of ‘Third World cultures’ sometimes depict the practices and values of privileged groups as those of the “culture as a whole” [...] equally essentialist representations are produced when the ‘Representative Third World Woman’ is modeled on marginalized and underprivileged Third World women” (84).

Crucial to this representation is how Santiago glances at Puerto Rican history:

through the prism of romantic nostalgia, a telluric imaginary that has stood her well in the marketplace. Her texts stage a Macondoized Puerto Rico, which in this novel is set in Vieques, thus telescoping the insularity to an island off the coast of an island. Early in the novel there is a telling description of Vieques:

Once these lowlands were a sea of sugarcane, which elegant señores oversaw atop sprightly Paso Fino horses. But when the U.S. Navy appropriated two-thirds of the island for its maneuvers, the great sugar haciendas disappeared and the tall stacks that dotted the island were bulldozed out of the way. This is history, and América doesn’t think about it (17).

This stunted historical picture of a model nineteenth-century graceful patriarchal life is the text’s construction of history, not the protagonist’s. The glaring irony of a maid, herself the descendant of servants, being located within a nostalgic vision of ruling class splendor is nonsensical since América is a working-class woman in a working-class world. This re-territorialization of Puerto Rican identity is dependent on a place, Vieques, which sustains a textual yearning for a patriarchal *vida señorial*—a dreamland already co-opted by Puerto Rican politicians and successfully marketed by banking and rum corporations since the 1970s. The reference—without apparent irony—to the proud and tall stacks of the sugar haciendas is estranged from the economic history and class issues of the sugar industry in the Caribbean. As José Luis González never tired of explaining, the “hateful” haciendas—which he described as having emerged from “la subcultura extranjerizante y parasitaria de los hacendados corsos, mallorquines y ‘peninsulares’ de idéntica laya expoliatoria” (González 1987: 150)—were never a “telluric” element but a foreign, oppressive structure created by what he would have called the (two) “metropolis.”<sup>6</sup>

The retro vision of Puerto Rico is closely linked to Santiago’s adherence to what González called “independentismo tradicional” (González 1989: 25), which presented a mythified view of Puerto Rican cultural and social unity in the nineteenth century. For González the world of the haciendas was a false “epítome de la ‘puertorriqueñidad’” (González 1989: 23). Yet the text looks back fondly on the haciendas.

As to the reference in the passage quoted earlier to “the sprightly *Paso Fino* horses,” José Luis González identified the same horses as symbols of the patriarchal order in superannuated notions of Puerto Rican identity:

El telurismo característico de la literatura producida por la élite puertorriqueña en el siglo XX no responde [...] a una desinteresada y lírica sensibilidad conmovida por las bellezas de nuestro país tropical, sino a una añoranza muy concreta y muy histórica de la tierra perdida, y no de la tierra entendida como símbolo ni como metáfora sino como medio de producción material cuya propiedad pasó a manos extrañas. En otras palabras: quienes ya no pudieron seguir “volteando la finca” a lomos del tradicional caballo, se dedicaron a hacerlo a lomos de una décima, un cuento o una novela (González 1989: 33).

Juan Flores writes that a certain brand of Puerto Rican nationalism is a vehicle for “obviously conservative metanarratives of moral puritanism, elitism, patriarchy, and heterosexism” (33). Given that Santiago’s subject matter is the diasporic experience of Puerto Ricans, the text adheres to an essentialist presentation of identity (national, class, and gender-based), over which América’s old-guard patriotic *independentismo* presides as a key conceptual instrument of Puerto Rican identity. The text ignores any discussion about Puerto Rican “nationhood” or of the hybrid construction of identities of Puerto Ricans in and out of the island.

Santiago’s univocal portrayal of Puerto Rico is in part due to a common phenomenon: exilic nostalgia for the past. Flores notes the heightened patriotism/nationalism shown by many Puerto Ricans in the mainland, which he characterizes as a “paradoxical inversion of geographic location and cultural belonging” (53) because “people, say in Guaynabo, ...take their culture for granted, while others in Philadelphia defend it passionately” (52); he uses as a model for this cultural occurrence the famous *casitas* in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Santiago’s nostalgia for the *terruño* positions her ideologically within the generation of Puerto Rican writers of the 1930s through 1950s—theoretically in such exalted company as Antonio S. Pedreira and René Marqués—who looked back with nostalgia on the hacienda economy.<sup>7</sup>

Santiago’s negotiation of identity falls back on a “pure” independentismo that resists the issues about the island’s status long debated by writers and critics both on and off the island. Her insistence on the independence ideal as central to the formulation of puertorriqueñidad appears with América’s contact with Latinos from other national origins. This happens in the chapter called “Las Empleadas.” After América states that she doesn’t consider herself an American, asserting “I’m not Americana... I’m Viequense” (218) (she means “Puerto Rican” since Santiago places her text in Vieques as the last outpost of that particular puertorriqueñidad), América then “tells them [the *empleadas*] that where she comes from people are fighting to win independence from the United States” (253). This act of suppression ignores the decades-long failure of the independence movement at the Puerto Rican polls. Absent from Santiago’s cultural radar is the long discussion of that failure; how, for example, in 1960 René Marqués bemoaned the imminent death of the *independentista* party, which he called the “P.I.P en naufragio” (203), or how in 1980 José Luis González blasted the ideology of traditionalist twentieth-century independentismo, which was for him a product of the culture of the nineteenth-century ruling classes. The past decade has seen increased discussions about the viability of the independence ideal. On one side are neonationalist theorists (who affirm it) and on the other so-called postmodern culture critics (who believe it has been superceded).<sup>8</sup>

Yet in 1996 *América’s Dream* uses what Ana Lydia Vega once called “el independentismo tirapiedras de los sesenta” (16): a rote, unquestioned assertion of independence as a contemporary “goal” of the Puerto Rican “people.” This claim makes Santiago’s imaginary Puerto Rico distant from the complex sociopolitical realities of the island. It is as if the political views of the protagonist were learned from the scene in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, where Negi discusses the island’s situation with her independentista father in the 1960s, which is surprising given that *America’s Dream* is set in the 1990s.

Juan Flores summarizes the wide-ranging discussions toward the end of the twentieth century about Puerto Rico’s political status and their impact on Puerto Rican identity:

Over against the “essentialism of the neo-nationalist discourse,” this line of recent criticism poses the “cultural hybridity (heterogeneity and plurality) of our contemporary cultural formation,” the profound contradictions inherent in the national construct, and its unboundedness and relational interaction with other “national” cultures (33–34).

*América’s Dream* affirms a neo-jíbara mentality that rejects notions of the hybridity of Puerto Ricans. Later in the novel, América’s residence in “America” also precludes notions of change for Latinos.

Puerto Rico is formulated as a nostalgic dreamland, where a utopian social space has been replaced by the evils of modernity. When América remembers her Vieques neighborhood, she recalls how in her childhood “every house was set back behind broad yards, surrounded by mango, breadfruit, and avocado trees. Before urbanization. They didn’t have running water then, or electricity” (25). One can’t help getting the impression that, for Santiago, the fruit was worth the lack of modern conveniences.

The protagonist reverts to genealogy as the source of historical memory; América is the latest in a long line of working peons oppressed by the hacienda superstructure, yet she romanticizes and identifies with an oppressed ancestress: “América is the daughter of the great-great-great-granddaughter of the resourceful Marguerite” (77), the housekeeper the patriarch of La Casa del Francés took as his lover. Rather than highlight the oppression of Marguerite (that earlier maid), the only other pseudo-historical passage in the novel dwells in melodrama and presents the romantic history of Marguerite, in which the servant girl lands the patriarch (cf. 77). Later, when América dreams of a second flight to freedom, she figures she will take on the identity of that ancestress and change her name to Margarita Guerra (cf. 287), thus ensuring the symbolic continuance of a heritage of oppressed women natives whose only possibility of moving up in the world is taken as being married to a man of the “right class”—more or less what América hopes her daughter will do.<sup>9</sup> La Casa del Francés itself, with its colonial architecture (broad veranda, mosaic floors, hammocks, wicker and rattan chairs, central courtyard with singing birds in a cage, cf. 35) is a synecdoche of the glory that was el *Puerto Rico señorial*.

Santiago keeps the characters firmly away from the social unrest that was then a condition of life in Vieques. The novel makes token references to the situation; one night América hears the distant thud and feels the ground tremble when the Navy is using the eastern shore of the island for target practice (cf. 64, 65). Later, when América muses on the protests against the Navy presence, which she rightfully says were “commonplace,” she respects the protestors’ commitment but cannot be a participant since she remains bound to her man, Correa, who true to form tells her “women should stay out of politics” (253), which keeps her from participating.

The novel’s strategic use of geography triangulates Vieques between Puerto Rico and the United States, with Vieques as the last cultural outpost of Santiago’s imaginary Puerto Rico. Whatever modern conveniences may have arrived from the “big island,” here Vieques (about as far as you can retreat from the “big” island and not drown) stands as the last bastion of a narrowly defined territorial culture. If the “big island” is far removed from the characters’ lives, even further away is the U.S.; when América’s mother Ester mentions sending her daughter Rosalinda to relatives in New York, “Ester could as easily have suggested she send Rosalinda to

China, and América would have responded with the same astonishment, the same trembling fear of the distance between Vieques and anywhere else in the world farther than Puerto Rico, which seems far away enough” (66).

In *América's Dream* Santiago withdraws with single-minded logic to the furthest geographical location in Puerto Rico, one that has a stretch of ocean between it and the “mainland,” and that far locale is the setting for a reenactment of the conditions that permeated the Puerto Rico of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, an agrarian, dirt-poor, underprivileged setting fit for Santiago’s underdeveloped Puerto Ricans. América is island bound and ignorant of any other life since the furthest she’s been is to Fajardo “and she stayed there a month, hiding out in the same house where Rosalinda now lives with Correa’s aunt and cousin” (117).

A strategic lynchpin to the far-awayness of Santiago’s Puerto Rico is the almost complete lack of references in her texts to contemporary Puerto Rican or U.S. cultures. For example, *América's Dream* displays an almost total unawareness of that all-consuming Puerto Rican pastime: local politics. One of the few examples of culture as a reference point for the story is when the novel reinforces the cultural quagmire of domestic violence by mentioning an unnamed merengue about a man whose “wife went to New York and now that she’s back, she won’t do his laundry, won’t cook his meals, and won’t have sex with him unless he speaks to her in English” (71). However, the text does not delve into the connections between diasporic identities, misogyny, and popular music. The novel also refers to popular TV shows such as Cristina Saralegui’s (U.S.-produced) talk show and mentions that América’s mother watches *telenovelas* endlessly. In a brief nod to the media’s distortions of everyday Puerto Rican life, at the end of the novel Ester herself achieves celebrity when she appears on Cristina’s show about domestic violence and its effects on family members. Even though there is mention of Lorena Bobbitt and O.J. Simpson (signs of the constant flow of U.S. mainstream culture on Puerto Rican daily culture in the 1990s), logic is tossed aside when América rides her first train in the U.S. yet has no point of reference to contemporary life in the U.S.: “her image has been formed by the iron black locomotives in westerns” (180). This kind of strategic ignorance about life in the U.S. repeats the text’s avoidance of culture “out there” and of the effects of the media, which, for good or ill, binds the island to the life of the U.S. (as represented by said media).

América is completely out of touch with daily life in the United States, one of the most common points of reference for the discourse of everyday Puerto Rican life. Her trip to the States, a “journey into darkness” is as to “a foreign country where they speak a language I barely comprehend” (133), where she arrives wearing a thin dress and high heels in February. Her problem in adapting to her residence in the States goes beyond her lack of English. The character is so provincial that she’s surprised when she hears other Latinos speaking Spanish with an accent unlike hers (cf. 164), which is illogical given that she lived in a house where *telenovelas* were constantly on the TV screen and most of these are produced in other Latin American countries. This strategic ignorance reduces América’s already limited experiences and shapes her docility. When her would-be Nuyorican lover Darío takes her to the circus she is “embarrassed that she feels like a kid who has never seen anything, has never been anywhere, and didn’t know there were such marvels in the world” (259).

Santiago’s lack of interest in mass or popular culture is a phenomenon that speaks to her refusal to portray Puerto Rico’s complex history and contemporary reality as well as the hybrid identity of Latinos. In part this blank textuality that refuses to include culture “out there” is motivated by the characters’ attachment to the microcosm of La Familia, to the fact that their world begins and ends in a small-town view of the world. Cultural traditions of a 1950s cast are consequently kept intact and replicated without referencing contemporary culture, therefore limiting the text to binaries of male/female, high/low, island/mainland.

Santiago’s nostalgic portrait of the *terruño* fuels the essentialism that creates gender identity in the text. The weight of Santiago’s characterization leads to a homogeneity of representation of Puerto Rican women—and men, if truth be told. Santiago’s characterization of women is key to understanding the continued appeal her work has for the mass market.

The protagonist, named resonantly (if strangely accented on the first but not the last name) América González, has the traits of the docile Puerto Rican; she is undereducated, poor, but in a new feminist twist, a battered common-law wife. Genealogy—a long line of women as victims—structures the fate of the female characters on the island. This kind of fatalism represents a cult of victimhood that sells well in the mass market (cf. any telenovela) but as Gloria E. Anzaldúa points out in *This Bridge We Call Home*: “Buying into victimhood forces you/them to compete for the coveted prized of the walking wounded” (5).

This aspect of characterization appears in the novel’s first pages with the depiction of Ester, América’s mother, who is characterized as a loser; she is lazy (América regularly covers for her at work) and turns to beer to ease her troubles. The “archetypal” mother figure who appears on the second page is a hysterical woman, weeping and wailing on the floor of the hotel like a “spoiled child.”<sup>10</sup> The visual clues for a stereotype-driven presentation of a working-class Puerto Rican woman are all there: a flowered housedress and “pink curlers on copper hair” (2). Ester’s hair color alone places her in the realm of stereotypes; the curlers are just the icing on the cake. In order to cinch the circle of fatally over-emotional women’s genealogy, when Ester finally manages to control herself long enough and utters a *cri de coeur* to the effect that América’s teen daughter Rosalinda has “escaped” by running away with her boyfriend, América herself gets hysterical, she “covers her face, squeezes her fingers deep into her flesh, and sobs” (2). This is a succinct presentation of melodramatic women’s “destiny.” It is a point the novel matter-of-factly acknowledges when the hotel’s owner, Don Irving, observes the previous scene and comments, “A damn soap opera. Jesus Christ!” (3).

Ester is essentially a defeated woman and an underachiever: “‘I could have been a cook in the best hotels in San Juan,’ she’s fond of saying, but she never explains why that didn’t happen” (105). Given Santiago’s worldview, staying in Puerto Rico of course dooms any woman to poverty and lack of ambition. The novel’s reductive simplification of women’s nature is symbolized by the hedge of roses that surrounds Ester’s house; América and Ester are constantly restrained by the “tunnel of spiny rose branches” (81), just as they are mired in their “womanhood” with its limitations—in their case more due to a collusion of sociocultural forces such as lack of education, poor working conditions, and a “femininity” that precludes the use of will power. Proof of the text’s emphasis on “natural” gendered limits is that América’s lover Correa is unaffected by the restraining flowers (cf. 84). Equally essentializing is the notion of “destiny” that Ester and América believe in; this is obvious in the scene

where América, after staring at a placid cow (which reflects her own situation in life) “heads not toward Esperanza, but away from it, toward Destino” (15). This fatalistic view of *puertorriqueñas*<sup>11</sup> and of América’s destiny is only resolved through her escape from Puerto Rico and, later, when she kills Correa by accident.

The contrast between Ester and Paulina, her sister who migrated to New York, is striking; Paulina, three years older than Ester, resides in the Bronx and has a happy family-centered life: “Ester never had Paulina’s spirit. Her life, [Ester’s] circumscribed by her garden, her soap operas, her occasional couplings with Don Irving, is all she seems to want” (187). Paulina’s family is the archetypal happy family unit who love and struggle together. The main difference between the two sisters is that Paulina is a success because she abandoned the island and stayed married to the same man, and with América only “finding” herself by fleeing the island, the novel reads like propaganda for migration to the States.

The Puerto Rican imaginary is here loaded toward an unrealistic agrarian hole, a backward place that is constituted in Santiago’s imaginary as the “real” Puerto Rico. Santiago’s Puerto Rico, in this case Vieques, has the trappings of modernization, but the social conditions of the characters place them squarely in the Macondoized Puerto Rico previously inhabited by Negi in *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Vieques, as seen through the eyes of América González, is in Renato Rosaldo’s phrase, a “primeval tropical village” (161); a “safe” location for a mass-market reading of Puerto Rican ethnicity.

Her works illustrate Santiago’s *nostalgie de la boue*, but one needs only look at the descriptions of América’s material conditions early in the novel: a door “stained with grease, the knob hanging uselessly from the lock,” a sink full of dirty dishwater, a disconnected phone for failure to pay the bill, a nylon uniform that feels like a sausage casing in the heat, a “plywood covered hole in the wall where Correa never put in a window (making the room airless) and no closet because Correa didn’t come through either” (7–8).<sup>12</sup>

To further portray women’s lives of deepening despair on the island, this novel deals with domestic violence. It fully presents the real-life conditions of an abusive relationship: the brutal macho, the submissive woman who swallows her rage, an irrational pattern of swift and blinding violence, a society that acquiesces with and reinforces gender stereotypes, a direct relation between alcohol and aggression, a connection between sex and violence, and an ineffectual law system. The social acceptance of domestic violence hinges on turning a blind eye even to public abuse since Correa slaps América in public several times. However, the novel does not make any reference to the Puerto Rican “Ley Núm. 54,” the groundbreaking law against domestic violence that was passed in 1989, making Puerto Rico the first Latin American nation to pass such a law.<sup>13</sup>

The novel depicts the beatings graphically (cf. 85) as it presents the helplessness and fear the woman lives in constantly: “When Correa is this calm, this controlled, he’s waiting for any little thing she might say or do that will make him explode, that will make it her fault if she ends up bruised and swollen” (61). The well-known cycle of violent behaviors of the batterer is also presented realistically: there is the accumulating tension, the many forms of violence inflicted, and the reconciliations after the violence (cf. 73, 91).<sup>14</sup> All the time his twisted notions of so-called love condition América’s life into a state of constant threat, “shielding her face from his kiss or his fist, whichever comes first” (62).

The social response of her fellow Puerto Ricans comes down to pity in the other women’s eyes and—tellingly about Santiago’s portrayal of Puerto Rican men—

triumph in the men’s eyes when they see she’s been beaten (cf. 90). Puerto Rican society is represented as unthinkingly complicit with the causes of domestic violence. Received notions of gender roles reinforce the cycle of violence; an example of this extends to the overarching archetype of the mother. América hits her daughter Rosalinda because she “can’t help herself” (43)—her rage is aggravated by Correa’s subsequent abuse (which the child witnesses). Reinforcing the fatalistic acceptance of violence, the daughter will later plead his case to América when he wants her to return to him.

Compounding the essentializing view of women’s lives is the cycle of teenage pregnancy that kept Ester and América firmly tied to poverty and underachievement—a pattern that América thinks her daughter is in danger of repeating. The great “mistake” passed from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter is the incurable cycle of running away with men at an early age, something América regards as a “family curse” (32), an inescapable fate. For América assumes that children will learn as they are told, not by the examples they are shown (cf. 33). The essentializing women’s legacy that América experiences is one of suffering directly connected to their binding heterosexuality: “all those women in her family going back countless generations, daughters who run away from their mothers as soon as their breasts grow and the heat between their legs becomes insupportable” (62).

The women in América’s Puerto Rico are not happy in their heterosexuality, given that the heterosexual drive of the female characters has as its only goal the attention and retention of the male. In this fatalistic view of recurring women’s patterns *América’s Dream* significantly departs from *When I Was Puerto Rican*, where the mother figure is cast, as Guillermina Walas remarks, as a representative (and I would add reinforcer) of negative Puerto Rican cultural patterns (of gender roles, mostly) from which the daughter breaks in order to find her identity (76).

América interprets the social consequences of Rosalinda’s sexual transgression as predetermined by received notions of gender roles: “Rosalinda will be estranged from everyone she knows, will be a subject for gossip, will be teased, ostracized ... América remembers how her friends avoided her after she came back with Correa” (59). Though 15 years have passed since her own elopement, nothing has changed: a girl’s sexual “mistake” will inevitably lead to being ostracized by society. América buys into unquestioned gender divisions in traditional attitudes toward men and ruefully thinks that “if Rosalinda were a boy, she would be calling him a man. If Rosalinda were a boy and were having sex at fourteen, there would be sly looks and jokes, and pride that his ‘equipment’ works. If Rosalinda were a boy, América would forgive him, because that’s what men are, sexual creatures with a direct link from brain to balls” (113). América never openly challenges this more or less Puerto Rican retrograde view of the genders and their sexual roles—always in Santiago heterosexual—and resigns herself to the fact that in her milieu, “It is expected that boys will be men, but girls are never supposed to be women. Girls are supposed to go directly from girlhood to married motherhood with no stops in between” (113). The stereotypical notion that “men are all after one thing only” is one that América readily accepts, and it colors her view of her role in the world so that it is not only Correa’s abuse that makes her feel imprisoned in her gender; she also has the feeling when she walks down the street and is harassed by men in cars as well as by the gaze of the American Other, and when she is exoticized by tourists while walking down a lane: “She felt like part of the tropical landscape they came to experience” (228).

América also remembers how social opinion blamed Ester for allowing her

(América) to “fall,” calling Ester a “descuidada,” and thinks that she will now in turn be blamed for her daughter’s mistake, her “metida de pata” (59). The women in Puerto Rico are never in control of their own lives, a realization that impels América to flight since she cannot fight effectively. For América the only solution is escape to the U.S., and it is her flight to the States that makes this a Latino novel. However, América’s acts of agency are only two: fleeing in secrecy and killing her abuser through happenstance.

Being an underachiever is key to the character. When faced with her daughter’s possible replication of her own and Ester’s fate, América thinks:

América had hoped that Rosalinda would break from her history, that she would educate herself, marry above her station, like Yamila Valentín, and live in a house where she would employ maids, not be one.

She shakes her head. I’m not ashamed of being a maid. It’s housework, women’s work, nothing to be ashamed of.

She’s never known anything else, has never wanted to learn to type or work computers, like so many of the girls in the town (77).

Docility and stereotypes dictate America’s thinking; she has no thought of breaking free from poverty through education or social activism. She has no resentment against the gendered social structure that keeps her down, nor does she wish to reform it. On the contrary, she dreams of her daughter marrying “above her station” and moving into a social status where she can oppress others by having maids, not being one. Ironically, given the novel’s title, docile América has no dreams: “Women nowadays want to be scientists and leaders of nations. But I never wanted that... All I ever wanted was a home and a family, with a mother and a father and children” (107). It is central in Santiago’s imaginary that when the female characters are in Puerto Rico, they have few or no dreams.

América’s dead-end job suits her defeatist attitudes as “she slaves her life away scrubbing toilets and mopping floors” (8). Correa has an equally dead-end job but is not portrayed as resenting it and in fact seems perfectly proud of it (cf. 11–12). On the whole the novel presents América as being much smarter than him; for example, she can consider the inconsistencies in his job (cf. 12), but she doesn’t use her intelligence to change the oppressive conditions of her life. Belonging to a pure lineage that resists notions of change or hybridization of any sort (economic or cultural or linguistic), América remains to the end an untampered product of genealogy, class, and location, fictitious though that may be.

In keeping with the simplistic binary casting of gender roles in Puerto Rico, Santiago typecasts Puerto Rican men as either good or bad. Correa symbolizes primal, gender-wars evil. I do not wish to minimize the recidivist disposition of batterers, but the character, like most of Santiago’s male characters, is one-dimensional at best. The crudity of her portrayal of the average *puertorriqueño* is evident when América summarizes her view of men: “that’s what men are, sexual creatures with a direct link from brain to balls” (113). Proof of the *puertorriqueño* brutality is the facile way the men workers (all of them) at La Casa del Francés chat about the “correct” way to put a woman in her place by beating her (cf. 34). The only

male counterbalance in Vieques is the policeman Odilio Pagán, a flawed, ineffectual “good guy.” He represents a defective Puerto Rican law system (without, as previously said, referencing current laws on violence in Puerto Rico), and though he tries to help América, he cannot transform that true-to-life immovable object, a battered woman who—moved by shame and fearful of reprisals—denies her situation. With Correa as the main representative of Puerto Rican manhood, it is only when América moves to New York that we come across a more nuanced portrayal of men: Poldo (the good father), Orlando (the good son), and Darío (the damaged but kindhearted wooer).

América’s situation is specifically complicated by her total lack of ambition; the sum total of her “dream” is that “all she ever wanted was to be taken care of” (220). She is truly a representative of Santiago’s Puerto Rico: underdeveloped and resistant to change, now and always a maid.

The character’s self-analysis doesn’t extend to Puerto Rican reality or later, to life in the States. When her acquaintance, a Guatemalan nanny called Adela, points out the benefits of a legal social security card, América realizes her U.S. citizenship allows her to bypass worries about such things as having a green card or opening a bank account. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner states succinctly, “Although in the United States Puerto Ricans are legally ‘first’-class citizens, they are often perceived as a racialized minority group and treated as such” (281).<sup>15</sup>

Yet América’s situation looks enviable to the *indocumentadas* she meets, who say, “You’re so lucky ... to be an American citizen” (253). Most of them have left behind their children (cf. 223), and Liana in particular is in the unenviable situation of trying to retrieve her children from her homeland of Mexico and being betrayed by a *coyote* (cf. 251). The most extreme situation is that of Nati, a *peruana* who goes crazy and is sent home by her employers (cf. 225). The chapter “Las Empleadas” is the most fully realized presentation in the novel of the complicated lives of working class Latinos—since Santiago doesn’t dwell on Latinos from other social classes. For example, their training is going to waste; back in their home countries they were nurses, bank tellers, school teachers, and telephone operators, but now all are nannies and maids. Furthermore, race matters to the empleadas, at the health club where they go with the children in their care, “the empleadas seem to be apologizing for taking up room where they don’t belong. The brown and black ones, anyway. The white-skinned ones behave like the mothers, with the same confidence and unapologetic decisiveness” (229). Santiago presents a realistically lowered vision of the American Dream through the maids who inhabit a cultural chasm. They live in the States but as outsiders, manual laborers who do not participate in the society, sometimes because of poor origins and lack of education, often because of fear of “la migra,” or because they all describe “lives tied to the fates of large extended families dependent on them” (252).

The empleadas have been touched by feminism, but true to Santiago’s “romantic” ethos, their analysis of their role in the world is grounded on the presence of the men in their lives. For example, Frida, based on notions she has acquired from an unnamed feminist book written by a Latina that her employer gave her, affirms that there is no place for machismo in the States. Yet the ensuing discussion reflects not their views of the roles of women or their possibilities in the U.S. but these women’s take on the role men play in society: “Latinos invented machismo, and I always thought of it like ... only as the way they treat women, possessiveness and jealousy and all that” (265). The end-all and be-all comes once again to men. The consequences are similar in *Almost a Woman*, which presents a femininity whereby

romantic gratification is valued above social or educational achievements.

In Santiago's world (especially for the self-absorbed protagonist of the memoirs), women articulate men as the center of their lives or, as América's tía Paulina says, they are "grown women, and they still behave like teenagers" (245).

Despite Santiago's authorial position as a prominent Latina, in *América's Dream* there is no interplay of hybridity—one of the defining characteristics of Latino, and Puerto Rican identities. Santiago's texts prove that Néstor García Canclini was right when he said that "la simple acumulación multicultural de experiencias no genera automáticamente hibridación, ni comprensión democrática de las diferencias" (60). As stated at the beginning, Santiago's marketable narrative model consists of exclusively working class characters, a representation of Puerto Rican gender roles as binary, women portrayed as victims, an agrarian setting, and a disconnection from contemporary culture, all of which revert back to the stereotype of the docile Puerto Rican.



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#### NOTES

- 1 The Radcliffe Association Alumnae Recognition Awards of 2001 offers a biographical synopsis that highlights her stature: "Esmeralda Santiago's writing career began with essays and op-ed pieces for *The New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Her first book, the memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican*, and her translation of it, *Cuando era puertorriqueña*, received critical acclaim and have been widely anthologized. Her first novel, *América's Dream*, has been translated into six languages, including the Spanish translation by the author, *El sueño de América*. It was also an alternate selection of the Literary Guild. Her second memoir, *Almost a Woman*, received the prestigious Alex Award from the American Library Association and will soon be a film for ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection." The last mentioned "jewel in the crown" was in fact shown on PBS in 2002.
- 2 Santiago's, and her filmmaker husband, Frank Cantor's, collaboration on the making of this filmic project is detailed in the interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández.
- 3 The counterargument is that Santiago's works do portray the effects of socio-economic disadvantages on a class of women. For example, the main characters prove the difference an education can make in a women's lives. Yet the contention of the present article is that the sum total of her imaginary is molded around notions that are ahistorical, nostalgic, and out of touch with Puerto Rican complexities.
- 4 There are many internet resources for Santiago. Of particular importance for this discussion are: [www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/women](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/women) and [www.esmeraldasantiago.net/](http://www.esmeraldasantiago.net/).
- 5 Santiago's Puerto Rico is Macondoized because it is a highly marketable retrograde version of Latin America, not because it uses magical realism; the texts are grounded on literary realism. Macondo is Gabriel García Márquez's fictional town from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Alberto Fuguet, co-leader—with Edmundo Paz Soldán—of the McOndo (an anti-magical realist movement which spoofs and rejects "Macondo") defines "Macondo" as an "invented town [...] where levitation mingled with eternal rain and the eccentric, the overfolkloric, was the only way to grasp a world where true civilization would never be established." Furthermore, it is "an *exotic land* where anything goes and eventually nothing matters, for it's no more than a fable." [My italics.]
- 6 González also referred to the sugarcane industry as "uno de los sectores más odiosos, tanto en la colonia como en la metrópoli, de ese capitalismo: las grandes corporaciones azucareras" (González 1987: 179), which he further termed "los 'pulpos' contra los que luchó el movimiento obrero puertorriqueño del primer tercio de ese siglo" (González 1987: 199).
- 7 For a breakdown of Puerto Rican literary ideologies of national identity see Luis Felipe Díaz, but with one caveat: his omission of most female writers, such as Rosario Ferré (a tried and true member of the "generation" of 1970), mars his excellent study.
- 8 For pro-independence views see Coss and Carrión (both published the same year as *América's Dream*) and Duany, among many others. For postmodern views see Juan Flores and Carlos Pabón.
- 9 Space does not permit me to analyze the three autobiographical works, but I have to mention that this romantic ethos operates in them. *The Turkish Lover* continues retelling the saga of her life.
- 10 Later she whimpers "like a hurt puppy" (4).
- 11 On her personal web page Santiago states: "I don't believe in coincidence however, being as much a fatalist as the next Puerto Rican."

12 Santiago's detailed descriptions of material poverty reinforce América's passivity and enhance the author's portrayal of traditional feminine dependence on men (particularly for any work involving hardware).

13 For a discussion of violence against women in Puerto Rico see López Paláu. López Paláu also details other legal and social mechanisms for the protection of abused women in the Puerto Rico contemporary to this novel, such as La Comisión Judicial Especial para Investigar el Discrimen por Razón de Género en los Tribunales de Puerto Rico (1995) and the Comisión de Asuntos de la Mujer.

14 López Paláu details these phases of "domestic violence" (72–6).

15 For Juan Flores Puerto Ricans in the U.S. should be considered "as 'colonial emigrants' [...] like Jamaicans in London, Martinicans in Paris, and Surinamese in Amsterdam" (162–3).

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