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**TITLE:** Emancipating the Self: The (Un)Becoming of Esmeralda Santiago's Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** This literary analysis is based on three autobiographical novels written by Esmeralda Santiago, *When I was Puerto Rican* (1994), *Almost a Woman* (1999), and *The Turkish Lover* (2005). In her narratives, the thread of becoming Esmeralda Santiago's character is analyzed to reveal how a dynamic collective memory reconstructs her new blended Puerto Rican and American identity. Santiago shares her personal experiences where she exhibits her desires to challenge and question her native culture's expectations and the need to reinvent herself in a new country. In Puerto Rico, Santiago dismissed the English language along with the American culture. However, when she arrives in the United States, learning English, pursuing an education, and rebelling against her native culture, sets her on a path of self-discovery. As she tries to discover who she is and what her future can hold, she must decide whether to choose for herself or let outside influences determine for her.

**KEYWORDS:** Esmeralda Santiago, Identity, Becoming and Unbecoming, Puerto Rico, Immigrant

**RESUMEN:** Este análisis literario se basa en tres novelas autobiográficas escritas por Esmeralda Santiago, *Cuando yo era puertorriqueña* (1994), *Casi una mujer* (1999) y *El amante turco* (2005). En las narraciones, se analiza el personaje de Esmeralda Santiago para explicar cómo una memoria colectiva y dinámica reconstruye una nueva identidad puertorriqueña y estadounidense. Santiago comparte sus experiencias personales con motivo de mostrar sus deseos de desafiar y cuestionar las expectativas de su cultura puertorriqueña y la necesidad de reinventarse en un nuevo país. En Puerto Rico, Santiago rechazó el idioma inglés junto con la cultura estadounidense. Sin embargo, cuando llega a los Estados Unidos, aprende el inglés para continuar su educación y se rebela contra su propia cultura, poniéndola en camino hacia un autodescubrimiento. Al mismo tiempo que trata de descubrir quién es y qué puede deparar su futuro, ella tiene que decidir si elegir por sí misma o dejar que las influencias externas determinen por ella.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Esmeralda Santiago, identidad, Puerto Rico, inmigrante

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## Emancipating the Self: The (Un)Becoming of Esmeralda Santiago's Identity

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The experiences shared throughout Esmeralda Santiago's trilogy begin with young Esmeralda growing up in her native country of Puerto Rico. During the mid 20th century, the country was being influenced greatly by American culture. Following the Jones Act of 1917 each Puerto Rican was officially a United States citizen, and the flood of American enlightenment continued throughout the newly acquired island. Despite the fact that she is indeed an American citizen, Esmeralda believes and speaks as if from an immigrant standpoint in her narration as she confronts the foreign alien. Santiago's memoirs encompass her assimilation and transition from her native culture into the unfamiliar, and at the beginning unacceptable, American one. Each portion of her story divulges her personal struggles with adaptation to new circumstances and her personal growth. The use of memories allows Esmeralda to look back from a distance and scrutinize particular moments in time and space, revealing the truthfulness and transcendence of her experiences that enable her to speak, rather than having others speak for her. Because she is independent of any boundaries, Esmeralda manipulates the order and duration of events, detailing her experiences as a continuous flow of agency. Hence, Santiago's trilogy interacts with the present and the past, ever changing in various directions. A close examination of each portion of her memoir, reveals the weaving of memory, time, and space to reconstruct the new Puerto Rican-American identity. Examples and interpretations of the texts are based on Santiago's experiences and focus more on the envelopment of the American culture, but readers must also recognize

that she is still, and always will be Puerto Rican. Thus, regardless of how much Esmeralda accepts American ways, she will also retain a portion of her roots, continuing in her hybrid identity.

The creation of Esmeralda Santiago's identity is represented as multi-directional crossroads that interweave along her autobiographical trilogy: *When I was Puerto Rican* (1994), *Almost a Woman* (1999) and *The Turkish Lover* (2005). Through personal memories, Esmeralda converges various aspects of her life to narrate a continuous experience of struggle for the discovery of her new Puerto Rican identity as a colonized immigrant to the United States. Esmeralda's perceived, lived and conceived experiences reveal the uncertainties of creating a new space in Puerto Rican and American society as a woman during the 1960s and 1970s. As she attempts to uncover who she is and what her future may hold, she must decide whether to choose for herself or allow outside forces to take control. Santiago makes critical decisions against cultural, traditional and relational expectations that enable her to create an alternate hybrid identity that helps her find self-liberation through experience, education and modern dance in the liberal arts.

In the first autobiographical narrative, *When I was Puerto Rican*, Esmeralda Santiago recounts the experiences of her childhood growing up in Puerto Rico and learning of the cultural norms and accepted behavioral practices taught to her by her parents, teachers, peers, neighbors, and other authoritative figures, whom exhort her to live according to their expectations. Esmeralda, also known as "Negi," faces personal decisions to follow or

reject the suggestions of others. Her obedience, as well as rebellion against these accepted cultural norms, play a critical role in the formation of her personality. During her time on the island, Esmeralda learns about American culture, and subsequently, she openly expresses her distaste. Later, she moves to the United States with her family at 13 years of age. After having been marked by the cultural customs of Puerto Rico, she must abruptly make a new start in a foreign land. Santiago learns the correct way to act as a young lady from New York following the models of teachers, peers, and strangers. Acculturating herself in the United States forms another part of her identity and is of particular importance during her teenage years. Negi finds herself wedged between two cultures, each with different traditions and cultural norms taught to her, that contribute to the growth of her identity. As a result of these experiences, Esmeralda realizes that her individuality depends greatly on her decisions to submit to or rebel against the customs and traditions in place within a culture. Through the combination of Puerto Rican and American culture, Esmeralda begins to foster an identity by opposing and/or following cultural assumptions of both communities.

At a very young age, Santiago exhibits defiant behavior by resisting Puerto Rican cultural expectations. She is the oldest child of her family, and according to the traditions of her mother, a daughter is to assist with the duties of the household. When her mother says: “Negi, come help in the kitchen” (9), Negi pretends “not to hear but felt her [mother’s] eyes bore holes in the back of [her] head” (9). According to her mother, it is an unwritten rule that Puerto Rican daughters should listen and obey their parents without hesitation. However, Negi rebels against the responsibility of doing housework and openly ignores her mother, who scolds her for displaying unacceptable behavior and reminds her whenever she is disrespectful. Anabela Alves elaborates in her article “Esmeralda Santiago— Writing Memories, Creating a Nation” about this subject.

Women play a paramount role as mothers in traditional patriarchal cultures. They are both the source and the transmitters of adequate behavior norms, especially to their daughters, who are the ones who can dishonor the family by their moral conduct. (2)

For a Puerto Rican girl, such as Esmeralda, disobedience is a direct attack against her family’s Puerto Rican culture. Even at four years of age, Esmeralda makes decisions to live contrary to the expectations of her mother. This rebellion directly challenges cultural beliefs, resisting the sociocultural principles of her family.

Once Esmeralda reaches the age to begin school, the American momentum has permeated her homeland. She quickly realizes that foreign influence will be forced upon her through learning English. Santiago is expected to follow the rules and norms of a new culture that was previously non-existent in her observed world. One day, she converses with her father and firmly expresses her opinion to renounce American imperialism: “Well I’m not going to learn English, so I don’t become American” (73). In reaction, her father teaches her an essential principle: “Being American is not just a language, Negrita, it’s a lot of other things [...]. Like the food you eat [...] the music you listen to [...] the things you believe in” (73). The explanation from her father shows Negi that culture involves far more than the words that one expresses in a specific language. However, she has no desire to leave behind her culture to learn something abnormal and unknown. Her determination to reject American influence through the English language constitutes a new element in her identity, becoming “a symbol of deterioration of the language and culture she feels so proud of” (Miguela 12). These contradicting forces inscribe in Santiago negative attitudes, refusing to learn English with the understanding and expectation that acquiring a new language implies the loss of her Puerto Rican culture.

Despite this attitude toward American culture, Esmeralda has little control over what happens in the classroom. English teaching continues, and the American culture infiltrates more intensely within her motherland. Negi remembers her teacher, Miss Jiménez, who “liked to teach us English through song, and we learned all our songs phonetically, having no idea of what the words meant” (77). As a young Puerto Rican girl, dedicated to her mother country, Negi has no desire to learn the words or meanings of American songs. By recognizing that language is not only a part of the culture, but also an important part of one’s identity, Santiago utilizes this incident to emphasize how behavioral and cultural colonization is instituted through education. During this early stage of continuous transformation, American cultural customs and rules are propagated throughout the island. Within her community, the children also receive American food which Esmeralda strongly dislikes, becoming “as indigestible as the lyrics she learns without comprehension” (Stephens 40). Regardless of the form of this new American plague, whether food or word, Esmeralda attempts to dismiss it all. Her rejections of her own family cultural norms as well as American impositions, shape her identity as an individual.

Esmeralda’s identity continues to develop as well through her experiences at home. Her parents have many difficulties and conflicts within their relationship. She recalls the rather trying obstacle when her father leaves the family. As a consequence, Esmeralda’s mother decides to find employment in order to support her family. In her memoir, Esmeralda recalls the strong disagreement with Puerto Rican tradition caused by this choice. It was expected that the mother will perform the duties of the household while the father works outside of the home. Negi hears negative comments from others about her mother and her family. When she is confused about why others speak in such a way she asks:

‘Why, Mami? Why is everyone so mean just because you have a job?’ I pleaded one day after a schoolmate said Mami was not getting her money from a factory but from men in the city. (122)

Her mother explains the expectations of many Puerto Ricans in regards to gender roles in the home. This is a pivotal point in Esmeralda’s life because she must open her mind to the meaning of community and culture. In her work, “Somewhere between Puerto Rico and New York,” Marta Vizcaya Echano explains:

Young Esmeralda’s concept of community shows that race, ethnicity, and the imagined communities built upon them cannot be understood separately from other factors such as class, gender, and sexual orientation as well as age, geographical and social environments, and education. (114)

At this point, Negi more fully understands what her father previously taught her regarding culture. It cannot be defined with one element, but instead involves several, such as social class and gender. Through the negative experiences that came through the rejection of her mother by the community, Negi’s identity grows and she chooses to renounce the restrictive roles and options her traditional Puerto Rican culture has defined for her as a woman.

Santiago’s family moves from a small village community to the Mangle, a more urban area, which implies a shift in cultural lifestyle. Growing in the country meant being known as a “jíbara,” a proud title for her, but a newly discovered insult in the more contemporary community. Esmeralda attends a new school where Señora Leona is teaching math fractions. She calls on the new student to provide solutions to a problem, but Negi has never learned fractions. Esmeralda’s teacher asks: “Didn’t you learn fractions in that school for

jíbaros you came from?’ The kids laughed. La Sra. Leona smiled. Her teeth were small. I was so cold my knees shook” (139). Having always been proud to think of herself as a future jíbara, a laborer in the country, Negi learns that in this new school it is disgraceful and embarrassing to embrace the traditional roots from her previous home. From the teacher’s perspective, jíbaro refers to a lack of knowledge and the individual’s inability to learn. Therefore, the rejection of the traditional self vastly impacts Esmeralda as she grows up, understanding how others expect her to act. These urbanized cultural presumptions create a jíbaro stereotype or rather an identity that a group gives to others whom they believe to be different. Nigel Rapport speaks more fully of stereotypes: “In short, stereotypes are seen to form a fortress in which groups can barricade themselves, universally convinced of the safety, rectitude, and respectability of their own shared traditions” (249). Negi is outside of the barricading traditions of this community and refuses to believe that a jíbaro implies something negative. Even though Señora Leona unknowingly influences the formation of Santiago’s identity, Negi dismisses the prospect of rejecting the possible identity she desires to develop. She has a new determination to become a future jíbara, which she previously yearned to become. This development of Esmeralda’s ability to choose her own identity is critical for the life experiences soon to follow in her life.

The greatest transition up to this point in Esmeralda’s life occurs when she moves to New York in the United States with her mother and siblings. Ironically, Negi finds herself facing the birthplace of the culture that beforehand she never wanted to accept. From the moment that they arrive, Esmeralda realizes that her life and identity, as a Puerto Rican, will quickly change according to new American views and ideas. Before traveling from the airport into the city, Negi recalls:

We huddled in front of the terminal while Don Julio negotiated with

drivers. The first one looked at us, counted the number of packages we carried, asked Don Julio where we were going, then shook his head and drove along the curb toward a man in a business suit with a briefcase. (216)

The driver’s disregard for helping Negi’s family causes any possible eagerness to accept American culture to deteriorate even further. Without knowing the reason for the possible prejudice, Esmeralda sees the act as a personal attack and wishes to push away the new life. Unfortunately, she must tolerate some of the cultural rules of her new home. As her time in Brooklyn continues, Esmeralda even finds herself accepting parts of this new experience and begins to connect with her two cultures. “Santiago feels and experiences a different level of racial subjectification as she comes to terms with her increasingly bilingual, bi-cultural development and formation” (Rivera 115). Esmeralda grasps the necessity of living between these two cultures much like a bridge crossing a ravine. During her time in Puerto Rico, she never thought it would be necessary to assimilate to any other culture than her own. Notwithstanding her previous beliefs, in her new home in New York, Negi chooses to accept and reject customs from both cultures. She attains greater space within for the emergence of her hybrid identity.

Attending her new school in Brooklyn generates an important alteration in Esmeralda’s life. As she goes to register for classes, Mister Grant explains the policy requiring that foreign language immigrants regress one grade to learn English. Negi is upset with this traditional expectation for alien arrivals in her new school. Knowing her capacity to learn, as well as her determination, Santiago refuses to be placed behind due to being a Puerto Rican who cannot yet speak at the level of the other students. Instead of obeying and remaining in silence, Esmeralda speaks openly: “Meester Grant, I said, seizing the moment. ‘I go eight gray six mons. Eef I no lern inglish, I go seven gray. Okay?’”



(246). Esmeralda rebels against this administrative rule with great resolve, asserting that she will work with all of her strength to learn the language during the next few months. After considering it over, Mister Grant accepts her proposition and agrees that she may enter the eighth grade. This act is the first time that Esmeralda makes the decision to learn English on her own and prove that she can learn just as well as her peers.

In clear contrast with her strong rejection of English when she was still in Puerto Rico, in New York she makes her best to learn English to prove she is as good as the other American students. (Miguela 13)

Santiago's identity is altered by her circumstances in New York when she desires to master the very language she initially despised. She goes against the previously solidified intention of never learning English. Esmeralda accepts living within these strange cultural parameters with a new determination to dispute for what she wants. With her decision to fight for her place in the eighth grade, Negi learns that she can still take hold of the customs of the community or reject the ones that she does not wish to tolerate.

While attending school, Esmeralda recognizes cultural structures among the students, which allow her to determine her own space within her educational society. She discerns a separation between two Puerto Rican groups, one of which she could be expected to join. She recalls:

There were two kinds of Puerto Ricans in school: the newly arrived, like myself, and the ones born in Brooklyn of Puerto Rican parents. The two types didn't mix. The Brooklyn Puerto Ricans spoke English, and often no Spanish at all [...]. Those of us for whom Puerto Rico was still a recent memory were also split into two groups: the ones who longed for

the island and the ones who wanted to forget it as soon as possible. (230)

Students of her same ethnicity followed specific expectations, and Negi realizes that the Puerto Rican students separate into groups to accommodate their own cultural norms. Esmeralda's refusal to join either of these groups also demonstrates her rejection to live according to their established patterns. Instead, she resolves to remain in the middle ground. Her newly formed hybrid identity incorporates both American and Puerto Rican cultures and allows her to take the best from each. Santiago combines elements from both, and as such she rejects the expectation to follow the other peer groups. She wants instead to be a Puerto Rican-American woman on her own terms. Santiago's refusal to pursue the student's societal norms allows for the continuation of her personal identity by another proven moment to reject a form of community regulations, this time within the walls of her school.

As a result of hard work and her accelerating ability to accumulate knowledge, Esmeralda impresses many of her teachers, noting that the greater the effort of the students, the more invested the teacher becomes in their academic success. One day, Mister Barone requests to meet with Negi in his office, and they begin to consider her future. He recognizes her great potential to achieve something greater in life. "You're a smart girl, Esmeralda. Let's try to get you into an academic school so that you have a shot at college" (258). Mister Barone's proposition that Negi apply to a more advanced high school in Brooklyn helps her to envision an escape from the often accepted cultural limits placed on many immigrants in New York. She is then faced with the option to turn away from these assumptions and strive for something higher by applying to Performing Arts High School. She can follow a typical practice of other Puerto Rican women in Brooklyn by working in a factory, or she can seek a greater opportunity. Esmeralda's determination to

apply to Performing Arts School represents her continued drive to accept opportunities provided by American society. She disregards the cultural norms followed by many Puerto Rican women living in New York during the 1960s. Her hybrid identity grows as a result of her defiance in following traditional pathways that have been prescribed for ethnic minorities.

With each day of preparation, Esmeralda's desire to be accepted into Performing Arts High School increases as she envisions a way out of her current social and economic situation. Negi wants more out of her life, and she finally understands before her the limitless horizon that had been beforehand hidden from view. "More than anything, I wanted to impress the panel with my talent, so that I would be accepted into Performing Arts and leave Brooklyn every day. And, I hoped, one day I would never go back" (263). Esmeralda aspires to move out of the neighborhood where American urban norms expect her to stay. She faces Puerto Rican culture daily within her family and home environment, yet she can live as part of the American culture at school, better her circumstances and break unspoken cultural regulations. Negi recognizes the freedom to chart a multi-directional path through accepting parts of both cultures. Rivera describes this newfound identity as positive:

Yet in her subsequent experience as a young woman constantly stepping in and out of two languages, cultures, and world views, Santiago gains a newfound appreciation for the ways in which the duality of her life becomes much more enriching than disruptive. (Rivera 112)

With her new understanding of life, Esmeralda goes to her audition determined to succeed. When she is accepted, she breaks the cultural expectancy for the typical Puerto Rican young woman living in New York. Her identity has matured from that

of an ordinary young immigrant woman to incorporate the potential of a future actress and dancer in a Performing Arts High School.

In her second book, *Almost a Woman*, her story covers eight years of her life in which she begins the transition from teenager to a woman as she confronts many experiences and challenges Santiago takes a step back to her first experiences of coming to the United States to further express her deviation from the traditional lifestyle. Esmeralda's mother pressures her to live and act like a traditional Puerto Rican teenager. However, Negi no longer wishes to live within her mother's established boundaries, and the beliefs and traditions her mother holds. Esmeralda understands that to seek the freedom that appears so attractive to her, she must create a personal route that varies from the one expected of her. As she continues progressing, she begins to adapt to the multi ethnic community of American culture in New York. During these years of discovery and exploration, Esmeralda cultivates her identity and attempts to become the young woman she desires to be. As a result, she leaves behind many of the expectations of her mother and birth culture to adapt to the New York society and build upon the alteration of her hybrid identity.

Esmeralda recalls that when she arrived in Brooklyn, society had already chosen her identity through a government census. When going outside of her apartment to play, she meets a girl close to her age. The young girl questions if she is Hispanic and Negi responds that she is Puerto Rican. The neighbor girl then states: "Same thing. Puerto Rican, Hispanic. That's what we are here [...]. Anybody who speaks Spanish" (5). Esmeralda thinks to herself: "But I didn't know. I'd always been Puerto Rican, and it hadn't occurred to me that in Brooklyn I'd be someone else" (5). At this moment, Esmeralda hears that in New York she is expected to be Hispanic even though she believes that this is far from the truth. In her article, "*Almost a Woman: A Look at Acculturation*

through Literature and Film,” Eva Santos-Phillips explains that

[r]ight away Santiago has to accept that for others it is unimportant whether she is Puerto Rican or not. Her origin and identity are being denied. To be thought of as Hispanic and no longer Puerto Rican is like erasing her former space as well as the person with whom she identifies. (210)

Esmeralda has to conform to the American identity imposed on her and accept rather than adopt the identification mainstream America has given her. Through new experiences in America, Negi quickly realizes that some cultural norms she will be required to accept, while others she will fight to reject. The creation of comfortability of betweenness of Puerto Rican and American culture allows her to choose within their individual boundaries the type of person she wants to become. These early experiences are critical to the growth of her multi-directional hybrid personality.

During her time in Brooklyn, Santiago faces a language barrier with learning English. She strives to learn the new language at school, and her efforts led her to use her newfound knowledge to translate for her mother. When Esmeralda accompanies her mother to the welfare office to ask for money, Negi is forced to speak English for her. It's hard to understand the terms unfamiliar to her even in Spanish, and she is expected to interpret a language that she previously avoided speaking. Following this experience, Esmeralda finds a new energy to master the language. “I had to learn English well enough never again to be caught between languages” (21). In more than one way, Esmeralda accepts more American cultural and traditional aspects and is determined to become fluent in English. Negi recognizes that she needs to differentiate from her mother as she does not desire to find herself in a trapped situation by lacking what she should learn. She is prepared to do what is necessary to receive

approval in this new society. Through this decision, Esmeralda leaves behind many traditional expectations that her mother has for her and replaces them with something entirely unfamiliar. This determination to oppose the presumptions of her native culture fuels her progression towards further becoming a Puerto Rican-American hybrid.

In the second part of this trilogy, Santiago again highlights the impact and importance of authority figures in her journey to go against traditional expectations as she relives her opportunities in school:

She finds Mr. Barone's subsequent decision to contact the New York City High School of Performing Arts on her behalf surprising, and she appears sheepish and bewildered. She recalls leaving ‘his office strangely happy, confident that something good had just happened, not knowing exactly what’ (1998: 260). She only knew that ‘until Mr. Barone showed [her] the listing for Performing Arts High School, [she] hadn't known what to do’ to change her life (1993: 261). (Rosario 114)

Esmeralda reiterates in her second memoir the difficulty she has in understanding why Mr. Barone is so invested in her; however, she exhibits a sense of pride in receiving personal guidance from an American authoritative figure. Her family does not share the same enthusiasm for her current circumstances. Negi recounts such inconsistency: “For weeks my sisters and brothers teased me about my lack of talent, while in school Mr. Barone, Mr. Gatti, and Mrs. Johnson helped me prepare” (36). At home, Esmeralda receives little support and motivation in preparing for her upcoming audition. Eva Santos-Phillips explains that

[p]arents can make acculturation difficult because they are not eager for the child to embrace the foreign



culture or because they make many demands of the children, but there are adults who want to help their new immigrant children succeed. (214)

Despite her mother's disapproval of acculturation towards a foreign culture, Esmeralda receives reinforcement outside of the home to prepare for her audition. The exposure to these situations allow her to continue developing her identity through the separation from her mother's lifestyle.

Esmeralda is accepted to Performing Arts High School and is faced with the approaching graduation from her current school. Both she and her mother go to Manhattan to purchase a new dress for the occasion. Her mother insists that she choose a simple blue dress to wear, however, Esmeralda wants a bright yellow one. She determinedly states that it is her graduation and insists on purchasing the dress of her choice. Santiago's mother is surprised with her daughter's frankness. Upon leaving the store, the yellow dress in her daughter's hand, she speaks firmly to her daughter about her behavior. She describes Negi as changing to a different young adult. From their conversation, Negi concludes: "When she said that I had changed, she meant I was becoming Americanized, that I thought I deserved more and was better than everyone else, better than her" (59). Esmeralda aspires to make her decisions and doesn't see being Americanized as a negative quality to aspire towards. She conforms to the life of a young American girl, the life of following her conscious will. It is difficult for Santiago to be trapped between the freedom of living according to her own will and of following how her mother expects her to act. Rivera speaks about this subject and states:

This work [...] marks her development as a young bilingual, bicultural adolescent. It charts her years of study at the School for the Performing Arts in

New York City and the difficulties of living up to her family's expectations. She tries to negotiate and balance her life between two opposing extremes: being what she considers a respectful Puerto Rican señorita on one side and becoming an overly 'Americanized' young woman on the other. (113)

During this confrontation of opinions, she has received from her mother and from the two societies in which she has lived, Esmeralda continues to adapt to the American way of life and as such nurtures her multi-directional identity.

Esmeralda becomes even more "Americanized" when her mother starts a new job during the summer. Negi and her siblings are responsible for buying food for the family each week, a responsibility to which each of them aspires in order to have the opportunity to do the shopping. Their mother expects them to buy rice, bread, and typical Puerto Rican foods. However, when the children get to choose, they select American produced food. Esmeralda recalls: "We didn't want rice and beans, milk and bread. We wanted Ring Dings and Yodels, pizza, Coca-Cola, Frosted Flakes, Jell-O, foods we never had in Puerto Rico and only got in Brooklyn" (64). Esmeralda makes the modification of substituting her traditional Puerto Rican food for American food, which years earlier she despised. Santiago believes this new sustenance to be better, despite it not being the food of her childhood. This change symbolizes her continued determination to adapt to the now not-so-foreign culture. Step by step she is becoming a unique individual with desires that differentiate her from her mother's intentions. According to Silvia Schulterman,dl,

[d]uring her ongoing identity negotiation, Negi thus becomes aware that forgetting one's home country and losing one's culture are potential side effects of acculturation and assimilation to mainstream American culture. (6)

Esmeralda assimilates herself to American society, which she accepts more and more and she strays from the traditional expectations of many fellow immigrants, causing further development of her hybrid identity.

As Santiago participates in the drama department of Performing Arts High School, she has the opportunity to change roles and through many experiences with other actors she discovers more space for the American side of her identity. Her attendance increases her yearnings to become a new person. In this new environment, Esmeralda can have a different identity, one not labeled by the origination of her spoken language. Her desire for acceptance from others fuels her motivation to become an American-Puerto Rican hybrid individual. She begins: "In my secret life, I wasn't Esmeralda Santiago, not Negi, not a scared Puerto Rican girl, but a confident, powerful woman whose name changed as I tried to perfect me" (83). She continues: "I wasn't Puerto Rican. I wasn't American. I spoke every language in the world, so I was never confused about what people said and could be understood by everyone" (84). Esmeralda's lack of enthusiasm for being identified by her ethnicity or the language she speaks fuels her desire to conform to American regulations of speech. She wishes to communicate in a way that others will undoubtedly understand and in New York that involves the need to speak English fluently. She adheres to the norms of the American culture in which she lives and continues on her pathway to a hybrid lifestyle.

The art form of acting in school becomes the highest priority in the life of Esmeralda. At home, she practices her lines and does her homework with complete fidelity. Her siblings question her strange behavior of repeating letters and words. She responds: "I have a class called voice and diction where I'm learning to talk without an accent." "Why? Don't you want to sound Puerto Rican?" [...]. "It's part of my schoolwork" (85). Santiago understands that sounding American and speaking English without an accent will open up the door to future opportunities.

This desire to conform to the society in which she participates gives her the hope of enjoying success as a professional actress. Schultermund describes the difficulty of battling between two languages as an interchange of cultures.

Although losing their accents is the ultimate goal of socialization into their new 'home' country [...] the loss of the mother tongue [is] a complicated process in the daughters' sense of belonging, especially since in part, this loss is emblematic of their increasing inability to communicate with their cultural heritage. (7)

To have a future in New York, Santiago understands that the power of correct speech is imperative. However, Negi's mother fears through the perfecting of this new language, she will lose her Puerto Rican identity. Esmeralda begins to feel a huge gap between who she is at school and her sense of self at home. Jamil Khader argues that

[h]omelessness is caused here by the pressures on Puerto Ricans to assimilate and acculturate. The discourse of jingoist assimilation assumes a necessary separation between the language of intimacy, their 'mama language,' and the language of public discourse, English. (70)

Esmeralda is again placed between two homes and languages. Santiago demonstrates a willingness to adapt to new cultural expectations with her decision to fully acquire the English language.

As part of her daily routine, Santiago takes the train to Manhattan, a place where Santiago feels that she must escape to in order to leave behind her pre-defined expected immigrant lifestyle and aspire to something much better. This location of work and school represents a distinction or separation from her home in Brooklyn. She recalls:

I'd learned that Brooklyn was not New York City [...]. Manhattan was the financial, theatrical, and artistic center of the United States. I wanted to be in it, to move from the margins to the center. I wanted to climb to the top of the Empire State Building, to gaze over the city and beyond it to the vast horizon that I knew existed but couldn't see from the ground in Brooklyn. (111)

Esmeralda wants to leave Brooklyn, her family and along with it, all traditional and cultural assumptions. She feels the need to be in the center where success and opportunities are to be found. Unlike Esmeralda, her mother does not share her acceptance of American society and maintains her Puerto Rican ideals. Antonia Domínguez Miguela speaks of this generational gap:

First-generation immigrants take for granted their ethnic identity and they subscribe to traditional values transmitted in Puerto Rico. They usually think that someday they will come back to the island. However, second generation immigrants need to come to terms with American society as the place where they must live and survive as minority members. (4)

Esmeralda separates herself from the first-generation traditions and recognizes the relevance of accepting the American societal lifestyle. Her hybrid identity progresses with the realization that acquiring more aspects of the new culture will allow her to obtain a superior way of life.

When Esmeralda receives a role for acting in a movie, she has the opportunity to spend time with professional American actors and actresses. Between scenes, an actress sits down and speaks directly to Negi, asking about her family. Santiago informs the woman that she is the oldest of nine children. The starlet shockingly asks if her mother has ever

heard of birth control. Embarrassed, this experience makes an impact on Esmeralda, and she makes yet another choice to do things differently than her mother. She remembers: "I'd decided that I'd changed enough diapers for a lifetime and planned to sign up for the pill as soon as there was any possibility I'd need it" (157). Esmeralda takes a new step to becoming a more modern Americanized woman. Despite the difficulty of rebelling against her mother's intentions, she chooses to continue embracing her multicultural lifestyle. As Schultermandl comments:

Their belated experience of America, of the cultural changes in language, customs, and social structure they and their families go through when they establish new lives in the United States, causes ubiquitous disillusionment with the daily hardships of their immigrant lives. (6)

Each day Esmeralda has to confront the contradictions of being an immigrant and a Puerto Rican woman as she works towards becoming her own unique individual. She leaves behind more of her mother's traditional ideas to conform to the newer society, a society which, for Esmeralda, is growing to be the more familiar one.

Esmeralda enters a critical phase in her identity development when she attends a small community college and meets a young woman named Shoshana. Both of them have desires to adapt and accept American society and live different lives than those of their parents. Santiago hides the daily experiences she leads with her friends from her mother. Esmeralda is now a young adult, yet, still adhering to the Puerto Rican expectations taught to her, she still worries about her mother's opinion. She says: "Shoshana argued that I was too considerate of Mami's wishes. To become a woman, she asserted, I must rebel against my mother" (283). The notion that Esmeralda must directly rebel against her mother's wishes to live the way she wants to,

immensely impacts Esmeralda's personality. She admits to herself that she indeed wants to distance herself from her mother, and as a result, makes no effort to reveal anything about her personal life of going out with men and the time she spends away from home. Santiago's mother wants her to live as a good and traditional Puerto Rican girl, but Esmeralda sees this lifestyle as holding back her progress. Esmeralda yearns for further acculturation to American culture to allow her hybrid identity to grow. Failure to do so will keep her from reaching the goals that she has set for herself. Separation from her mother's traditional intent of living enables Santiago to seek a different place in American society.

Towards the end of the novel, Esmeralda meets Ulvi Dogan, a Turkish filmmaker who quickly wins over her affection. Without fulfilling any previous romanticized dreams, Santiago falls for his passionate words with little knowledge about him. Upon the confession of her lover of his need to leave for Florida, he requests that she accompany him. After his proposition, Negi arrives at her home finding it full of family, conversation, and chaos. She reflects on her decision to walk away from her family as an irrational reaction. "Covers pulled over my head to block out the noise, the confusion, the drama of my family's life, I knew, just as Ulvi knew when he asked, that I'd already made my choice" (311). In this critical moment, Esmeralda is willing to adjust to the American sociocultural prospect of leaving the family home for a different life. Negi's insecurity of leaving her family behind is as clear as the certainty of her decision. She wants to live her life as an independent woman, free from the constraints of her Puerto Rican and immigrant upbringing. "Constructing a life is ultimately about choosing the life one is convinced is worth living because it is believed to conform to what one cares about and values" (Rosario 117). Esmeralda reaches a breaking point in her identity concluding this phase of her life as she realizes that her value is different from the notion of her mother's traditional culture.

Instead, she cares about the unfolding and development of her hybrid independent lifestyle.

In the third memoir, *The Turkish Lover*, Esmeralda narrates her experiences and reveals the reason for the abandonment of her family to follow her lover, Ulvi Dogan, to Florida. Later, she takes her journey to Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, and back to Syracuse University in New York, continually following her lover. A time span of seven years begins with an act of rebellion that Esmeralda justifies by believing that she is leaving the prison of family life to escape the unrealistic expectations of a "decent Puerto Rican girl" (Santiago 6). However, the result is an even worse imprisonment and the years following her decision become a time of personal discovery. Negi lives under the watchfulness and control of the man whom she loves, but with time she begins to find her purpose and desire. In order to have self-control, Negi needs to free herself from the dependence that she has upon Ulvi. During these years, she recognizes that she has a voice and can reconstruct her cultural hybrid identity by rejecting the relational expectations forced upon her.

Esmeralda takes the decisive step away from her family's traditional life when she writes a letter, informing her mother of her decision to move to Florida with her lover. She remembers:

When I wrote the words, *el hombre que yo amo*, it was already too late. I had made a choice—a man over my family. Even if I didn't follow him to Florida, I'd taken that first step, a week after my twenty-first birthday, into the rest of my life. (2)

This "first step" signifies the beginning of her path toward an identity independent of her mother's watchful gaze. Until this point in her life, Esmeralda has followed the expectation of living at home until she is married, but for the first time, she makes a decision to

veer from the traditional path and to choose another. This is a critical moment in the development of her distinct hybrid identity, in place of the image and life that her mother has created for her. Instead of being a “*vena puertorriqueña decente*, a decent Puerto Rican girl” (6), Esmeralda departs with a man 17 years her senior, and by doing so, chooses to follow the expectations of her lover. The decision to abandon her family and home means to officially disregard her mother’s intentions and doing so starts her on a new path towards self-discovery.

During her time with Ulvi, Santiago receives a new identity from her lover as he begins calling her by the name of Chiquita. Each time that he introduces her to a friend or acquaintance, she is presented with this belittling title, diminishing any pride or confidence within her and directs her to believe she must depend completely on him. Ulvi tells her: “I will teach you everything. But you must listen to what I say. Okay?” (22). The name Chiquita demonstrates to Esmeralda her lack of knowledge about the world. The rebellious identity that she has been forming since infancy is now cast aside and replaced with a follower role. When Ulvi calls her Chiquita, this forceful label penetrates the depth of her personality, and she accepts it. She states: “I felt so inconsequential that Chiquita seemed like the perfect name for me” (34). Instead of receiving the freedom that she expected, Santiago is imprisoned within her relationship with Ulvi and becomes precisely the person that he wishes her to be. Esmeralda is blinded from the truth that she is being held completely under his control, not realizing that by making this critical change of becoming Chiquita, she conforms to the ideals of her Turkish lover and changes directions towards progression of her independent identity.

After a time, Ulvi returns to Europe for work and will not allow Esmeralda to accompany him. This decision gives Santiago a new form of freedom from the dependence in which she has recently been trapped. Despite

her lover’s demands to live with her family in New York while he is away, Negi chooses to rent a new apartment. She recalls: “I wanted desperately to see what it was like to be alone, unencumbered by family, by lover, by anything familiar except the streets outside the door” (85). For the first time in her life, Santiago is freed from the assumptions of her family as well as her lover. In this moment of self-discovery, Esmeralda experiences loneliness as well as freedom on the streets of the city. According to Elizabeth Wilson, inner-city life can provide a woman a sense of independence: “the city, a place of growing threat and paranoia to men, might be a place of liberation for women. The city offers women freedom” (7).

Renting on her own provides Esmeralda an autonomy within the city, away from all previous expectations. During this year independent from Ulvi, Esmeralda rediscovers her hybrid independent identity that she nurtures by living according to her own agency.

Santiago agrees to meet with Ulvi in Texas upon his return to the States but, resulting from her experiences in the city, she is no longer the same submissive Chiquita and will now continue to fight for her identity. However, Esmeralda is again placed under the control of the man she loves, with recognition towards the enclosure that she will need to escape from to return to forging the identity she desires for herself. She recalls the imprisonment of her relationship and says: “I had no friends of my own. I could not answer the phone (‘it might be business’), could not go anywhere alone” (154). Esmeralda has experienced the freedom and solitude of being apart from this control, so upon returning to it, she recognizes it more fully for the imprisonment that it is. Until this point, her relationship with Ulvi has been one in which he had the voice, and Chiquita could not have any opinion of her own. Hélène Cixous explains this type of control and manipulation from a man.



Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. (878)

Ulvi treats his Chiquita in a degrading manner with the idea that she, a naïve young woman, needs a knowledgeable man to live. This type of demobilizing harm returns her to an oppressive situation in which she loses much of the self-esteem and fight that she spent years developing. The transitions from prison and freedom then back again, cause Negi to recognize her difficult situation and desire for the liberation to choose for herself once more.

During the months in Texas, Santiago takes any opportunity to taste independence from the regulations forced upon her. Esmeralda yearns to make her choices and think for herself once again, free from the towering dense wall that surrounds her identity. When he is present, Esmeralda believes that her lover is her protection, but in reality, he is a barrier between her and the independence she desires deep within. She realizes the freedom that she enjoys when both are apart, but within his embrace, she is blinded from seeing the woman that she can indeed become. "Because I was so busy, Ulvi had a social life without me. I was both grateful and resentful of his evenings out. I liked having the apartment to myself" (173). Santiago enjoys the quiet nights away from Ulvi, but despite her few hours of freedom from his control, she recognizes the difficulty in being fully away from the man whom she loves. She ponders the Puerto Rican norms previously taught to her which dictated how she should act in a relationship. She thinks: "A mujer puertorriqueña decente does not question her hombre, even when she suspects he's not telling the truth" (200). María Acosta Cruz in her critique about women expressed her disappointment

toward women's inability to leave these oppressed situations:

Romantic gratification is valued above social or educational achievements. In Santiago's world [...] women articulate men as the center of their lives [...]. [Negi has been] touched by feminism, but true to Santiago's "romantic" ethos, [the] analysis of [her] role in the world is grounded on the presence of the men in [her life]. (183-84)

Esmeralda becomes trapped within her need of a male figure in her life, following previously learned expectations and a desire for freedom. From Esmeralda's experiences, both sides of her multicultural personality feel enslaved to the relational role that circumscribes how she must live, making it difficult to leave the relationship.

Esmeralda matures her hybrid identity when she becomes a supervisor over ten other women at a hospital. Suddenly, she is identified as a leader instead of the follower that she has previously been manipulated to accept. The other women give her a new name and identity during her time working there. She says:

As in Brooklyn, where I had been Negi at home and an official Esmeralda to outsiders, I was Chiquita with Ulvi and his friends, but answered to the shorter, less intimidating Es or Essie at Crouse Irving Memorial Hospital. (209)

Santiago looks back at the many nicknames that she has received at different points in the evolution of her identity. Each name has been a part of the formation of her hybrid identity. Negi was the oldest daughter and example for the other children and was expected to live up to all the cultural and traditional notions of her mother. Negi escaped and became Chiquita, the woman at Ulvi's side, without sufficient knowledge to live out in the world

on her own. Up until this point, she has been a dependent female, living according to the lifestyle created by others. In the hospital, Esmeralda is a smart leader to a group of women who respect her. She is also faithful to her inner voice and surpasses what is expected of her in the hospital. Johana Barszewska Marshall writes of the change of identity through the evolution of titles.

These multiple arenas become more closely linked, however, as she matures into Esmeralda (an official name that she reclaims when she begins to assert more control over her own life) and struggles, in her final identifications and values, to come to terms with the shameful bases of her sense of self and her possibilities. (49)

Her fight towards her hybrid identity becomes a fight for Esmeralda Santiago. A conflict to free herself from Chiquita, a nickname given by Ulvi to remind her of her subordinate status. This can only be achieved through making persistent decisions against the expected way of living in her relationship.

For the first time, Esmeralda leaves Ulvi to experience freedom once again and pursue her independent development once again. Before walking out the door, she strongly expresses that she is no longer Chiquita, but rather Esmeralda. Upon finding a place to live, Santiago understands something essential about her relationship with Ulvi and her personality. She states:

Our life was based on what was best for him. He had said, and I had believed, that what was good for him was also good for me. Would he understand that I no longer believed that, that I had dreams of my own? (225)

Esmeralda sees the contrast between what her lover expects and how she desires to live. During her time of solitude, Santiago

recognizes that rejecting the expectations of the subjugated position that have been placed upon her is what is best for her life. Within the control of Ulvi, she knows her progression towards an independent identity is halted within the walls of their apartment. Doreen Massey theorizes about women's experiences under these situations. "The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity" (Massey 179). Through the control of Esmeralda's personal space, Ulvi had managed various aspects of her life and caused her to become co-dependent. Unfortunately, this dependence causes her to return to his controlling arms once again. Nevertheless, Esmeralda in time grows more conscious of Ulvi's control and becomes filled with a new drive to live according to her own desires, forging a new identity.

Esmeralda renounces many traditional, cultural, and social expectations as a young Puerto Rican immigrant when she makes the decision to attend Harvard University. Not only breaking the norms of society, she courageously goes against the plans of her Turkish lover, living away from Ulvi and becoming conscious of her desires and personal inclinations. She expresses uncertainty once she makes this decision: "I was utterly alone [...]. I was terrified. In another few days, I would start college as a sophomore, eight years removed from high school and that many years older than my classmates" (243). Santiago finds herself going completely against her inherited cultural norms as she attends Harvard with her younger predominantly Anglo-American peers. Attending such a prestigious school demonstrates the immense growth of her hybrid identity. An education at Harvard University represents her independence from Ulvi and as a result she gathers enough confidence to think of herself as an individual and not as an adjective or an extension of Ulvi. This pivotal moment in her life proves the constant fight towards her development and a success in discovering and overcoming

weaknesses, doubts and fears. Throughout her life, Esmeralda has felt restricted due to Puerto Rican traditions, the American cultural norms of an immigrant, and the manipulative nature of her relationship with Ulvi. Her time at Harvard University represents a radical break from her previous lifestyle and allows Santiago to develop her hybrid identity more fully.

After some time in school, Negi returns to Puerto Rico with Ulvi, an experience which demonstrates the length she has gone in her progression since a child. On this vacation, she touches the ground of her childhood home once again, but the footprints that now follow her are from a woman fighting for an identity independent of all previous expectations. Ulvi takes notice of the changes that have transpired with his Chiquita since her time studying at Harvard. Esmeralda states:

We fought constantly those two weeks because he thought I was 'too free' when I thought I was being myself. I derived perverse pleasure from testing him, from deliberately doing what I knew would upset him or challenge his sense of propriety. (282)

Esmeralda is living independently and studying on her own at Harvard, proving to Ulvi that he is not essential to her future success. He complains that she is too free, but Santiago recognizes that it is a characteristic that has helped to form her identity since infancy. Despite her complete rebellion from relational expectations, Santiago cannot eliminate her dependence entirely. She is cornered between her new independence and the lifestyle that she has been living for years with Ulvi. Pinkola-Estés speaks of the false hope that a woman has if she follows the same pattern of living. "In most cases, the woman feels if she just holds on to the old pattern a little longer, why surely the paradisiacal feeling she seeks will appear in the next heartbeat" (39). Esmeralda desires to live her life free from the demands placed on her by her lover, but also still wishes

to hold to the relationship for which she has willingly given everything. Santiago finds that she is still unwilling to let go of her relationship with Ulvi, but she understands that to reach her fullest potential as an independent, culturally hybrid woman, than she must eventually be released from his grasp.

Towards the end of her memoir, Esmeralda reaches her greatest accomplishment as she approaches her graduation from Harvard. Her time at school has allowed her to gain vast amounts of knowledge and many great friendships. Ulvi realizes that he no longer has any control over her life. He cannot tell Esmeralda what friendships not to have and dominate every conversation to keep her in line. He speaks openly with her: "You have become too free. You want too much independence. I cannot allow it" (326). Esmeralda responds that she will not leave behind her new friends and the knowledge she has gained in order to live according to his rules. She then recalls: "He turned, his hand on the doorknob, his features contorted in disdain. 'Forget my name, forget my address, forget my phone number'" (326). In a moment of desperation, her lover accepts defeat, knowing that he cannot convince his Chiquita that she still depends on him. Suddenly, he has lost dominion over Esmeralda, and she is no longer following in his shadow. Cixous speaks of a woman when she is dependent on a man and his control over her life.

A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. (880)

By allowing Ulvi to walk out of her life, Chiquita is destroyed, and her true identity can freely continue to evolve. Now she is Esmeralda Santiago, a Harvard graduate who will never again be trapped within the dictatorship of a lover. Santiago's seven years of dependence on what

to say, where to go, what to wear, and how to act have helped her to realize the life that she desires for herself. She suddenly reaches complete freedom from her manipulative relationship, and she moves forward with the development of her hybrid identity.

Following her graduation, Esmeralda starts on her path, independent of what anyone else expects of her and she returns to Puerto Rico to film a documentary. Returning to her roots, Santiago understands that even with all her experiences, she will always be a Puerto Rican woman. Esmeralda reflects on her life and the development of her identity. She says:

I was returning with my family free of a man who disdained my people and me. 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. (337)

Thinking back on her journey, Santiago can view the accomplishments she has made and the person she has become. Being back in her homeland, she returns to the beginning of her life, back to her nation, and back to where her identity started. In her own view of home, Doreen Massey states:

The construction of 'home' as a woman's place has, moreover, carried through into those views to place itself as a source of stability, reliability and authenticity. Such views of place, which reverberate with nostalgia for something lost, are coded female. (180)

At her original home in Puerto Rico where she again tastes the freedom of independence, Santiago remembers her Puerto Rican pride, the part of her identity that was pushed back for a period of time, wandering,

but never actually lost. Despite setting aside many of the original norms taught to her by her mother, Esmeralda realizes that the Puerto Rican portion of her identity was always present. Being back in her home, she can see that her birth culture gave her the foundation towards becoming who she desired to become. She returns to the origins of Esmeralda, a young innocent girl unsure of the future that lay ahead, to Esmeralda, an intelligent, independent and limitless woman. Santiago understands that this is where her identity began; when she was Puerto Rican.

The incredible journey of becoming Esmeralda Santiago helps us understand the process an individual, and especially an immigrant, goes through to become conscious of the multiple forces that mold his/her identity. Each book in Santiago's trilogy shows her determination to reject and/or accept Puerto Rican cultural standards, the traditional expectations of an immigrant in the United States, as well as assumptions in a relationship. With each carefully chosen experience, she looks back, interweaving memories, time, and space to reconstruct the new ongoing Puerto Rican-American identity. Santiago demonstrates the possibilities that are accessible to any person, regardless of ethnicity, if drive and dedication are present. Her example of choosing which portions of culture to include within herself prove the possibility of creating a hybrid identity. The ability to acculturate oneself to any desired culture is apparent through her reflections of the past. The progression of her individuality is accessible to the reader through the carefully constructed imaginary that cross references time, memory, and space to project an ever-changing identity.

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