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FROM “JIBARA” TO “CHIQUITA”: CONFESSIONS OF DIS-BELONGING IN ESMERALDA SANTIAGO’S MEMOIRS¹

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Abstract

This paper by focusing on the intersection of race, gender and identity as reflected in the three memoirs of the Puerto-Rican American writer Esmeralda Santiago, When I was Puerto Rican (1993), Almost a Woman (1998) and The Turkish Lover (2004), attempts to read into the complex dynamics of the Puerto-Rican migrant female experience. Esmeralda Santiago’s memoirs that intertwine the problem of transculturation with that of male dominance and cultural patriarchy rest on her desire to find and sustain a stable point of reference in a world marked by mobility, transitivity, discontinuity and fragmentation. The feelings of vulnerability and invisibility that she constantly experiences within her Puerto-Rican culture and later with her Turkish lover lead her to resist rather than accept a gendered and racialized self. However it also leads her to forge an identity “distinct from” and “in conflict with” the significant Others around her. In When I was Puerto Rican, she is the black jibara “Negi” highly critical and at odds with her Puerto/American island heritage; in Almost A Woman, she is the lost young female Esmeralda trying to rise above her mother, family and Nuyorican community; and in the The Turkish Lover she is the Esmeralda Santiago who learns to judge her own self and others through the social and racial categories and cultural standards of American society. This paper asserts that unlike many women autobiographical writers, Esmeralda Santiago can achieve to create a sense of belonging in her life only through an assertion of difference and later through the contestation of her Puerto-Rican female identity.

Keywords: Esmeralda Santiago, Puerto Rican Female Experience, When I was Puerto Rican, Almost a Woman, The Turkish Lover.

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JİBARA'DAN CHÍQUITA'YA: ESMERALDA SANTIAGO'NUN ANILARINDA BİR YERE AİT OLAMAMANIN İTİRAFLARI²

Öz

Bu makale, Porto Rikolu Amerikalı yazar Esmeralda Santiago'nun, *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993), *Almost a Woman* (1998) ve *The Turkish Lover* (2004) adlı üç anı kitabındaki ırk, cinsiyet ve kimlik kavramlarının kesiştiği noktalara odaklanarak, Porto Rikolu göçmen kadın deneyiminin iç içe geçmiş dinamiklerini irdelemeye amaçlamaktadır. Kültürler ötesi olma sorununu erkek egemen kültür yapısıyla birlikte ele alan bu anı kitapları, Esmeralda Santiago'nun hareketlilik, geçişkenlik, süreksizlik ve parçalanmanın hakim olduğu bir dünyada tutarlı bir referans noktası bulma ve bunu sürdürülebilirlik arzusu üzerine şekillenir. Porto Riko kültürünün yanı sıra annesi ve sevgilisi ile de yaşadığı kırılma ve yok sayılma gibi duygular, yazarın cinsiyete ve ırka bağlı bir benliği kabul etmesinden ziyade böyle bir benliğe karşı direnmesine yol açmıştır. Ancak bu durum, değer verdiği kişilerle çatışan ve onlardan kendini ayrı tutan bir kimliğe bürünmesine de sebep olur. Yazar, *When I was Puerto Rican* adlı kitabında hem Porto Rikolu hem de Amerikalı köklerine eleştirel yaklaşan ve onlara ters düşen "Negi" adlı siyahi bir jibara olmuşken, *Almost a Woman* kitabında annesi, ailesi ve Nuyorica topluluğunu geride bırakmaya çalışan genç Esmeraldaya dönüşür. *The Turkish Lover* adlı eserinde ise Amerikan toplumunun sosyal ve ırksal sınıfları ve kültürel standartları üzerinden kendini ve başkalarını yargılamayı öğrenen bir Esmeralda Santiago ile karşılaşırız. Bu makale, birçok otobiyografik kadın yazarların aksine, Esmeralda Santiago'nun önceleri bir farklılık iddiası, sonrasında ise Porto-Rikalı kadın kimliğine karşı verdiği mücadele ile ancak bir aidiyet duygusu yaratmayı başarabildiğini ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Esmeralda Santiago, Porto Rikolu Kadın Deneyimi, *When I was Puerto Rican*, *Almost a Woman*, *The Turkish Lover*.

INTRODUCTION

After the 1898 occupation of Puerto Rico and the Jones Act of 1917 that granted American citizenship to the islanders, The United States witnessed what *Life Magazine* would describe in 1947 as the "first airborne diaspora in history." Being able to move freely from the island to the mainland, the Puerto-Rican "developed mobile livelihood practices that encompass several places in the mainland as well as on the Island"(Duany, 2002: 11). Nevertheless, the unlimited access to U.S. territory also furthered the feelings of uprootedness, lack of belonging and exile. The United States, the new locus of socialization became a site of extreme poverty³ and racism for the de/reterritorialized Puerto Rican

² Bu makale 06-09 Aralık 2007 tarihlerinde Vienna'da düzenlenmiş olan KCTOS (Küreselleşme, Uluslararası Edebiyatlar ve Dönüşüm) konferansında sunulan bildirinin düzenlenmiş ve genişletilmiş versiyonudur.

³ Among Hispanic groups and colonial migrants Puerto-Ricans are shown to be the most disadvantaged developing underclass with the highest welfare participation and unemployment rates. For further reading see Torres (1995) and Chavez (1991: 139-150).

migrant whose continuous circular migration contributed to the formation of what Augustin Lao terms as a "colonized labor force"(1997: 181) both in the homeland and its diaspora.

The memoirs of the Puerto Rican American woman writer Esmeralda Santiago, *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993), *Almost a Woman* (1998) and *The Turkish Lover* (2004), can be read as self-narrations that voice this issue of de/reterritorialization, especially, for the Puerto Rican woman migrant whose struggle against these negative economic and social conditions is even more complex and tenuous since it involves a battle with male dominance and cultural patriarchy as well as class and racial strife. Furthermore, given the fact that Puerto Ricans are more or less described as "a nation on the move" (Duany, 2002), the issue of Puerto Rican female selfhood involves a constant shift in positioning. Caught between the patriarchal nationalism of her island community and the overwhelming fast-paced yet liberating culture change of the United States, the Puerto-Rican woman tries to find steady points of reference within her dual yet contrapuntal⁴ national identity.

The critical reception of Santiago's memoirs differs immensely depending on whether they come from Boricua intellectuals and scholars or mainstream readers or advocates of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism. For example, while her first two memoirs *When I was Puerto Rican*, and *Almost a Woman* and her novel *America's Dream* (1996) have gained critical praise from most scholars as life stories that honestly portray the difficulties and hardships of the Puerto-Rican woman migrant in-transit -either as coming to terms with her bicultural/hybrid (Mayock, 1998; Suero-Elliot, 2008), non-national hybrid (Soto-Crespo, 2006) or multiple (Echano, 2003) positionalities-- they have been critiqued by Boricuan scholars to be assimilationist and unrepresentative (Szadziuk, 1999; Gonzales, 2001; Cruz, 2006). Moreover, Santiago's memoirs have been criticized for overlooking the escalating collective poverty of Puerto-Rican diasporas, especially, of Boricua women and children and for negating the genuine messages given by most Nuyorican novelists -the importance of an organic Boricua cultural citizenship⁵ and a resistant North American identity (Gonzales, 2001: 10-11). In

⁴ Edward Said uses the term "contrapuntal" to highlight the mutual-referentiality between the here and there that is constitutive of the "exile" who is aware of "simultaneous dimensions" and whose "habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally"(2000: 186). James Clifford furthers Said's usage of the word "contrapuntal" by applying the term to the experience of diaspora, "but with the difference that the most individualist, existential focus of the former is tempered by networks of community, collective practices of displaced dwelling, in the latter"(1997: 365).

⁵ In an era of globalization and fragmentation, the issue of cultural citizenship is becoming more and more noteworthy in identity politics. While Blanca Silvestrini describes cultural

contrary to most assimilationist criticism, it is not my intention to criticize Santiago for writing a Puerto-Rican version of the American success story and reaffirming the American Dream, as a “rehabilitative concept,” as a “proof that America works, that its principle and beliefs are well-founded” (Hsu, 1996: 38-39). For I believe it is pointless to set up a symmetrical hierarchy of belonging and unbelonging in today’s capitalist networks of wealth and power, where emancipatory privileges of American life and consumerism can easily outweigh competing claims for group loyalties. Rather this paper by focusing on the intersection of race, gender and identity, as reflected in Santiago’s three memoirs, attempts to read into the complex dynamics of Santiago’s diasporic female experience. Santiago’s journey from displacement to homecoming rests on the desire to find and sustain a stable point of reference in a world marked by mobility, transitivity, discontinuity and fragmentation. Interestingly, it is only through an assertion of difference and later through the contestation of her female and racial identity can Santiago achieve to create a solid sense of belonging in her life.

WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN

When I was Puerto-Rican (1993), the first of the three-volume serial memoirs, encompasses the early recollections of Esmeralda Santiago during her childhood years in the island of Puerto-Rico. Her trajectory of selfhood begins with the nostalgic memory of eating a ripe, juicy enticing guava and “enjoying the crunchy sounds, the acid taste, the gritty texture of the unripe center”(1993: 3-4). Surprisingly, however, the idea of identifying and holding on to a Puerto-Rican heritage as one might expect, is not a theme resonated in Santiago’s first memoir. Rather than offering a comforting collective script for individual longing, Santiago’s childhood recollections of her homeland describe the painful experience of extreme poverty, restraining Puerto-Rican taboos and customs, instability and uncertainty. It recounts the constant move of a young female child, nicknamed as Negi by her parents (due to her very dark skin), traveling from one poor neighborhood to another, from Macun to Santurce to El Mangle, living in houses

citizenship as “the ways people organize their values, their beliefs about their rights, and their practices based on their sense of cultural belonging rather than on their formal status as citizens of a nation” (1997: 44), Bryan S. Turner gives a broader definition stating that cultural citizenship is “cultural empowerment, namely to participate effectively, creatively and successfully within a national culture” (2001: 12). The issue of cultural citizenship plays a prominent role esp. for Boricuas who consider themselves as a nationless nation and who pride themselves for making their local Boricua communities one of the few surviving centers of Anglo-European hegemony. Considering themselves as intermediaries and investors of a transcultural capital, Boricua intellectuals fervently oppose the reaffirmation of the “grand narratives” of Western cultural tradition. For further discussions of the significance of cultural citizenship in today’s global transnational migration see Silvestrini (1997) and Turner (2001).

whose "contents" range from "a rectangle of rippled metal sheets"(1993: 7) to a "box squatting on low stilts"(1993: 12) with no electricity or running water to a "float[ing]" house on a black lagoon"(1993: 133), used as sewage and garbage disposal.

Each spatial move adds not only to Negi's knowledge of her impoverished condition but also of her painful difference; she is a Catholic who doesn't go to church, she has the darkest skin in her family and she comes from an atypical Puerto-Rican household (where her mother is the breadwinner; hence, the decision-maker and where her siblings are all born out-of-wedlock). But most important of all, spiritually and emotionally, she identifies herself with the free-spirited "jibaro" of the land and soil, the country bumpkin whose mannerism and crude appearance is looked down by most Puerto-Ricans –proletariat or bourgeoisie. In fact, Santiago, entitles the first chapter of her book, "Jibara," unconsciously highlighting to her readers the vantage point from where she will look back upon her childhood years. For Santiago and her father, the jibaro stands as a mythological hero, a national icon of Puerto-Rican rural heritage and roots, a symbol of defiance, independence and resistance to American imperialism. However, for Santiago's mother as well as the rest of the islanders, the jibaro is a logo of low-class status, representative of the hillbillies of Puerto-Rico with "unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect[s]" (1993: 12). In fact, this dilemma begins to shape Santiago's memories of self-identity. On one hand, she is her daddy's girl brought up in the spirit of the jibaro, the spiritual and moral symbol of Puerto-Rican identity --the humble, hard-working and fiercely independent and rebellious hero of the land and soil. On the other hand, she is confined to the rules and regulations of her domineering mother who looks down upon and abhors the jibaro for what it is worth: "'Don't be a jibara,' she scolded, rapping her knuckles on my skull, as if to waken the intelligence she said was there"(1993: 12). This double standard contributes to Santiago's conflicting images of home: "My own grandparents, whom I was to respect as well as love, were said to be jibaros. But I couldn't be one, nor was I to call anyone a jibaro, lest they be offended"(1993: 13). Moreover, the colonization practices of America which have favored the development of city life have been significant in distancing Puerto-Rico from her cultural heritage. As a result, a new generation of Puerto Rican "Americanitos"(1993: 64) are raised not only in Puerto-Rican schools where English is taught and oatmeal cookies are consumed but also in the metropolis, in Puerto-Rican suburbs where children brought up in class antagonisms are indifferent to the "jibaro tales of phantasms, talking animals and enchanted guava trees"(1993: 49).

Because it is the poetry of the jibaro, the male country bumpkin rather than the tradition of 'marianismo'⁶ on which Negi draws to sustain her sense of self,

⁶ Marianismo, a term used as counterpart to machismo (and whose model is the Virgin Mary), is a Spanish word that describes the ideal values, roles and standards generally

Santiago cannot conform to the prescribed roles of femininity and frequently experiences a tension between her feminine identity and personal ideals. Consequently, Santiago's memories of her homeland contribute to the understanding of her Puerto-Rican identity as a struggle against rather than a negotiation with the regulated roles and traditions of Puerto-Rican society.

When Santiago's mother, Ramona, in order to escape from the rural poverty and gender oppression of her island hometown, takes Negi and all her children to New York, leaving her husband behind, the difference between Negi and her mother becomes even more apparent. While Negi's mother becomes aware of the inhibitions and restrictions imposed by the self-sacrificing good-wife image and begins to fight incessantly with her husband as a consequence, she still insists that her children be raised by strict Puerto-Rican norms and customs: "Every night Mami told me how I had failed in my duty as a female, as a sister, as the eldest. And every day I proved her right by neglecting my chores, by letting one of the kids hurt, by burning the beans, by not commanding the respect from my sisters and brothers that I was owed as the oldest" (1993: 125). Furthermore, Ramona prefers to maintain symbolic ties to her homeland community, transforming her barrio home to a Puerto-Rican fortress where all the Americanized "algos" are "to be avoided at all costs"(1998: 12). In response to the negative social and economic forces that she encounters in the metropolis of New York, Ramona crams her home with her Puerto-Rican past, with familiar faces of relatives and friends and with scents of traditional Puerto-Rican cooking. While Ramona tries to cope with her spatial displacement by creating a sense of belonging and family through a network of kin-relationships, Negi wavers between multiple identities, trying to find steady points of reference in a sporadic life of constant removals.

ALMOST A WOMAN

Unable to find any anchorage that can sustain her with a sense of belonging, Esmeralda Santiago's second memoir *Almost a Woman* opens with feelings of bitterness and resentment:

In the twenty-one years I lived with my mother, we moved at least twenty times. We stuffed our belongings into ragged suitcases . . . learned not to attach value to possessions because they were as temporary as the walls that held us for a few months. . . . We moved from country to city to country to small town to big city to the biggest city of all.

expected from Latina women. It encompasses such traits as self-sacrifice, chastity, submissiveness, docility and domesticity.

. . . Each time I packed my belongings, I left a little of myself in the rooms that sheltered me, never home, always just the places I lived. . . . (1998: 1-2)

Being cast adrift in Macun, as well as in New York, leads Negi to rethink her vexed nature of belonging and to internalize a state of in-betweenness where the line between foreign and local, external and homegrown loses its significance. The multiple overlapping spheres of Negi's personal experience result over time in a double consciousness, a critical stance towards both Puerto-Rico and the United States, rather than a one-way loyalty (as in the case of Ramona). While Negi doesn't identify with the habitualized traditions and coercive norms of Puerto-Rico that confine women to the domestic realm of everyday life, she is very critical of the patriarchal and racial oppression of women in the United States. She is well aware that her mother's life in New York has not changed for the better, on the contrary, her problems have multiplied since, now, her mother together with poverty has to cope with racial profiling and discrimination. The social gap between the self-sacrificing and constraining life of her mother and the womanizing machismo of her aloof father is to be replaced in the United States by the economic gap between the impoverished and ghettoized life of her family and the suburbanite care-free life of her white friends.

Santiago's constant uprooting and her gradual estrangement from the security of a home can be seen as positive steps towards her transformation. They puff her with a new sense of freedom and a strong desire to regulate her own life. She wishes to pursue her own needs and agendas, become a "powerful woman," with "no attachments, no loyalties, no responsibilities" (1998: 83), a "pilot of [her] own plane" (1998: 83), who is able to resist any particular labeling.

In my secret life I wasn't Puerto-Rican. I wasn't American. I wasn't anything. I spoke every language in the world, so that I was never confused about what people said and could be understood by everyone. My skin was no particular color, so I didn't stand out as black, white, or brown. (1998: 84).

In order to become the successful actress, the independent woman of her dreams, Negi knows that she has to emulate the practices of American mass society; has to learn English, attend school and work hard. She doesn't want to experience her Puerto-Rico barrio in the same fashion that her schoolmates "Lulu and her gang" (1998: 37) do, by playing the victim role and neglecting the individual initiative that can deliver them from poverty. Even though Negi is highly critical of the sexism and racism that she experiences as a woman of color, she still doesn't let her "disadvantaged" (1998: 69) condition hold her back, even if this means that as a hyphenated American she has to rest an unrealistic faith in America's foundational premises of egalitarianism and personal autonomy. Not wanting to remain a member of the permanent underclass, she applies to New York's prestigious Performing Arts School where "status was determined by

talent”(1998: 36) but nevertheless, where “almost all the students and teachers were white”(1998: 69). After her acceptance to the school, Negi enters the world of voice coaches, nose jobs, Europe vacations, tennis lessons, taxi commuting, club memberships; a “*blanquito*” world where “talent had to take [her] a long way, a very long way indeed “(1998: 70) from where she was. As a dark-skinned racially marked ‘outsider,’ she is acutely aware of the discrepancy between the American dream of ‘rags to riches’ and her own positionality, between the romantic fantasy of being rescued by a prince charming in uniform (1998: 93) and the brutal reality of being subjected to the unjustly interrogation and sensual gaze of a racist police officer (1998: 112).

Negi, like all people of color, finds herself racialized, biologized and minoritized, nonetheless, she still holds onto the national saga of the United States, seeing personal autonomy and hard work as a gateway to wealth and success. She knows that the “pretty clothes”(1998: 58) she wants on her back are products of the exploited labor of people like her mother, however, she still cannot “help who [she] is becoming”(1998: 59).

. . .in Brooklyn every day was filled with want, even though Mami made sure we had everything we needed. Yes, I had changed. And it wasn’t for the better. . . . When she said I had changed, she meant I was becoming Americanized, that I thought I deserved more and was better than everyone else, better than her. She looked at me resentfully, as if I betrayed her, as if I could help who I was becoming, as if I knew. (1998: 58-9)

Thus, from the onset of *Almost a Woman*, the reader’s attention is drawn to the dilemmas of a diasporic migrant who in trying to improve her class positioning realizes that she is being pulled into the exploitative networks of capitalism and racism which she once despised and repudiated. Esmeralda’s attempt to overcome the state of impoverishment results into what Svetlana Boym describes as “a gap, often an unbridgeable one, . . .[that] reveals an incommensurability of what is lost and what is found”(2001: 256). Consequently, throughout Santiago’s second memoir, we are frequently drawn into the mental contradictions and inconsistencies of a transnational uprooted self that navigates back and forth from the periphery to the center. Unable to integrate or tolerate all these contradictions and ambiguities in her life, and “tired of the constant tug between the life (she) wanted and the life [she] had”(1998: 210), Santiago desires “to be like Garbo, alone. . . to become . . . deaf to [her] family’s voices, their contradictory messages, their expectations”(1998: 210). Her home community in Brooklyn and its Puerto-Rican values become more a locus of oppression and confusion rather than a site of nurturance and resistance. Suffocated in the space of an overbearing mother and a stifling Nuyorican community, Santiago gradually begins to see them as obstacles that need to be overcome and grasps a boyfriend, seventeen years older than her, as an opportunity. Hence, in the concluding chapters of Santiago’s second

memoir, the reader is introduced to Ulvi Doğan, the charismatic and "mysterious" Turkish filmmaker, due to whom Santiago will be on the brink of leaving home.

THE TURKISH LOVER

The Turkish Lover, Santiago's last memoir, written as a continuation of *Almost a Woman*, is narrated against the background of an acculturated mobile self in distance to her Puerto-Rican heritage. Santiago's ambivalence towards her cultural identity continues as she tries to justify to the readers, as well as to herself, the reasons behind her elopement to Ulvi Doğan, a Turkish man who she describes as having "lulled [her] into a sleep from which [she] would not wake for seven years"(2004: 44). Santiago meets Ulvi Doğan who is the co-producer and leading actor of *Susuz Yaz* (Dry Summer), a gold medalist movie of the 1964 Berlin International Film Festival, while conversing at a phone booth on Fifth Avenue. Unlike Santiago, Ulvi Doğan comes to the United States as a short-term shopper, an entrepreneur trying to benefit from the cultural vitality of America's free-market economy. When the Turkish film *Susuz Yaz* is censored in Turkey, Doğan smuggles the hard copies of the movie to the United States and without the knowledge of the movie's film director nor the cast, shoots additional pornographic scenes and markets it as "I Had My Brother's Wife." It is during this 'creative' period of Doğan's search for porno actresses that Esmeralda meets him and is offered an audition for a 'leading' exotic role in the movie.

The twenty-one year old Negi grasps this wealthy and sophisticated looking man living in "a luxury apartment building a block from Bloomingdale's, w[earing] expensive suits . . .with finely detailed pleats and seams"(2004: 3), as an "opportunity"(2004: 40) to get away from the lacks, the insecurities, the confusions of her everyday barrio life, ranging from her absent father to her overprotective authoritarian mother, from the endless loads of laundry to her crowded household of fifteen people. Unable to fulfill the emotional and material reassurance she desperately needs, Negi says good-bye to her beloved family and wanders off to Florida to be Ulvi Doğan's new "chiquita."

For seven years, Ulvi Doğan "becomes the director of Santiago's self-narration as he tries to shape, define, and fashion Santiago's sense of self against the backdrop of his own cultural conventions and male sensibilities. . . . As she relinquishes her will to his, she becomes an actress on stage responding automatically to . . . [Ulvi's] expectations and demands"(Korpez, 2006: 147). Santiago escapes from the stifling rules of her Puerto-Rican community, only to find herself in Doğan's manly over-protection. She is not to pick up the phone at all times (2004: 201), she is not to have any friends independent from Doğan's (2004: 173) and she is not to choose clothes without Doğan's approval (2004: 49-52). Conversing freely with friends, going out alone even for a walk (2004: 173), spending her money as she pleases (2004: 52-53) become luxuries she forgets. On

the other hand, Doğan gives Esmeralda an “entry into a world that until he came along had been inaccessible to [her]” (2004: 185). It is a world where she “fe[els] safe and loved” (2004: 139) and where she experiences an alluring upper class culture; an intellectual life of sophistication and good mannerism, where she learns to eat properly at the table, converse intelligently and gracefully among Doğan’s friends, broaden her horizon in issues of politics, governments, and religions, and learns to appreciate museums, monuments and historical markers. During her momentary stays in Florida, New York and Texas, the countless days of exhaustive and strenuous work she does in helping Doğan pursue three graduate degrees, two Masters and one PhD, bring its own rewards. Being Doğan’s invisible research assistant, typist and language editor for four years, she decides to pursue her own academic career. She first attends part-time community colleges and then gets accepted to Harvard with a full scholarship. After graduating from Harvard, Santiago, with her newly earned diploma, is now ready to discover her new self which she “had created . . . under his protection” (2004: 315).

Santiago’s interracial relationship with a “foreigner,” 17 years her senior, can be read as a rebellious act of transgression against her Puerto-Rican social taboos, for which she pays a dear price. However, *The Turkish Lover* should not be dismissed merely as the story of an oppressed female subaltern and her struggle for self-agency. Santiago forges her female subjectivity not only through struggling against but also through reproducing the discourse of racism and sexism. This is apparent in the provocative title of the book (whose exotic connotations cater largely to the Western population imagination) as well as in the Euro-centric positionality of the memoir that appropriates the seductive fallacy of eroticizing racial bodies:

His large head and well-defined features were not handsome when examined individually, but on him they created the effect of exotic and mysterious beauty. Heavy-lidded dark brown eyes protruded slightly on either side of a nose that formed an almost perfect triangle. His face was broad, with chiseled cheekbones, the taut skin darker along the shave line, which gave the lower part of his face a bluish tint. His lips seemed drawn on, with an inverted V on the top, while the lower was the exact same size and shade, a slightly pinker brown than the rest of his skin. I loved his lips; loved how soft they felt on mine, how he moved when he spoke his foreign language, or when he struggled with unfamiliar English vowels. Behind those delicious lips were small, white, even teeth which he brushed after every meal. (2004: 49-50)

The sexual/racial undertone that lies underneath Santiago’s description of her Turkish lover hinges on exploiting rather than challenging the exotic “Other” stereotype. It is not merely Doğan’s “tender smile” (2004: 49), “intoxicating” voice (2004: 44), his sensual lips and tender caresses, his “exotic and mysterious beauty” (2004: 49) that captivates and compels desire in Santiago but also his

"feminine care-giving" that stands in stark contrast with his manly discipline, regulations and complete control: "He [Ulvi] took on the domestic chores that I so poorly executed. . . . He kept the apartment tidy and clear of clutter, shopped for and cooked our meals when we were not invited out, and took clothes to and from the laundry"(2004: 163). Her sexual objectification of her Turkish lover becomes a reverse stereotyping that leads him, in the eyes of the readers to take on a similar role, to what Sheng-mei Ma terms as the "Occidental Madame Butterfly," who "emanat[es] maternal warmth as well as sexual charm" (1998: 71). But this time it is a female benefitting from the body of an exotic male. Even if it is for a brief moment, through her interracial lovemaking, Santiago is able to identify with the center, forgetting that she, too, is an exotic dark-skinned Hispanic woman for many white American men. Throughout *The Turkish Lover*, Santiago promotes her lover, Ulvi Doğan, as the seductive cultural Other in whose critical gaze she has learned to shape her identity. By foregrounding Ulvi's guileful and crooked inventiveness, "When I needed it [money], I thought of getting jobs. When he needed it, there was always a scheme that involved so many people that it amazed me the problem was ever solved"(2004: 45); and his non-western religious fatalism, "He [Ulvi] attributed the constant failure to achieve his goals on bad luck. I didn't believe in luck, and blamed failure on personal flaws, in myself and in others" (2004: 296); his mysterious Middle Eastern business trips (2004: 311) and exotic gifts, his disrespect for American laws (esp. traffic regulations and speed limits), and his "broken English" (2004: 210), Santiago replicates the "othering" discourse that she sharply perceives in mainstream America.

The Turkish Lover, as "a bildungsroman, very vividly and engagingly chronicles Esmeralda Santiago's seven-year struggle to create her own space, to regain her self-integrity and self-respect and to become 'visible' once again"(Korpez, 2006: 148). Santiago understands her personal weaknesses and strengths through her mediated relation with both her mother and her lover, reminding us that one's identity develops not always "in dialogue with" but "sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us"(Taylor, 1994: 33). Both individuals, Ulvi and Ramona, try to dictate to Esmeralda a "moral model"(Maego, 2002: 144-47) of the self that perceives virtuous behavior "as tantamount to responsible individualism" (Maego, 2002: 144). Santiago's behavior is judged on how well she abides with moral rules (Puerto-Rican or Turkish) and how well she offers her time, physical labor and moral support to Ulvi and her mother as her superiors. The more she thinks about the roles she has to play to gain their approval, the more she distances herself from them. As a result, she begins to conceptualize her culture as well as her lover as negative forces at odds with her individuality. Ulvi becomes foreign with his hard to pronounce name and his Turkish "sense of propriety" (2004: 282) that demands from his chiquita not to "be free" when Esmeralda actually "[i]s being herself" (2004: 282). In the same way, her mother becomes foreign to her when she tries to enforce the rules of "nena puertorriquena decente," asking her to choose between

being a “puta”(prostitute) or “pendeja” (good-wife). The psychological and emotional dilemmas that she constantly experiences, gradually enables Santiago to reassess her identity. The very state of diaspora is melted completely away as Santiago begins to translate her set of differences with her Turkish lover and her mother within the individualistic paradigms of selfhood.

And, indeed, *The Turkish Lover*, concludes with Esmeralda proving to herself and to her readers that no matter one’s ethnic origin or social strata, in the United States, one can really “do whatever [she] set[s] [he]r mind to”(2004: 18). Santiago finishes her self-journey with a rhetoric of self-pride, self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction demonstrating to the reader that she, in fact, has become all that she could be in a hostile, uncertain world: “I was returning having exceeded even the most optimistic expectations for a poor girl from a huge family raised by a single mother under the most challenging conditions in a hostile culture and environment” (2004: 337). Her return trip to Puerto-Rico that functions as a ground for self-appreciation as well as self-validation, reminds the reader Robert Bellah’s striking observation of one of the essential features of American individualism:

Separated from family, religion, and calling as sources of authority, duty, and moral example, the self, first seeks to work out its own form of action by autonomously pursuing happiness and satisfying its wants. But what are the wants of the self? By what measure or faculty does it identify its happiness? In the face of these questions, the predominant ethos of American individualism seems more than ever determined to press ahead with the task of letting go of all criteria other than radical private validation. (1996: 79)

In this sense, Santiago’s return to her land of origin, her homecoming, serves as a means for self-gratification, a chance where she can compensate her feelings of uprootedness by an overvalued desire for achievement. She not only has turned herself to a self-made woman free of cultural or social restraints (this can be in the form of an oppressive lover or culture) but also has grasped the meaning of Emersonian America, what Sacvan Bercovitch describes as “self-trust, the ‘unapproachable’ heights of revolutionary self-reliance” (1978: 183). Her happiness comes through her own approval and self-blessing. Thus, at the end of her third and last memoir, Santiago’s life of constant removal and dispossession ends as she begins to feel at “home,” emplaced in the security of middle-class merit-based western values. Her graduation thesis the “Song of Songs,” a dance performance that she has “researched, interpreted, wrote, designed, directed, choreographed, and performed”(2004: 314) is not merely the amalgamation of her “interests, skills, worries, and concerns”(2004: 314), it is the reconstruction of her personal experience with “love, passion, . . . loneliness, longing. . .nostalgia, power and powerlessness”(2004: 314). It is Santiago’s own creation, her solo masterpiece that helps her to have faith in herself, her skills, her potential.

CONCLUSION

Santiago's self-journey, begins in *When I was Puerto Rican* as the black Negi, continues in *Almost a Woman* as the Hispanic Esmeralda, develops in *The Turkish Lover* as the nameless Chiquita, and finally ends as Esmeralda Santiago, the successful Harvard graduate that wins full membership to mainstream America. The titles of her consecutive memoirs run parallel with the acts of self-naming that has been pivotal in Santiago's journey to selfhood. These various names which Santiago wears like a dress, demonstrate how her literary consciousness is dominated by the issues of gender, race and ethnicity. Rather than trying to unname herself and "undo all categories, all metonymies and reifications, and thrust the self beyond received patterns and relationships" (Benston, 1984: 153), Santiago's self-assertion is, in fact, erected on these many labels and highly structured relationships. In *When I was Puerto Rican*, Santiago is the black jibara country girl highly critical and at odds with her Puerto/AmeRican island heritage; in *Almost A Woman*, she is a young female Chiquita lost in the glitz and glamour of New York, trying desperately to rise above her Puerto-Rican community; and finally in *The Turkish Lover*, she is the lonely minority Harvard graduate who has learned to judge her own self and others through the social and racial categories and cultural standards of American society.

Consequently, even though, Santiago's trajectory of the self whose spatial movement from one geography to another results in the forging of multiple identities, ranging from the Puerto-Rican highlander to the "Essie at work" (2004: 209), her border-crossing doesn't enable her to break down established individualistic paradigms and operate in what Anzaldua terms as the "pluralistic mode" (1987: 79) or what Sommer calls as the "plural" I of testimony (1988). As a result, it stands in stark contrast with the interconnected model of female selfhood that is apparent in most women's autobiographies:

Individualistic paradigms do not take into account the central role collective consciousness of self plays in the lives of women and minorities. They do not recognize the significance of interpersonal relationships and community in women's self-definition, nor do they explain the ongoing identification of the daughter with the mother. Rowbotham's historical and Chodorow's psychoanalytic models, on the other hand, offer a basis for exploring the self as women have constituted it in their writings. To echo and reverse Gusdorf once more, this autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. (Friedman 1989: 79)

Seeing her "culture, family and lover" (2004: 314) as setbacks, as negations, as obstacles that need to be overcome, Santiago alienates herself from them. In so doing, Santiago downplays the importance of such concepts as

interconnectedness and relationality and constructs her self-making narratives around what Richard Shweder, a cultural psychologist, points out as the “ethics of autonomy.”⁷

In all three memoirs, Santiago’s self-definition is based not on female relatedness and communion but more on male white paradigms of “isolate” selfhood in which Santiago constantly opposes herself to all others. As a result, Santiago’s transcultural experience which wrestles with different meanings of what it means to be a Puerto-Rican always in a state of perpetual transition leads her to resist rather than accept a gendered and racialized self. In so doing, it fosters an isolated concept of self that denies the self “relationality” and construes an identity through demarcation and delineation. At the end, as a racial minority woman juggling between two patriarchal cultures, Esmeralda Santiago creates a sense of belonging in her life by forging an identity “distinct from” and “in conflict with” the significant Others around her.

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⁷ The cultural psychologist Richard Shweder argues that the “moral reasoning” behind people’s beliefs and actions, the lens through which they judge themselves and others, regardless of their culture and race, can be traced to one of the three essential ethical criteria which he describes as the “The Big Three of Morality”(1997: 74-133). These are “the ethics of autonomy,” “the ethics of community,” and “the ethics of divinity” (Figure 2.2: 98). According to Shweder, individualistic paradigms are based on the “ethics of autonomy” that take into account such concepts as justice, rights, a general respect for individual freedom and choice, free agent, agency, appetites, free contract, marketplace. On the other hand, paradigms of relationality are based on “the ethics of community” among whose regulating concepts are duty, hierarchy, interdependence, role-based status, family, community, holism, sacrifice and membership regulate his/her life (see Figure 2.2: 98). In describing the difference between “the ethics of autonomy” and “the ethics of community,” Shweder writes, “Presupposed by the ethics of autonomy is a conceptualization of the self as an individual preference structure, where the point of moral regulation is to increase choice and personal liberty. Presupposed by the ethics of community is a conceptualization of the self as office holder. The basic idea is that one’s role or station in life is intrinsic to one’s identity and is a larger interdependent collective enterprise with a history and standing of its own”(98-99). For Further reading see Shweder et. al.

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