

On the Search for Identity in *When I was Puerto Rican*

Zhou Weigui

School of Foreign Languages
China West Normal University
China

Abstract

Esmeralda Santiago's first memoir when I was Puerto Rican narrates Negi's childhood experiences in Puerto Rico and her teenager experiences in New York. In the memoir, Negi frequently experienced relocations in rural and urban Puerto Rico and later in New York. The spatial shift propelled Negi to explore her own identity, represented in her reflections upon national identity, gender identity and cultural identity. Through recollection of her past experiences, Negi came to successfully negotiate the differences existing in various social spaces, and understand her meaning in life and her position as an immigrant woman.

Key Words: Esmeralda Santiago; Puerto Rican American; When I was Puerto Rican; identity.

1. Introduction

Esmeralda Santiago is widely praised for her poignant yet nostalgic portrayal of the protagonist's experience of growing up in both Puerto Rico and the United States in *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993), the first memoir written by Santiago, followed by two other autobiographical narratives, *Almost a Woman* (1998) and *The Turkish Lover* (2004). In *When I was Puerto Rican*, the author-narrator Santiago, affectionately called Negi, short for Negrita, experiences frequent relocations in rural and urban Puerto Rico and later in Brooklyn, New York. Santiago's immigration into the mainland indicates the loss of her old identity, manifested not only by the lost territory of her homeland but also lost personal and relational connections, as well as the ties with the past. However, in writing about her growing-up experience in both Puerto Rico and the mainland, and through the modality of nostalgia, Santiago records her groping for wholeness and integration through re-connecting with what has been lost. So how Negi would negotiate the different societies and establish her own identity becomes the thematic focus of this *Bildungsroman*, just as the title of the memoir suggests.

2. National Identity

When I was Puerto Rican recounts Santiago's bittersweet recollection of the past, roughly spanning from the year when she was four, living in Puerto Rico with her parents, to the year when she reached 14, an immigrant girl in New York. Memories of her island life, however, take up most of the book, revealing a strong nostalgic sentiment for the place in which she spent most of her childhood years. Nostalgia is often associated with some negative connotations, often suggesting such negative emotions as depression, sadness, anxiety, etc. However, ample researches have shown that nostalgia can also be regarded as a primarily positive experience.

According to such scholars as K. E. Loveland and T. Wilds hut, "nostalgia is psychologically advantageous as it increases positive mood, self-esteem, and social connectedness." (qtd in Routledge et al., p. 457) Apart from these positive outcomes of nostalgia, scholars also prove that nostalgia can also bolster meaning in life (Routledge et al., p.457), and "nostalgia serves three global psychological functions: it generates positive effect, it maintains and enhances positive self-esteem, and it serves as a repository of social connectedness." (Routledge et al., p. 453) Based on these findings, the nostalgic construction of Santiago's childhood years can be best understood in terms of her striving for identity. At the beginning of this memoir, Santiago provides a prologue in which the speaker Negi discusses in detail how to eat a guava, a common tropical fruit native to Mexico, Central America, and Northern South America. Negi compares her childhood experiences in Puerto Rico to green, sour guavas and her immigrant experiences to apples and pears. She stood before a stack of dark green guavas, which reminded her of "late summer afternoons and hopscotch under the mango tree." (p.4)

Immediately, she nostalgically remarked that “But this is autumn in New York, and I’m no longer a child.” (p.4) The memories of the past still haunted the speaker, even though she had lived in New York for a long time. Her childhood and the native land had retreated further into her memory, which created in her mind a kind of melancholy and anxiety. However, facing the stack of guava, she knew that there was no way that she could return, so “I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet.” (p.4) Getting away from the guavas and moving towards the apples and pears symbolically suggest that Negi seemed to shed her old identity, as the use of past tense in the title *When I was Puerto Rican* tends to convey, and accept her new identity as an American. To her, her adult life in New York was predictable, indicating that her life was characterized with a sense of security and certainty now, forming a contrast with her insecure life in the island. Thus in the prologue, Negi’s nostalgic reminiscence of the past and her willingness to embrace her immigrant identity are mixed together, setting the tone for the whole memoir, as suggested by Schmidt, “Although there has been a rupture with her past and she is no longer completely Puerto Rican, the guavas of her childhood still attract and tempt her, summoning her to an identity she cannot ignore.” (p. 136)

When Negi narrated her childhood experience in the island, her close relationship with her father was portrayed in different sections of the memoir and it is in the narration of her relationship with her father that Negi showed a strong nostalgic sentiment towards her childhood; though her trust in him gradually wore thin, her father still served as a mentor in many ways. Negi and her father Pablo shared a common sensibility and love of poetry and knowledge. Through their casual talk, Negi acquired some knowledge about sin (p. 43), soul (p. 53), and imperialism (p. 73). In addition, it is from her father that she first got to have primary understanding of the U.S. From her father, she knew the reason why the American people call the Puerto Ricans *spiks* and why the Puerto Ricans call the *Americanos* imperialists and gringos, all these words carrying with them a humiliating insult. She was told by her father the definition of “imperialist”, “they want to change our country and our culture to be like theirs” (p. 73), indicating the Americans’ disrespect towards Puerto Rican culture. Pablo’s explanation of “imperialist” was quite revealing to Negi, and the opportunism and hypocrisy of those American “experts” proves the truth of Pablo’s explanation. Those nutritional experts, invited by the Puerto Rican government to teach women about proper nutrition and hygiene, knew little about Puerto Rican culture and their dieting habits, so some fruits and vegetables they introduced in their nutrition program cannot be found in Puerto Rico, indicating their aloofness and indifference to the local culture. Their pretentiousness made them ignore the fact that Puerto Rico is a place with its own particular language, tradition, and culture. Negi, after eating the American food distributed by the experts, was worried that he might become *Americanos*, and “Negi develops an explicitly anti-colonial stance, as she attempts to purge the shame of being Puerto Rican in a colonial context” (Marshall, p.51), but her father assured her that she would not lose her identity as a Puerto Rican unless “you like it better than our Puerto Rican food.” (p.74) Thus, in the prologue, Negi’s neglect of guavas and her choice of apples and pears indicate that her identity as a Puerto Rican had given way to her new identity.

Negi’s imagination of the United States, however, was still fuzzy at this stage. On the one hand, Negi thought that the United States was a rich country in which people’s life was not as hard as that of her family, because her Tata, Monin’s mother, often sent the family some clothes from New York that were almost new, and the *Americanos* were tall and strong because of proper nutrition and hygiene. On the other hand, the United States was regarded by Negi as a domineering existence which made Puerto Rico its colony in 1898 and tried to change the country and its culture. In the eyes of the Puerto Ricans, the *Americanos* were foreigners and Puerto Rico was still a country rather than a colony. After Pablo explained the power relations between the United States and Puerto Rico, Negi decided that she was not going to learn English. However, Pablo told her that “Being American is not just a language” (p. 73). Even after Negi moved to New York, she still “felt disloyal for wanting to learn English, for liking pizza” (p. 230), indicating her identity anxiety due to her dislocation in language as an immigrant girl who was labeled Puerto Rican but lived in New York. Negi’s anxiety arose not only from her learning of English and her preference for pizza, but also from other sources. Negi divided the Puerto Ricans in school into two categories: the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans who “spoke English and often no Spanish at all” (p.230) and the newly arrived Puerto Ricans. The former had been integrated into the American society almost completely and Puerto Rico was a foreign land to them, while the latter was subdivided into those “who longed for the island and the ones who wanted to forget it as soon as possible.” (p. 230) Negi didn’t feel comfortable with the newly arrived and was also rejected by the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans, creating a strong identity anxiety in her mind.

Through her nostalgic recollection of the past, Negi gradually understood her past experiences in Puerto Rico, which helped Negi to negotiate the differences between Puerto Rican life and American life. In Puerto Rico, there was not much opportunity for families as if Negi's and she lived an insecure life because of the conflict between her parents. Compared with her island life, Negi seemed to appreciate her life in New York gradually because of the opportunity and the promise of a better life. Negi's mother urged her to study hard, believing that in this country "Anyone willing to work hard can get ahead." (p. 246) their life condition was still hard in the U.S. at first and the neighborhood was not as friendly as in Macun, making Negi feel terrified "that being in Brooklyn was not a new life but a continuation of the old one." (p. 247) But Negi learned English hard in school, and "By the fourth month in Brooklyn, I could read and write English much better than I could speak it, and at midterms I stunned the teachers by scoring high in English..." (p. 237) Because of her hard work, she was placed in the homeroom with the smart kids and later with the help of Mr. Barone, a guidance counselor, she found her interests and applied for the High School of Performing Arts, a vocational, public school that trains actresses. At the end of the memoir, Negi revealed that she graduated from Performing Arts and was later a scholarship student at Harvard University. In the Epilogue, when the adult Negi paid a visit to Performing Arts, her mentor asked her "Do you ever think about how far you've come?" (p. 269) she replied that "I never stop to think about it. It might jinx the momentum." (p. 269) through her hard work, she achieved success in the mainland and came to appreciate herself. She integrated herself into the American society and accepted her new identity, although she felt uprooted about her immigration and her hybrid status as a Puerto Rican American.

3. Gender Identity

Equally significant in Negi's search for identity is her understanding of the gender role in the society. When Negi started to receive education, she was admonished by her parents to behave herself. Through her parents, Negi learned that "men could look at women any way they liked but women could never look at men directly...unless they were *putas*" (p.30). If women do not follow these instructions dictated by patriarchal ideology, they run the risk of being regarded as a *Putta*, a whore. Through eavesdropping on the conversation between her mother and the female neighbors, Negi realized that women were in a position of subordination. In the power relations between genders, men can betray women and their freedom cannot be challenged, but women could never aspire for the same freedom in the patriarchal society. When Pablo and Monin are fed up with each other, it was always Pablo who ran away from the family, leaving the family behind and shunning the responsibility of taking care of his children. Women's role in marital life is confined to tending the children and doing house chores, and anyone who ventures outside the house would be considered breaking the taboo. Because of the financial difficulties in the family resulting from the destructive hurricane and their poor income, Monin managed to find a job in a factory, which improves the financial condition of the family but at the same time attracts resentment and ridicule from other people. Working women were despised by the Puerto Rican society, and so were those women who remain *jamona*, women who has never married. Naming an unmarried woman *jamona* carries with it a categorization which sets her apart from other women, making her a social outcast. However, there was no such word to designate a man who never marries.

Because of Pablo's constant abandonment of the family and Negi's duty of helping her mother in tending the children and doing house chores, the bond between mother and daughter became stronger, and Negi began to understand the hardship her mother had endured, which paved the way for her to sympathize and respect her mother, which is probably the reason why Santiago dedicated this memoir to her mother. After witnessing so much tears shed by her mother, Negi decided that "I would just as soon remain *jamona* than shed that many tears over a man." (p.104) as she grew up, Negi gradually realized that her father had another life outside the family. Pablo had another daughter born by another woman, and in response to the domestic battle, Pablo was frequently absent, probably seeing other women. Even Pablo's mother sympathized with Monin, but as a housewife destined to suffer the disloyalty of her husband, she could do nothing but to tolerate her husband again and again. Although Pablo and Monin lived together for fourteen years and they had seven children, they were not officially married. After Monin came back from a short trip to New York, her conception of marriage went through some changes which would eventually propel the separation of the couple. Monin's decision that they should be legally married was without doubt a direct result of her contact with American marital culture. Pablo, however, refused to make concession and give Monin a legal status as a wife, which strengthened her decision to leave Pablo and move to the United States. Shortly after Monin moved to New York, Pablo married another woman, to the disappointment of both Negi and her mother.

However, Pablo put the blame on Monin for letting his children know the truth of his betrayal, even though Monin constantly reminded her children never to forget their father. Negi's realization of the power relations between genders paralleled the birth and development of her sex consciousness. As she grew up, she gradually understood her vulnerability as a female to sexual seduction and manipulation. When she reached ten, her mother often reminded her that she was almost *señorita* and with that identity came a whole set of social rules such as stopping playing with boys and keeping her legs closed when she sit. As a grown-up, her mother was quite aware of the danger a female might encounter in a patriarchal society. However, Negi was not as well-prepared as to understanding the implication of her mother's warnings until an eleven-year old boy Tato's attempted sex with her provided her with a gateway to see herself as the prey of male manipulation. After Monin discovered what Negi and Tato had done, she gave Negi a good beating, hoping to discipline Negi in the face of the birth of her sexual awareness. However, it was from Gloria, the girl who helped the family tending the children when Monin was working, that Negi really learned about the truth of being a *señorita*, "Before you can make babies, you have to be a *señorita*, which means you bleed once a month." (p.121) Gloria explained to Negi the phenomenon of menstrual cycle and what a woman had to do during the menses. Due to Gloria's enlightenment, Negi associated the sexual behaviors of animals with her parents in the night. Thus, Gloria served as a mentor who initiated Negi into puberty and Negi came to understand the physical part of being a female.

Negi's further understanding of sex took place when she realized the power dynamics of "gaze". While standing in front of the window of her house in New York, Negi watched the activity across the street. A truck driver realized that a girl was watching him and "A female's gaze was enough to send them groping for their *huevos*." (p.239) In response to Negi's gaze, the man began to perform masturbation even though Negi had done nothing to arouse his desire. This scene reminded her of Marilyn Monroe who "always looked at the camera and smiled...A little girl leaning out a window watching the world fulfilled the promises." (p.240) Negi realized that sexual dynamics was much more than physical intercourse and power dynamics between men and women was much more complicated than she previously thought. Negi's gaze inspired the man to show his masculinity and that is also the reason why Monroe attracted so many men. Pictures of Monroe gazing at the camera and smiling would fulfill men's sexual fantasy and his desire to manipulate the opposite sex. Through attracting Negi's attention and performing masturbation in front of her, the driver relegated her to the status of objects that could be admired for physical appearance and male sexual fantasies. The objectification of women contributed to the manipulation of women and their inferiority. Negi's immigration into the U.S. provided her with more opportunity to be independent and fulfilled. Different from her siblings, she worked hard and chose to receive education, which gave her profound insight into women's roles and destiny. Her education and insight helped her to overcome the marginality of her immigrant identity and gave her a kind of narrative power which can integrate her nostalgic recollection of her childhood and her disillusionment with patriarchal ideology characteristic of the traditional Puerto Rican society. Through her memories of the past, Negi came to identified herself more with her mother, thus bolstering meaning in her life and making her acquire strong self-awareness.

4. Cultural Identity

Negi's first encounter with cultural aspects comes with her perception of different attitudes towards *jibaro*, with *jibara* as its feminine form, referring to the rural Puerto Rican with distinctive dialect and customs. Negi's family lived in Macun, a barrio in rural Toa Baja on the northern coast of Puerto Rico, and "All the emblems of the Puerto Rican *jibaro* are present: an exuberant and rich countryside, very modest wood and metal houses, large families, traditional Puerto Rican music, and strong family ties." (Schmidt, p.136) Santiago deliberately chooses *jibara* as the title of the first chapter, signifying Negi's early pondering over the cultural elements in the society. The radio programs often played the traditional music and poetry of the *jibaro*, praising their unique lifestyle characterized by "a life of independence and contemplation, closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism." (p.12) However, even with such positive connotation, Negi was advised by her mother, Monin, not to become a *jibara* and to call anyone by the word, which made young Negi puzzled because of "the hypocrisy of celebrating a people everyone looked down on." (p.13) Negi was told by her mother that she was not a *jibara* because she was born in the city, although their life in Macun was no better than that of the *jibaro*. But when Negi moved with her mother to Santurce, a suburb of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, she was treated as a *jibara* by her classmates. Later, the family moved to a barrio in El Mangle, a section of Santurce and there Negi's new teacher even openly and scornfully treated her as a *jibara*.

The fact that she constantly moved with her family from Macun to suburban Santurce and other neighborhoods in town suggests that she had to frequently adjust her identity and position herself against the changing landscapes and different societies. No matter where she moved, she seemed to be still at ease with life in Macun, indicating her acceptance of the *jibaro* way of life, even though her mother was quite antagonistic towards Macun. After the family moved to Brooklyn in New York, Negi continued to show her preference for life in Puerto Rico. Life in Puerto Rico was characterized by a strong sense of community, and the *barrio*, though poor, formed a closely knit neighborhood, in which members of the *barrio* might share foods and parties, or a house during the hurricane. Negi was even invited to perform a ritual in a funeral party to help close the eyes of a baby who died in infancy, forcing her to ponder over the questions of death and soul at such a young age. When her mother was busy, Negi could be sent to a neighbor or a relative's house, or a teenager girl from other families could be requested to take care of the children. Although Puerto Rican society was characterized with gender prejudice, economic hardship, and social immobility, it was a society in which people had a strong sense of community and benign, friendly, reciprocal relationship among people were highly appreciated. However, in Brooklyn they were confronted with a dangerous environment, threatened by the possibility of "murders, rapes, muggings, knifings and shootings" (p.252). For Negi, the hospitality of Puerto Rican community was replaced by a neighborhood in which "[w]e lived separated by thick doors with several bolts, windows with iron grates, peephole." (p.254) Distrust and hostility among people contributed a lot to the marginality of ethnic minorities in the U.S.

Although Puerto Ricans compared with other ethnic minorities, had the privilege of owning U. S. citizenship in birth, when they moved to the United States, racial segregation, and prejudice still reduce them to second-class citizens. Their skin color, language, and social customs were in discord with the Anglo-dominant society. Therefore, when Negi went to school in New York, she noticed that "[t]here was a social order that, at first, I didn't understand but kept bumping into." (p.229) the ethnic children were treated differently from the start, as "the smartest eighth graders were in the 8-1 homeroom, each subsequent drop in the number indicating one notch less smarts." (p.228) Negi was directly placed by Mr. Grant in the 8-23 homeroom, "where the dumbest, most undesirable people were placed" (p.228), while the *Americanos* "belonged in the homerooms in the low numbers." (p.229) It was no coincidence that the homeroom teacher of 8-23 was a black woman, so it was not hard to guess the makeup of this homeroom. These ethnic children were denied the possibility of better education not because they were really stupid, but because they were "undesirable". Faced with prejudice and segregation, these children could not possibly cultivate in their mind a sense of self-realization and self-confidence, thus, affecting their motivation in study, as revealed by the narrator that the problems for these students in study "had nothing to do with their ability to learn but more with their willingness to do so." (p.228) the hostility between the Italians and the *morenos*, the blacks, in the school was just an epitome of the practice of racial segregation. Even within the broad Hispanic community, Negi realized that "to the same extent as American society is profoundly plural and made up of diverse ethnic groups, the Hispanic community, although labeled with one single common term, is far from homogeneous." (Schultermandl, p.6) Thus, Negi was antagonistic towards the Brooklyn life and she wanted to get out of Brooklyn, as "she develops a sharp consciousness of the impact of intolerance and racism in daily life." (Schmidt, p.138) Negi showed her resentment towards the racial segregation and prejudice, but she did not offer any other solutions except education. Through education, she could get out of Brooklyn in which many ethnic groups dwelt.

5. Conclusion

The immigration of the family turned Negi into an immigrant girl straddling borders and the hybrid identity required Negi to negotiate the differences and find her meaning in life. All through the memoir, Negi pondered sensitively over the questions of class, gender, religion, and ethnicity, which was accomplished in nostalgically looking back on her past experiences. From a Puerto Rican *jibara* to a New York resident, Negi's life experiences encompassed several relocations which forced her to come to grips with her identity. As a Puerto Rican American living in New York, Negi was quite conscious of her Puerto Rican origin, yet her success in striving for self-fulfillment and self-determination as a female paved the way for her to accept the American identity. Her success was without doubt a typical version of American Dream because the mainland had provided her with opportunities that were almost denied to her on the island because of her female identity.

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- Attached: Weigui, Zhou was born in Sichuan, China P. R. in 1982. He is an English lecturer at China West Normal University (Nanchong, China). His research mainly focuses on 20th century English and American literature.