

Esmeralda Santiago — The power of memories in rewriting History

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Esmeralda Santiago is a Puerto Rican contemporary writer who questions traditional values and beliefs. Santiago incorporates and reflects on the reality of her culture in her work, emphasising colonialism and women issues as she does so. Male figures are a minor presence in Santiago's work. Female figures dominate the narratives, especially in the voices of the grandmother, the mother and the author/narrator herself. Mothers are traditionally viewed as both the source and the transmitters of adequate behaviour norms - especially to their daughters, who are the ones who can dishonour the family by their moral conduct. They represent power and authority inasmuch as they reproduce the primeval normative knowledge of the Puerto Rican culture in the domestic sphere. With the present article, I intend to look at Esmeralda Santiago's work in the light of post-colonial and feminist theories, trying to focus on the elaboration of alternative perspectives to patriarchal cultural constructions and in the rewriting of history.

Female characters proliferate in the work of Esmeralda Santiago, not only in the stories told by her grandmother but also in the ones the author observes and describes. All of them are individually fighting for survival but together give voice to the Puerto Rican women. Given their doubly marginalized status both as women and as members of a minority, the women who populate Santiago's narrative have rarely received this kind of attention. This is especially true as they have been educated in the culture of silence. The position and portrayal of male figures, however, is not gratuitous. Men are strategically used as

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instruments, to allow for women to challenge gender roles and to begin a process of empowerment as they struggle to break from patriarchal rules.

A people without memories is a people without history. Esmeralda Santiago can be considered a natural born memoir writer. She tries to inscribe her people in history via memory writing. Born in Puerto Rico in 1948, Santiago moved to the US when she was only thirteen, away from the poverty which marked her childhood. In New York Santiago studied theatre and dance at the Performing Arts High School and studied Film Studies at Harvard. She began writing to document the challenges she had to face, to make sense of her experiences and the suffering of her people. Santiago was especially troubled by the suffering of women, who are most often forgotten in a patriarchal society, like the one she was brought up in, Puerto Rico, and this definitely influenced her work. Santiago's autobiographical work tells both her own story in her own terms and attempts to be representative of the experience of a displaced community of immigrants. Santiago's writing also explores the difficulties of her integration into American society and her search for identity. In fact, the 1990s witnessed the appearance of a wave of writers with similar concerns, such as Pat Mora, Sandra Cisneros or John Phillip Santos, who wanted to (re)write their collective history and see their lives validated and legitimated.

Writing allows Santiago to reconcile with the past and to think about herself as a complex and hybrid citizen. Most of her work analyses the question of Puerto Rican identity from the perspective and experience of a migrant woman. Memoirs can be placed somewhere between the autobiography and the chronicle. The lines between these genres are sometimes blurry, especially when writers constantly cross boundaries. In Greek, *autos* denotes “self”, *bios* “life”, and *graphe* “writing”. Taken together in this order, the words can provide a brief definition of autobiography. Another common definition of autobiography is “the story of one's life written by himself” or herself.¹ While a memoir

concerns itself with an emotional truth - not exactly what happened but what the subject remembers, his/her feelings and emotions - an autobiography details the chronology, events, movements and any other relevant information that occurred in the life of the subject.

Thus, memoirs are a way of writing about oneself. They mainly provide witness for a time and place but can also combine the historical and political accounts with the personal and familiar. Among this category, we can find the trilogy made up of *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), *Almost a Woman* (1998) and *The Turkish Lover* (2004).

In her first book *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Santiago describes the rural atmosphere of Macún, the poor neighbourhood where she grew up in the 1950s with her family. She depicts an idyllic childhood, in which exists a type of freedom unknown to those who live in the big city. Negi, the protagonist, evokes through her descriptions the fragrances, the flavours, the smells, the rituals and ceremonies, the worries and joys of a big and disorderly family. Despite poverty and the many deprivations, Negi feels comfortable in this familiar environment and she knows exactly which role each one of them plays in the community. The constant conflicts between her parents overshadow this happiness however, putting the family through a painful succession of separations and reconciliations, moving from house to house and from place to place.

The narrator/protagonist does not conform herself to the norms imposed on her by patriarchal culture. She is expected to learn domestic chores, to be a good chaste girl, get married and have children. But she wants more than this, Santiago yearns to challenge these conventions, to escape this confinement prescribed to her condition as a female in order to conquer other spheres, conventionally restricted and perceived as being male: education, the yearning for adventure, and writing. There is yet another idiosyncrasy that differentiates Negi from the rest of her family. When talking with her mother, she realizes

her real name is not Negi, but Esmeralda. Mami explains that when she was born, her skin was so dark that everybody began calling her “Negrita”, which with time shortened to Negi. Mami adds:

— We all have our official names, and then our nicknames, which are like secrets that only the people who love us use. [...]

It seemed too complicated, as if each one of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not.²

Finally, Mami, tired of her husband, his constant absences and the fights and infidelities, decides to separate from him and take her children to Brooklyn, “a place said to be as full of promise as Ponce de Leon's El Dorado”.³ Burdened with grief and sorrow for having to leave her motherland, Negi courageously accepts this new life, even though they never get to see the promised El Dorado, for

what lay around the corner was no better than what we'd left behind, that being in Brooklyn was not a new life but a continuation of the old one. That everything had changed, but nothing had changed, that whatever Mami had been looking for when she brought us to Brooklyn was not there, just as it wasn't in Puerto Rico.⁴

Moving to a new city that is completely different from everything she has known so far forces Negi re-evaluate herself. She has to learn a new language, a new culture and a whole new set of indecipherable rules and expectations about a certain pattern of female behaviour. Negi's whole world is shaken. All her learning, acquisitions and values are challenged, and her identity is questioned. Negi's experience is common, typical of a diasporic experience and its narratives of displacement, familiar to those who immigrate to the US, especially women:

Restricted by their race, ethnicity and a paucity of occupational and English language skills, the group grappled with maintaining a sense of dignity while holding on to traditional family values. Inevitably, alterations in lifestyles impacted equally on men and women, but the latter bore a double burden for they were expected to continue to fulfil conventional roles even though they entered the ranks of labor in increasing numbers. Women remained conditioned to marriage and motherhood as expressions of their primary functions in life.⁵

Negi feels alienated and dislocated in Brooklyn, as if she belongs to nowhere. She becomes a “hybrid between this world and the other”: Puerto Rican but simultaneously American. Negi states that “for me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara*⁶ who longed for green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a *hybrid* who would never forgive the uprooting”.⁷

She later realises, when returning to her dear Macún, that everything in her has changed. She no longer likes the same things, and worse than that, people who were once part of her existence, part of her everyday life no longer recognize her as one of them - as a Puerto Rican:

When I returned to Puerto Rico after living in New York for seven years, I was told I was no longer Puerto Rican because my Spanish was rusty, my gaze too direct, my personality too assertive for a Puerto Rican woman (...) I felt as Puerto Rican as when I left the island, but to those who had never left, I was contaminated by Americanisms, and therefore, had become less than Puerto Rican. Yet, in the United States, my darkness, my accented speech, my frequent lapses into the confused silence between English and Spanish identified me as foreign, non American.⁸

Another reason for being accused of no longer being Puerto Rican is the fact that Santiago chooses to write in English. She is accused of forgetting her culture and language, but for

her “it is devastating to be denied an identity [she] had struggled so hard to uphold”.⁹ Even though the author writes in English, she writes about her country, her culture and her people. If she doesn't feel completely Puerto Rican it is because she is now a mixture, a product of two different, often opposing cultures. This same notion is conveyed by the use of the past tense in the title *When I Was Puerto Rican* (emphasis added) — meaning that her identity is not something fixed, immutable, but ever changing and evolving. In fact, Puerto Rican culture is influenced by US culture both on the island and in the mainland. Puerto Ricans arrive in the US already “Americanised” to some degree and the hybrid self they become there is simply an extension of the process which began back there on the island.

In the sequel *Almost a Woman*, Santiago continues giving life to the incongruencies and challenges of her experience in the US during the 1960s. Now a teenager and with some fluency in the language, speaking English better than they do, Negi becomes her brothers and sisters' voice and especially her mother's. Mami desperately needs and depends on this voice to translate and interpret her family's necessities while defending the little dignity they have left. Negi originally refused to speak English while in Macún for fear of becoming an imperialist *Americana*, but now uses it in the US as an instrument for social and professional improvement.

Just two days after arriving in New York, a neighbour about her age hesitantly asks Negi:

‘¿Tú eres hispana?’ she asked, as she whirled the rope in lazy arcs.

‘No, I'm Puerto Rican.’

‘Same thing. Puerto Rican. Hispanic. That's what we are here.’

[...] Two days in New York, and I'd already become someone else. It wasn't hard to imagine that greater dangers lay ahead.¹⁰

The girl explains that in the US all Spanish speakers are considered Hispanic. At the end of this conversation, Negi realizes that she has already been classified in an arbitrary way and foresees eminent dangers in the future. She quickly realises that being Puerto Rican in New York is quite different from being Puerto Rican on the island, for here it implies a whole set of negative associations and connotations which will both excuse and justify discrimination. Here, Puerto Ricans, as well as all other Hispanics, “belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the ‘Other’. [They] are at the outer edge, the ‘rim’, of the metropolitan world — always ‘South’ to someone else's El Norte”.¹¹

Negi relates the identity crisis which consumes her. The adverb in the title of the book already suggests an unfinished process *Almost a Woman*: almost, but not yet an entirely grown woman. Her personal growth is not yet fully consummated, and it seems this extends to other areas of her life. Negi is almost a woman, just like she is almost bilingual; almost ‘Americanised’; almost no longer Puerto Rican due to all the new acquisitions and lessons in the new culture which have estranged her from her roots. Everything seems to her hopelessly and fatally “almost”...

It was good to learn English and to know how to act among Americans, but it was not good to behave like them. Mami made it clear that although we lived in the United States, we were to remain 100 percent Puerto Rican. The problem was that it was hard to tell where Puerto Rican ended and Americanized began.¹²

Integrating and adapting to this new culture involves a constant rethinking of her nationality, of her social origin, of her race, and even of her identity as a woman.

The colour of her skin is the object of a conscious reflection. Negi is confronted by this issue when having to fill in some documents to apply for an unemployment grant. She needs to categorize herself as: “White, Black, Other”.

When I had to indicate my race, I always marked ‘Other’, because neither black nor white was appropriate. (...)

I was neither black nor white; I was *trigueña*, wheat colored. I had ‘good’ hair, and my features were neither African nor European but a combination of both.¹³

[...]

I wasn't black, I wasn't white. The racial middle in which I existed meant that people evaluated me on the spot. Their eyes flickered, their brains calibrated the level of pigmentation they'd find acceptable. Is she light enough to be white? Is she so dark as to be black? In New York I was Puerto Rican, an identity that carried with it a whole set of negative stereotypes I continually struggled to overcome. But in other places, where Puerto Ricans were in lower numbers, where I was from didn't matter. I was simply too dark to be white, too white to be black.¹⁴

By the end of the novel, Negi is still not far from where she began — almost Americanised; almost Puerto Rican, because she can't avoid it; almost independent; almost a woman. Little Negi's identity is still in the making, “never complete, always in process,”¹⁵ and as Ellen C. Mayock puts it, it is a personal identity deeply affected “by her geographical past and present, by the cultural implications of that geography, by the constantly evolving mosaic of the combination of two distinctly different cultures, and, to complicate matters, by the changing ‘locations’ of her developing adolescent self (or selves)”.¹⁶

This manifold personal identity is common to the Puerto Rican national identity in the US. It is likewise multiple, constantly (re)building itself and interacting with other foreign cultures and influenced by new historical and political events. It is incessantly and continually in process.¹⁷ This multiple identity can also be seen by the different names/characters/identities that the protagonist assumes throughout the narratives: Negi, Negrita, Chiquita, Ez, Essie and Esmeralda.

This narrative shows the different ways of adaptation to which immigrants recur in order to integrate in the new culture - some are assimilated and learn the ways and language of the new country while others strive to maintain their cultural traits. Negi notices how each individual chooses, consciously or unconsciously, to carry his or her national identity. Thus the image of nation, nationality and national identity as solid, concrete and constant concepts is questioned.

In Santiago's third volume, *The Turkish Lover*, the feeling of alienation is still present. Santiago decides to abandon the friendly familiarity of the Puerto Rican barrio and her family in order to live with her lover, Ulvi Dogan. This mysterious and captivating character appears in the last pages of *Almost a Woman* and presents himself as the director of a Turkish film that has won an award at the Berlin Film Festival. This brief encounter between Santiago and Ulvi marks the beginning of both an obsessive love affair and, at times, a rather sick and deranged relationship.

I wanted to be with him, so I attended to his lessons. When we were out, I was to mirror his movements, so as not to embarrass myself. I was to eat if he ate, with the utensil he used, to speak less and listen more, to withhold my opinions. He made me aware of my limitations, promised to help me overcome them. 'You are poor girl with small mind,' he said once and repeated often.¹⁸

As Esmeralda manages to finally liberate herself and overcome the intense struggle with her mother, she inexplicably ends up conquered and subjugated by Ulvi, a sophisticated and much older man. Through this, she discovers that love and passion can also become a prison. Santiago gives detailed accounts of her relationship with Ulvi and through the perspective of that conflicting liaison she explores and scrutinizes themes such as racism,

sexism, feminism and the value of education. In the end, she unveils a woman who, against all the odds, is able to liberate herself and gain her independence.

By choosing to live with “el hombre que le hizo el daño,” Esmeralda ends up disappointing and betraying her mother as well as her cultural legacy, since she can no longer be considered a decent Puerto Rican girl, as defined by patriarchal norms.¹⁹

As the reader can infer from the titles of some chapters — “That is not good, Chiquita,” “Come, Chiquita, this is your job,” “Don’t worry, you still have me,” “You have many men friends, Chiquita” — her lover’s attitude towards Esmeralda seems somehow out of balance, domineering and overprotective. “Don’t worry!” or “Do not concern yourself, Chiquita” are recurrent replies Esmeralda gets when trying to find out more about Ulvi’s past.²⁰ He seems to be an executive or business man with mysterious and obscure connections to a dark world. Even though it seems after all that Ulvi hadn’t directed any film, he becomes the director and supervisor of her life. He tries to shape, define and form “his” Chiquita’s identity according to his own cultural references and male prejudices. As she is in conflict with her own identity, Esmeralda lets him progressively impose his discipline, his authority and his rules and allows him to take control of her life: “I was nothing, Ulvi had told me many times. ‘You are poor and naïve. But I like you are young and innocent. I can teach you everything’”.²¹ It is as if she were a blank paper which he could fill in, according to his convictions, beliefs and predispositions.

As she abdicates her own will in favour of Ulvi’s, Esmeralda becomes an actress (Chiquita) who mechanically responds to her lover’s expectations and demands: “He controlled the money I made, how I ate, what I wore, what I said, when I said it. Was this my life? Yes, it was. Had I made a mistake? Yes, I had”.²²

During her time with Ulvi, Esmeralda can’t answer the phone under any circumstance, she can’t freely talk in front of his friends, and she can’t even have her own friends.

Choosing her clothes or spending her money at will become luxuries she must renounce. During their temporary stays in Texas and New York, Esmeralda not only works part-time to financially support Ulvi, but she also becomes his research assistant, secretary and translator. Thanks to her commitment and dedication, Ulvi is able to get several academic degrees in different areas. Santiago uses all her energy, talents, abilities and skills to benefit her lover to the detriment of herself. However, these endless days of hard work and study, arduous and extenuating as they might have been, will eventually be rewarded: they help Esmeralda realise and acknowledge her own capacities and potential, giving her the courage and self-confidence necessary to perceive and pursue her own path, and concurrently, giving her entry into a world she thought inaccessible to her. She begins attending school at the places she and Ulvi stay in, later applying to Harvard where she is readily accepted. It is only at the end of her studies at Harvard that she dares to say: Enough! She finally creates a space and declares her independence from this man who suffocated her for seven long and hard years of a neurotic and distressful relationship.

Esmeralda Santiago's fictional works include *América's Dream* (1996) and *Conquistadora* (2011). The latter and most recent novel by the author deserves, in my opinion, a special highlight. *Conquistadora* is the first in a series of novels which recount the life of five generations of a Puerto Rican family, beginning in the 19th century and ending in the 1990s with her own generation. For Santiago, her writing is a way of exploring or even reinventing the most remote past, about which very little has been written. In doing so, she tries to understand her origins and look for answers to so many of the identity questions posed to her. This rewriting is, in a certain way, a form of protest against the exoticisation and silencing of the Other and the exoticisms deforming their image. This narrative strategy of rewriting and reclaiming the past is already present in the works of other contemporary US Latina writers: Cristina García, Julia Álvarez, Sandra

Cisneros and Rosario Ferré, among others, as Jessica Magnani emphasizes in her dissertation about family sagas and national romances.²³ These narratives, or family sagas, attempt to recover histories at the historical and geographical margins of the US while at the same time characterising women as legitimate producers and agents of those histories.

In postcolonial literature the question of identity and its construction is intertwined with the question of history. In this sense, it could be said that Santiago rewrites the history of the colonised Puerto Rico - a history of resistance and violence that contains not only the African traditions and mythologies but also the horrors of slavery. Santiago's is a history rewritten in feminist terms, which highlights not only the role of slave women but also that of Spanish women, giving them an active role in history. In this way Santiago underlines the heterogeneous and multi-layered nature of Puerto Rican identity, culture and traditions, embracing Taíno, Caribbean, African, and European characteristics.

Conquistadora could also be labelled, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, a "historiographic metafiction", for it contests boundaries between history and fiction.²⁴ It appropriates characters and historical events conceived of as truth and contests or questions them, considering that there is no such thing as "one 'writable' truth about history and experience, only a series of versions".²⁵ Therefore, the characters in Santiago's fiction may not be actually real, they may not have lived real lives but they were based on a people that really existed. The events of Santiago's novels are described from a different point of view, offering a critical reading of the past in the light of the present.

Conquistadora narrates the story of Ana Larragoity Cubillas, a Spanish aristocrat and Santiago's hypothetical ancestor, who lived in the 19th century. The fact that the title of the book appears in Spanish must have been intentional; in fact, the Spanish title makes it clear that it is a woman conqueror, while in English it would be much more ambiguous.

The first chapter of *Conquistadora* is entitled “El Encuentro / The Encounter: November 19, 1493”.²⁶ To what is conventionally termed as ‘discovery’, Santiago offers another designation — ‘encounter’. According to post-colonial theories, the expression ‘discovery’, when used in relation to continents and countries, is considered equivocal and must be avoided. Only an unpopulated place can be discovered; if it is already inhabited by human beings, no matter at what stage of development, it already exists and cannot be ‘discovered’. In this case, only contact/encounter with that people can take place. The word ‘discovery’ implies an imperialistic assumption towards the unknown and proclaiming its existence justifies its dominion.²⁷ The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos remarks that there is a radical difference between discovering a thing and discovering a human being: “discovering a human being implies reciprocity; the one who discovers is also discovered”²⁸(my translation). If for any reason this reciprocity is denied or concealed, the act of discovering becomes an act of covering as well. That denial or concealment of reciprocity is only possible when someone has the power to negate or conceal somebody else's humanity. Modernity, according to Santos, consists of an enormous web of denied reciprocities: between the subject and the object, nature and man, civilized and uncivilized, sacred and profane, individual and state, employer and employee, man and woman, old and young. Fifteenth century discoveries can be regarded as the founding metaphor of the modern denial of reciprocity. In that sense, they are as much covering as discovering.²⁹

In the words of Walter Mignolo, who contrasts discovery and invention:

‘America’, then, was never a continent waiting to be discovered. Rather, ‘America’ as we know it was an invention forged in the process of European colonial history and the consolidation and expansion of the Western view and institutions. The narratives that described the events as ‘discovery’ were told not by the inhabitants [...] but by Europeans themselves. It would be four

hundred and fifty years until a shift in the geography of knowledge would turn around what Europeans saw as 'discovery' and see it as 'invention'.³⁰

Puerto Rico was originally inhabited by a people named *Táinos*, who called their island *Boriquén* (or *Borinquén*). Santiago recounts the arrival of the Europeans, providing the reader with a fresh perspective of that encounter through the eyes of the visited and not through the visitors':

The men who dropped from the ship were monstrous creatures with shiny carapaces on their chests, upon their heads, and around their arms and shins. They carried spears, flags, and crosses. [...] The sailors looked at the *borinqueños* as if they'd never seen humans. They gaped at the tattooed and pierced bodies, and swept their eyes over the women with an especial hunger.³¹

It is clear that the conquerors came looking for wealth. Soon after the awe and admiration produced by the encounter and during the first period of colonization, the Taíno population decreased dramatically as a result of pillages, violence, enslavement, conversion and massacre, as well as the spread of European diseases that the natives had not previously been exposed to.

The *borinqueños* began to die from diseases they'd never known and from infected wounds opened on their backs and arms and legs from whips they'd never experienced. They died in rebellions, their numbers easily overwhelmed by men on horses carrying sharp swords. They died from exhaustion [...] They died from terror. [...] They died of humiliation after hot irons branded their foreheads. They died in such numbers that their language began to die, too, and the names of their ancestors and most of their gods were silenced from tongues. The *borinqueño* culture, traditions, and history were chronicled by the conquerors who called them savages, who misinterpreted their customs and rituals, who told them that if they didn't renounce their own gods, they would live in flames in the next life.³²

The accounts of these expeditions told by the vanquishers are always considerably different for they highlight the potentialities of the land and the imperious need to civilize the barbarians, considering them inferior and savages. Fertile and ever green soils are evoked, rich in gold, with a luxuriant fauna and exotic flora, and a year-round mild climate. The differences concerning civilization, usages and beliefs are obvious when compared with the European continent. This contrast, combined with other factors and stirred by doctrinal conceptions read in books or in the European oral tradition, prompted some equivocal attitudes because “both real and imagined worlds come to us through their accounts of them, that is, through their traces, their texts”.³³ The official history offered by the conquistadors can be considered a narrative construction written to serve the colonialists' purposes, for writing history is also a creative act. This account does not in “any way deny the value of history-writing; it merely redefines the conditions of value in somewhat less imperialistic terms”.³⁴ It renders other perspectives indispensable.

Read and translated by the Europeans, the natives see their identity elaborated through alien ideals and stereotypes. The authors of these texts are not objective, they judge what they see based in their own culture and references. The opposite, however, is very rare, because few texts question the validity of European perspective.³⁵ This way a body of biased ideas is created, fascinating as well as influencing the travellers who set out to discover and conquer these new and faraway lands.

In the 16th century the Spanish conquistadores began by taking over those huge territories in Central and South America. The settling process that followed reproduced the models of Spanish infrastructure, creating harbours, cities, roads and churches. Conquistadors also imposed their own language, religion and laws upon Natives. In the second chapter of *Conquistadora*, Santiago presents to the readers some of those

conquistadors who left for Puerto Rico in search of adventure, glory and wealth, in the form of the ancestors of the main character, Ana.

Don Hernán's journals and letters were illustrated with landscapes, colorful birds and flowers, strangely shaped vegetables, barefoot men and women with feathers and shells in their hair. [...]

Don Hernán wrote of a harsh existence punctuated by deadly raids by *caribe* warriors, by earthquakes, by fevers, by violent storms that destroyed everything in their path. But he also described gold nuggets gleaming from climbing vines, impassable forests [...] He saw endless possibilities in that mysterious land, he wrote. Like all the conquistadores, he was there to enrich himself, but to earn his bounty he first had to tame a wilderness.³⁶

According to Santiago, *Conquistadora* is an attempt to look for and understand her roots. Going back to mid-19th-century Puerto Rico, this epic novel is the result of methodical factual research and a competent historical reconstruction but it is as well an attempt to fill the gaps that research uncovered. *Conquistadora* tells two extraordinary stories of growth and development which progress in parallel – the story of Ana Cubillas, the daughter of Spanish aristocrats who becomes the owner of a sugar plantation, and the story of the country itself, Puerto Rico. As there were no written records and because she comes from poor and unschooled families, Santiago was provided with little factual material and therefore tried to recreate who her ancestors might have been based in hints and thorough research.

She knows little of her family history, composed of ‘landless peasants, *campesinos*, who left few written records’.

But they left other clues: ‘My father was very dark. His ancestors probably came from Africa.

My mother was very fair, with European roots, probably Catalan or Basque’.³⁷

Santiago tries in this way to fill in the blanks of knowledge about her origins.

Ana María Larragoity Cubillas was born in 1826. This unwanted and unloved daughter, who should have been a boy to inherit the fortune and honour of the family, becomes a rebel teenager, and later, an adventuress. Educated at a rigid convent school, where girls are harshly punished, called (ironically) de las Buenas Madres (of the Good Mothers), it is here that Ana meets her first love, Elena Alegria Feliz: “They explored each other with furtive, fluttery fingers, hot mouths on cool flesh”. Elena will later introduce Ana to her twin cousins, Ramón and Inocente, and the erotically awakened girls conspire to marry them: “We’ll be sisters then, and we’ll always be together”, says Elena. “Ramon and Inocente are rich and handsome”.³⁸ But a deeper passion soon arouses in Ana and this initial plan is modified. Having learned that the twins’ family has inherited a piece of land in Puerto Rico, she convinces them to depart and take possession of the island property to become masters of their own world.

Brave and resolute, Ana does not hesitate to exchange the comfort and idleness of the futile life of the Spanish aristocratic salons for the adventure and freedom in the sugar plantation in Puerto Rico. Ana devours the diary of her ancestor don Hernán Cubillas Cienfuegos, one of the conquerors in the service of Juan Ponce de León and who was part of the first expedition in 1508. Throughout her reading, she can almost feel his hand reaching through all those centuries to touch and impel her to an unknown world: “The more she read, the more Ana longed for a world beyond her balcony, far from the echoing halls of her convent school, home, and disappointed parents”.³⁹ This brave Spanish woman dares to defy the patriarchal structures that define her social status and sexuality to face a hostile environment where she will reclaim the role of the male conqueror.

Ana is a complex and contradictory woman, fearless and firm, intelligent and ambitious, far ahead of her time, enigmatic, respected and admired:

Santiago's plantation mistress isn't a shrew who derives sadistic pleasure from flogging her slaves. Nor is she their ministering angel [...] Ana is something much more elusive and contradictory. She delegates the flogging, but flinches when the slaves screams. [She] is a feminist before her time. [...] An unconventional, ambitious woman whose attitudes toward children, slaves and lovers perplex and engross. [...] Ana is emotionally intelligent enough to imagine how slaves might feel, to understand their longing for freedom, yet ruthless enough to use and punish them in order to flourish herself. Neither white witch nor angel, she is convincing despite her contradictions — indeed, because of them.⁴⁰

Ana is the 'conquistadora', not just of the twins' hearts, Ramón and Inocente, but also of Severo Fuentes', the ruthless overseer who was hired for his "ability to instil fear and respect in another human being and his willingness to kill, if necessary, without thinking too much about it".⁴¹ She is also 'conquistadora' of the lands, her true and overwhelming passion. "She only knew that from the moment she saw it, the land and everything and everyone within its borders were essential to her existence. It couldn't be questioned, challenged, or explained. It just was".⁴²

Unlike the three baby boys her parents lost immediately after birth, Ana was, from the first moment, a natural survivor *par excellence*: "Ana thrived and survived beyond a few days, then three months, then six, then nine, and by her first year was wobbling and lurching from her nurse's arms to those of her maid".⁴³ And she will prove to be a survivor for her entire life: she will lose her husband and brother-in-law, her parents-in-law and her son, but Ana will obstinately and undauntedly persist and resist the inclement weather, the successive tragedies and diseases, dangers and adversities. Severo Fuentes, himself an authentic fortress, refers to her as "hard, hard, hard Ana"⁴⁴ or "a hard heart their child would have to conquer".⁴⁵

Santiago dedicated long years of investigation and scrupulous historical research, focusing especially on African cultures, slavery and the slave trade. This way, she is able to convey:

fascinating and disturbing historic information about human trafficking in Puerto Rico and its region, about the work and living conditions of slaves and the punishment of runaways. The hunger for freedom, the rumblings of rebellion and the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States trigger unrest in and around the island, threatening its economy. Against this backdrop, there are hurricanes, fires and a cholera epidemic that swiftly kills 27,000 Puerto Ricans in the 1850s.⁴⁶

Santiago thrusts the reader “into a world where kindness and cruelty coexist, as do slavery and freedom, and where the destructive force of nature continually tests the human spirit”.⁴⁷ Some of the most memorable and powerful characters in Santiago's novel are slaves: Flora, the Pigmy from the Congo who was captured as a young girl, still sings in her native language and is watchful and observant. She pays close attention to her masters and learns what kind of people they are in order to survive. José, the carpenter, who carefully carved and engraved the coffins of all those who died during the cholera epidemic; and Nena, la Lavandera, who whispers in her last breath her real name, Olivia, because she didn't want to die nameless.

Names are an issue widely explored by Santiago. As she states at the beginning of *Conquistadora*, “[t]he *españoles* renamed everything into their language” beginning with the name of the island, immediately changed upon the arrival of the conquerors.⁴⁸ The *Táinos* called their island *Boriquén* (or *Borinquén*), but the Spanish renamed it San Juan:

Because the first sound from the mouths of the *borinqueños* was the word *taíno*, the men from the sea thought the people were describing themselves and renamed them for the word ‘peace’.

The men from the sea also renamed Borínquen, meaning Great Land of the Valiant and Noble Lord, as San Juan Bautista, meaning Saint John the Baptist. [...] they changed the *borinqueño* ancestral and clan names to their own language.⁴⁹

Obliterating their African names, new names or nicknames were also given to the slaves, which clearly defined the authority and status of the owner. The new names also functioned as a formal property register. Slaves “were forbidden to speak their own languages. No matter where they came from, once in the Spanish colonies, they were baptized and given new names”.⁵⁰ The names were often chosen among biblical characters, followed by an epithet related to the tasks the slaves performed or any special feature — José, the carpenter; Teo, the houseman; Marta, the cook; Nena, la Lavandera (the washerwoman); or Conciencia, la Jorobá (the hunchback). To further strengthen their authority and minimize the status of the slaves, the owners also chose names which were familiar or shortened forms of proper Christian names, diminutives and childish versions.

Regarded as subhuman, deprived of intellectual capacity, dispossessed of their past, torn apart from their family and bonded through terror and fear, for the slaves there was no other choice but submission and silence, at least in front of their masters. As Walter Mignolo observes that “lurking beneath the European story of discovery are the histories, experiences, and silenced conceptual narratives of those who were disqualified as human beings, as historical actors, and as capable of thinking and understanding”.⁵¹

All these silences have resulted in the exclusion of voices, leaving gaps in history, empty spaces and untold lives, contributing in this way to the reproduction of yet more stereotypes and new forms of discrimination. Certainly, there are no doubts that official history is made up of versions and interpretations of events, built on memories, regarding and disregarding details. This official history casts away everything not worth recording,

all that can, in any way, question or challenge the dominant discourses from the voices of the powerful.

It is from this series of constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions that Esmeralda Santiago tries to rewrite the past and compose an alternative history, performing a revolutionary act. She constructs her narrative from a feminist perspective, deconstructing the traditional vision of a racist and sexist society, re-evaluating the role of women and opening up space for new meanings and identities. Santiago creates a subversive space, for she dares to shatter a barrier of silence, allowing women belonging to ethnic minorities to break patterns imposed both by the patriarchal system and by racial hegemony.

In the case of the memoirs, Santiago makes the voiceless subaltern become an actress and protagonist of her own story and become the agent of her own narrative, thus contributing to the emergence of new conceptions of women.

In her fiction, she builds fictional figures to give voice to those silences and fill in the gaps of the past. In the case of *Conquistadora*, ironically, that reclaiming of the past as a way of rebuilding an historical identity was paradoxical. There's no way out of colonial history, be it American or Spanish. The heroin is a woman who ran away from a destiny she did not want for herself, she is dislocated and lonely in a foreign country but she is also Spanish, aristocratic and domineering. This might show that the author fully embraces her heritage. She has to accept the heavy legacy of descending from a colonizer, from someone who contributed to the subjugation of her people. The “European presence is about exclusion, imposition and expropriation”, so it would be easier to “locate that power as wholly external to us — an extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin”.⁵² But that presence can't be thrown off and Santiago won't. Undoubtedly, Santiago's is an ambiguous identity, full of contradictions and ambivalences,

but also revealing a historic, national, cultural and social diversity of which the author is heir and which she wishes to accept and embrace.

Endnotes

- ¹ Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1.
- ² Santiago, Esmeralda, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 14.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.
- ⁵ Korrol, Virginia Sánchez, "In Their Own Right: A History of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.A." *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: History*. (New York: Arte Público Press, 1993), 290.
- ⁶ This term is usually used to designate the traditional Puerto Ricans, poor country people, uneducated, and illiterate. They lived in extreme poverty. Other traits traditionally linked to *jibaros* were honesty, bravery, hospitality, self-sufficiency, stubbornness, and pride in their origins.
- ⁷ Santiago, *Puerto Rican*, 209.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Kevane, Bridget and Juanita Heredia, *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 131.
- ¹⁰ Santiago, Esmeralda, *Almost a Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 4-5.
- ¹¹ Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 396.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 25.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 56-57.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.
- ¹⁵ Hall, "Cultural Identity," 390.
- ¹⁶ Mayock, Ellen C., "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Álvarez, and Santiago." *The Bilingual Review/La revista Bilingüe* Vol. 23, No 3 (1998), 223-29, accessed 1 October 2011, Academic Search Premier, Ipswich, MA, 223.
- ¹⁷ Santiago-Stommes, Ivelisse, "Procesando etiquetas: El proceso de re-construcción de la identidad personal y el cuestionamiento de la identidad nacional en *Casi una mujer* de Esmeralda Santiago," *Grafemas* (2004). Electronic Informative Bulletin from Asociación Internacional de Literatura Hispánica Femenina, accessed on 1 October 2011, <http://www-pub.naz.edu:9000/~hchacon6/grafemas/article10.html>, 15.
- ¹⁸ Santiago, *Almost a Woman*, 305.
- ¹⁹ The man who damaged her, meaning, took her virginity (my translation).
- ²⁰ Santiago, *The Turkish Lover* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2004), 46, 61.
- ²¹ Santiago, *Almost a Woman*, 23.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 60.
- ²³ Magnani, Jessica, *Divided Loyalties: Latina Family Sagas and National Romances*. Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida. May, 2007.
- ²⁴ Hutcheon, Linda, "Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²⁶ Santiago, Esmeralda, *Conquistadora*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 3.
- ²⁷ Iglésias, Francisco, "Encontro de duas culturas: América e Europa," *Estudos Avançados*, Vol. 6, No 14 (Jan./Apr. 1992), São Paulo, accessed 1 October 2011, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0103-40141992000100003>.
- ²⁸ In the original: "Contudo, existe uma diferença radical entre descobrir uma coisa e descobrir um ser humano: descobrir um ser humano implica reciprocidade. Quem descobre é descoberto." Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, "Descobrimientos e Encobrimientos," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, No. 38, Dec. 1993, 6.
- ²⁹ Santos, "Descobrimientos e Encobrimientos," 6-7.
- ³⁰ Mignolo, Walter D., *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 2.
- ³¹ Santiago, *Conquistadora*, 3.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 5.
- ³³ Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction", 10.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ An example of one such text would be the work of Bartolomé de las Casas, who in spite of being Spanish, always tried to defend the dignity/humanity of the natives and denounce the crimes, violence and abuses committed by colonizers.

³⁶ Santiago, *Conquistadora*, 16.

³⁷ Minzesheimer, Bob, "Esmeralda Santiago emancipates her feelings." *USA Today*, 13 July 2011. Online Edition.

³⁸ Santiago, *Conquistadora*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁴⁰ Lee, Felicia R., "Puerto Rico in History, Imagined and Real." *New York Times*, 25 Jul. 2011: C1.

⁴¹ Santiago, *Conquistadora*, 82.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 297.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁴⁶ Zukerman, Eugenia, "Book Review: *Conquistadora* by Esmeralda Santiago." *The Washington Post*, 30 Jul. 2011. Online Edition.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Santiago, *Conquistadora*, 88.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵¹ Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 4.

⁵³ Hall, "Cultural Identity," 401.

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