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Esmeralda Santiago in the marketplace of identity politics
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“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 iber-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.1 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 García 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. 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月初 of the 20th century. But the text and suffering...
("Y triste, el jibarito va / pensando así, diciendo así / llorando así por el caminoooooo").

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 González 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 strategem 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
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” (33) because “people, say in Guaynabo, ...take their culture for granted, while others in Philadelphia defend it passionately” (32); 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—technically in such exalted company as Antonio S. Pedreira and René Marqués—who looked back with nostalgia on the hacienda economy.7

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 nationalism theorists (who affirm it) and on the other so-called postmodern culture critics (who believe it has been superseded).8

Yet in 1996 América’s Dream uses what Ana Lydia Vega once called “el independentismo
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 América, after staring at a placid cow (which reflects her own situation in life) “heads not toward Esperanza, but away from it, toward Destino” (13). This fatalistic view of puertorriqueñas 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, [Esters’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 Vique, has the trappings of modernization, but the social conditions of the characters place them squarely in the Macondoized Puerto Rico previously inhabited by Neji in When I Was Puerto Rican. Vique, 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).

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.

The novel depicts the beatings graphically (cf. 85) as it presents the helplessness
(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 untempered product of genealogy,
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 reverberate back to the stereotype of the docile Puerto Rican.
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).

For a discussion of violence against women in Puerto Rico see López Palau. López Palau 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 Discrime por Razón de Género en los Tribunales de Puerto Rico (1995) and the Comisión de Asuntos de la Mujer.

López Palau details these phases of “domestic violence” (72–6).

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).

REFERENCES
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