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## From Borderlands to Border Islands: Intersections between Anzaldúa's Chicana Feminist Theory and U.S. Latina Literature from the Hispanic Caribbean

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FROM BORDERLANDS TO BORDER ISLANDS: INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN  
ANZALDÚA'S CHICANA FEMINIST THEORY AND U.S. LATINA  
LITERATURE FROM THE HISPANIC CARIBBEAN

CRISTINA GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN

99 Pages

This thesis studies three texts by three U.S. Latina authors from the Hispanic Caribbean through the lens of Chicana feminist border theory. The works analyzed are *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) by Dominican author Julia Alvarez, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cuban-American novelist Cristina García, and the memoir *Almost a Woman* (1998) by Puerto Rican author Esmeralda Santiago. The theoretical framework used is Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. The objective is to show how these texts manifest the formation of a hybrid, diasporic, in-between identity that corresponds with Anzaldúa's definition of *mestiza* consciousness or *la conciencia mestiza*, despite the different geographical, political and social contexts to which they refer. This thesis also explores the ways in which Alvarez, García and Santiago shed new light to this borderlands identity in ways Anzaldúa's canonical text does not.

**KEYWORDS:** Border theory; Borderlands; Hybridity; *Mestiza* consciousness; In-betweenness; Liminality; Displacement; Exile; Diaspora; Migration; Gloria Anzaldúa; Julia Alvarez; Cristina García; Esmeralda Santiago; Mexico, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Puerto Rico; U.S. Latina literature; Hispanic Caribbean.

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2018

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## CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CHAPTER I: FROM BORDERLANDS TO BORDER ISLANDS	1
Border Theory and Transnational Identity	1
The <i>Mestiza</i> Consciousness	3
Caribbean Borderlands	5
My Thesis	8
CHAPTER II: “SHE HAS NEVER FELT AT HOME IN THE STATES:” YOLANDA GARCÍA IN JULIA ALVAREZ’S <i>HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS</i>	13
Dominican Literature in the United States	13
Rafael Trujillo’s Dictatorship, U.S. Intervention and Dominican Migration	15
The Case of Julia Alvarez	18
The <i>Mestiza</i> Consciousness in <i>How the García Girls Lost Their Accents</i>	19
A Borderland Text	21
Yolanda García’s Hybrid Identity	23
A Journey to the Roots	24
Displacement in the United States	28
How Yolanda García Found Her Class Consciousness	32
“A Failure of the <i>Mestiza</i> Consciousness”?	35
CHAPTER III: “EVEN THOUGH I’VE BEEN LIVING IN BROOKLYN ALL MY LIFE, IT DOESN’T FEEL LIKE HOME TO ME”: PILAR PUENTE IN CRISTINA GARCÍA’S <i>DREAMING IN CUBAN</i>	38

Cuban Literature of Displacement	38
The Cuban Revolution and the Exile in the United States	39
“ <i>Los atrevidos</i> ” of the 1.5 Generation	41
The Case of Cristina García	43
Dreaming in Cuban and the <i>Mestiza</i> Consciousness	45
Pilar’s Hybrid Identity in <i>Dreaming in Cuban</i>	48
Torn between Languages	51
Artistic Expression of Hybrid Identity	53
<i>La facultad</i> : A Bridge between Two Cultures	56
Understanding <i>Dreaming in Cuban</i> through Anzaldúa’s <i>Mestiza</i> Consciousness	59
CHAPTER IV: “DO YOU THINK WE’RE AS PUERTO RICAN IN THE U.S. AS ON	
THE ISLAND?”: NEGI IN ESMERALDA SANTIAGO’S <i>ALMOST A WOMAN</i>	
Puerto Rican Literature in the United States	62
Unincorporated Territory, Dislocated Identity	63
Puerto Rican Hybridity	65
The Case of Esmeralda Santiago	67
Negi’s Borderland Identity in <i>Almost a Woman</i>	68
<i>Putá</i> or <i>Pendeja</i> ? Conflicted Definitions of Womanhood	70
Linguistic Identity: From <i>Hispana</i> to Americanized	72
Performing <i>Mestiza</i> Hybridity	75
Negi’s Coatlicue State	79
Towards a <i>Mestiza</i> Consciousness	82



CHAPTER V: “AN ABSOLUTE DESPOT DUALITY THAT SAYS WE ARE ABLE TO BE ONLY ONE OR THE OTHER:” CHICANA FEMINISM AND LATINA LITERATURE FROM THE HISPANIC CARIBBEAN ISLANDS	85
WORKS CITED	92

## CHAPTER I: FROM BORDERLANDS TO BORDER ISLANDS

“De las islas no se despiden nadie para siempre.”

—Dulce María Loynaz, *Un verano en Tenerife*

### **Border Theory and Transnational Identity**

Border theory has attracted the interest of literary scholars since the early 1990s, as U.S. imperialism culminated with the erection of borders to separate the American self from the foreign ‘other.’ Nevertheless, the creation of artificial territorial divisions has resulted in the formation of an in-between space that is not only physical, but also a psychological state of mind where the dominant values of two different cultures interact and blend. For this reason, anthropologist Michael Kearney distinguishes between the notion of borders, which can refer to both geographic and cultural zones between nations, and that of boundaries, which are the legal delimitations of a territory. Borders and boundaries do not necessarily correspond, since cultural borders can transcend geographical boundaries. When people migrate from one country to another, their native culture is often replicated in the new location, whose culture, in turn, gradually influences and transforms the migrant’s conception of their own original values. As Kearney states, “‘transnationalism’ implies a blurring, or perhaps better said, a reordering of the binary cultural, social, and epistemological distinctions of the modern period” (55). In this sense, the author explains, “peoples that span national borders are ambiguous in that they in some ways

partake of both nations and in other ways partake of neither” (52), since they may remain attached to their motherlands even when they migrate and settle in a different place.

In postcolonial literary studies, transnational identity has been central in the works by numerous critics throughout the last three decades. One of the most influential contributions to the field has been that of Homi Bhabha, whose theory of ‘third space’ has defined the current understanding of the displaced self. According to the author, “[a]ll forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity,” whose importance is not so much in the “two original moments from which the third emerges” but rather in the “‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge.” Therefore, “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (“The Third Space” 211). Hybridity, liminality, ambiguity, hyphenated identity, plurality and multiplicity<sup>1</sup> are some of the terms which characterize the life of those who are connected to two places and yet feel disconnected from both of them as they exist in a third space. In the case of migrants, identity negotiation in this third space can result in a tension between the original culture and that of the host country. Nevertheless, as Bhabha states, “border lives” which emerge in these “in-between spaces [...] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative signs of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (*The Location of Culture* 1-2).

The resolution to this identity conflict, thus, manifests as a process of accepting and embracing the contradictions between two different cultures, so that borders become spaces of

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the constraints in length of this project, and for the sake of variety, these terms will be used interchangeably to describe displaced identity, even though there are certain nuances associated to each one of these words.

both individual and communal empowerment and resistance, even though they originated as sites of oppression. For bell hooks, marginality also becomes a space where binaries are subverted and contested, so that it becomes a state that is chosen by the subject rather than imposed on the subject. As the author explains in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, “marginality is a space of resistance” (152):

It was this marginality that I was naming a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not only found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds (149).

### **The *Mestiza* Consciousness**

One of the most representative examples of a third space where a hybrid consciousness arises in a marginal space is the Mexican-American border, which Chicana feminist author Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. As the title already suggests in its combination of English and Spanish, symbolically divided but also connected by a slash, Anzaldúa constructs a hybrid text that acts as a borderland itself, a place of encounter between languages, genres, narrative voices, and cultures intertwined in a colorful patchwork where the author’s personal story and Chicana history merge into a new genre, which she coins as *autohistoria-teoría*. In this text, Anzaldúa defines a border as “a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” as opposed to what she calls a borderlands, which is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). Her example of a borderlands is the physical and psychological space between Mexico and the

United States, which is seen as a limitless space in constant negotiation and transformation that defies and transcends binary opposites.

In order to understand the subject that inhabits this hybrid space, Anzaldúa uses the concept of *raza mestiza*, first developed by Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos and defined in *Borderlands* as “*una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color—la primera raza síntesis del globo ... a cosmic race, la raza cósmica*, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world” (99). To this mestizo identity, the Chicana writer associates a *mestiza* consciousness, which she conceives as an in-between female consciousness or “*conciencia de mujer*” (99), which is neither American nor Mexican, and both at the same time. In the author’s words,

this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making, a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer* (99).

Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness originates from the ambivalence and contradictions between the values of the two cultures she exists in, physically and mentally. This “consciousness of the Borderlands” (99), the author explains, is “plagued by psychic restlessness” (100). On the one hand, Anzaldúa explains, Chicanos “don’t totally identify with the Anglo-American cultural values” and, on the other hand, they “don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values” (85). Thus, the *mestiza* is “[i]n a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (100). *La mestiza* remains in this state of fragmentation until she discovers that “she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries” (100).

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa not only exposes the source of the *mestiza*'s struggle between cultures, but also identifies the solution to this dilemma. As the author observes, "[t]he *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity [...] She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode" (Anzaldúa 101), that is, in order for the *mestiza* to survive she has to embrace her hybrid identity and build a bridge between cultures: "we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once" (Anzaldúa 100). La *mestiza* will have to accept her in-betweenness, to become multiple to transcend borders:

Because I, a *mestiza*,  
continually walk out of one culture  
and into another,  
because I am in all cultures at the same time (Anzaldúa 99).

### **Caribbean Borderlands**

Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of the *mestiza* consciousness, although formulated with the specific context of the Mexican-American border in mind, proves applicable to other displaced groups across the globe and to other types of borders beyond the one between the United States and Mexico. That is the case for Hispanic Caribbean immigrants, whose experiences as exiles in the United States can be regarded as borderland experiences where a *mestiza* consciousness originates. As Rebecca Fuchs explains,

The Caribbean experiences of colonialism and slavery, dictatorships and neo-colonial interventions have required strategies of resistance, survival, and resilience that [...] contemporary Caribbean writers have adopted and modified in order to come to terms with new conflicts in a globalized world. They use strategies of plurality and multiplicity

against an absolute and universal power position that still lingers from colonial times and has assumed new manifestations in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (3).

In the present thesis, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* theory will be applied to the experience of immigrants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands. The reason for using a text by a Chicana author to analyze the literature by Caribbean authors is that, on the one hand, *Borderlands* is one of the most—if not the most—elaborated essays describing the search for identity depicted in the texts by U.S Latina<sup>2</sup> authors. On the other hand, Chicana feminist theory, and Anzaldúa's specifically, deals with the experience of women who face yet another challenge; that of being oppressed not only because of their language, citizenship status, and ethnicity, but also for their female condition. Even though there are critics who have theorized the Caribbean in-betweenness specifically, Laura R. Rostau explains that

El concepto de 'frontera', tal como lo plantean los críticos y críticas chicanas, nos permite interpretar de maneras estimulantes los encuentros y choques culturales así como los desplazamientos y movimientos que se producen cuando dos o más culturas entran en contacto. Además dicho análisis nos facilita el estudio de las representaciones narrativas, poéticas y culturales que se llevan a cabo en zonas de contacto históricas, geográficas, lingüísticas y corporales (14).

The Antilles are both a physical and imaginary borderland space. On the one hand, the islands are geographically separated from each other and from the mainland by the sea, which acts as a natural boundary. On the other hand, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo asserts, "the Caribbean is the union of the diverse" (2), a space which acts as a place of division but also of encounter for

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<sup>2</sup> While I advocate for the use of inclusive terminology (Latina, Latin@, Latina/o, Latinx, etc.), since this project is woman-centered, I will refer to the literature analyzed in this thesis as Latina literature.

different colonial histories, languages, ethnic groups and cultures, a “meta-archipelago” which has “neither a boundary nor a center.” Therefore, “the Caribbean flows outwards past the limits of its own sea” (4), it transcends physical and cultural borders and repeats itself outside of its boundaries. “To persevere in the attempt to refer the culture of the Caribbean to geography,” Benítez-Rojo claims, “is a debilitating and scarcely productive project” (24). The author cites the example of Martin Luther King, who “was able to be a Caribbean person without ceasing to be North American, and vice versa,” to prove that “[t]here are performers who were born in the Caribbean and who are not Caribbean by their performance; there are others who were born near or far away and nevertheless *are*” (24). Caribbean identity, thus, is not reductive, but inclusive and compatible with other identities outside the islands.

Nevertheless, there is a strong connection between the idea of national identity and the island, which is especially evident in Hispanic Caribbean literature. As Dara E. Goldman explains, “the island frequently occupies a central role and, furthermore, becomes the foundation of the textual project” so that “boundaries constitute the site of negotiation and reconfiguration of subjectivity” (49). Nevertheless, the critic notes, “[i]nsularity is not bound to a particular definition but can acquire multiple and even incompatible meanings. Similarly, the rhetoric of insularity can construct boundaries as a problem to be solved or as a potential to be activated” (56). The understanding of the island as a physical border or boundary, Goldman notes, is challenged by the fact that “a significant portion of the Hispanic Antillean population has begun to reside beyond the island’s borders” (57) so that “currently, both Caribbean people and their cultures are linked to multiple geographic locations” (149). Therefore, “as the diaspora becomes an increasingly significant place of cultural production, the rhetoric of insularity should be rendered less relevant or be radically reconfigured to accommodate this change” (149). In other



words, the island's borders, just like the Mexican-American border Anzaldúa describes, should not be understood only as a physical boundary, but also as a borderlands space between Caribbean and American culture, given the history and magnitude of migration movements from the islands to the United States and the strong ties exiles have maintained to their mother-islands throughout the decades.

### **My Thesis**

As has been explained before, strategies of plurality and multiplicity can be found not only in the Mexican-American border, but also in the Caribbean. The *mestiza* consciousness in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, therefore, exists in other works produced in different borderlands contexts. In the three literary texts analyzed in this thesis, which are *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) by Dominican author Julia Alvarez, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cuban-American novelist Cristina García, and the memoir *Almost a Woman* (1999) by Puerto Rican author Esmeralda Santiago, as I will argue, it is possible to observe the development of a diasporic identity which corresponds to Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. My analysis focuses on the common preoccupation the female protagonists in these works share, which is their inability to completely belong in either of the two cultures which define their identity, but rather they occupy an intangible mental space in between their motherland and the United States. This conflict, as I suggest, is resolved through the development of a hybrid consciousness which embraces both cultures and bridges their conflicted identities.

The chosen works share many commonalities besides the depiction of a hybrid, in-between identity, such as their decade of publication (1990s), the *bildungsroman* or coming of age nature of the stories narrated by the young female protagonists, the time (1960s) and place (New York) in which the stories are set, the identity crisis of the adolescent protagonists as the

daughters of Hispanic Caribbean immigrants, their initial longing for the lost life back on the island, and their search of their own identity through different forms of art. There are also many significant differences among these texts, such as the genre and style used by the authors, the themes and topics they deal with, the type of exile depicted, and its influence on the identity conflict of the main characters. Furthermore, as Jorge Duany explains, due to the different circumstances which have forced people from the Hispanic Caribbean islands into exile, the three countries have not been approached by critics in the same way. “Of the three Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean islands,” he observes, “the Dominican Republic has sustained the most attention from transnational migration scholars. Many authors have regarded Cuba and Puerto Rico as anomalies in contemporary population movements, because Cuba is socialist and Puerto Rico remains a colony” (*Blurred Borders* 3). Nevertheless, their common history of Spanish colonization and American intervention, and their huge presence in the United States make the three islands worth comparing in this study.

Anzaldúa’s idea of *mestiza* consciousness is not only limited to questions of race but extends to in-between identity as a whole, considering issues of language, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of oppression that relegate individuals to these borderland spaces. As a Mexican-American educated lesbian who speaks several languages and dialects, the author exists in the borderlands in multiple ways. In the case of the texts by Caribbean authors studied in this thesis, the female protagonists live in the borderlands not only between their islands of origin and the United States, but also between childhood and womanhood, since they are teenage girls when they begin to experience an identity crisis. Thus, the journey towards a *mestiza* consciousness that bridges opposing cultures can be connected to adolescents’ search of identity in their journey towards adult consciousness. The main characters in these *bildungsroman* texts

are trying to figure out who they are in terms of cultural affiliation but also as young girls developing their own ideas and subjective identities, which are often in conflict with the values of their parents' generation and culture.

The analysis of Anzaldúa's idea of *mestiza* consciousness in connection to adolescence commences with Chapter II, which offers an analysis of Julia Alvarez's autobiographical novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*. This work deals with the lives of four sisters, Sofía, Sandra, Yolanda and Carla, who were born to a privileged Dominican family and, just like the author, had to flee the country after their father's involvement in a failed attempt to overthrow Trujillo. Thus, in this chapter I provide an overview of the sociopolitical background of the novel, followed by the analysis of a number of scenes in Alvarez's text through the lens of Anzaldúa's theory in *Borderlands*, in order to explore the main character's development of class consciousness as exemplary of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. The aim is to shed some light into the ways in which Chicana experience compares to that of Dominican, middle-class young women who arrived to the United States escaping Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship and lost their previous socioeconomic status.

The third chapter studies Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*. This autobiographical novel deals with the experiences of three generations of women living on both sides of the Strait; Celia del Pino, the matriarch of the family who is resolved to dedicate the rest of her life to the Revolution, Lourdes, one of her two daughters, who left the island to flee from Castro's regime, and Pilar, Lourdes' daughter, who was born in Cuba but has been raised in the United States since the age of two. To contextualize García's work, I begin with a description of the sociopolitical climate in which the novel is set, followed by the author's example as part of the generation of writers who were caught in between cultures due to their experience of

displacement. For this purpose, I analyze the ways in which the text depicts a girl who is torn between two cultures, not completely belonging to either of them, considering Anzaldúa's definition of *mestiza* identity. The aim is to explore the connection between the hybrid identity developed in the context of Chicana feminist theory and the in-betweenness of the main character in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Chapter IV deals with Esmeralda Santiago's second memoir, *Almost a Woman*, which covers a span of the author's life from the time she was ten and her family had just moved from Puerto Rico to New York until the moment she turns twenty-one and moves out of the family house. In this book, a young Negi, which is Santiago's pet name and the name the author's narrative voice receives in her memoirs, describes her arrival to the United States and her attempts to assimilate while feeling excluded in her new culture. I begin this chapter by explaining the neocolonial relations between the United States and Puerto Rico, which result in the formation of an in-between, hybrid consciousness as Boricuas migrate from the island to the continent and become displaced from both. Then, I study the specific case of Santiago from the theoretical point of view of Anzaldúa's Chicana feminism in *Borderlands*. The aim is to explore how Negi presents a borderland subjectivity which is not completely embraced and celebrated, but which suggests the forging of a *mestiza* consciousness in Anzaldúan terms.

The fifth and last chapter serves as a conclusion to my thesis, where I compare and contrast the applicability of Anzaldúa's borderlands theory to the texts by Alvarez, García and Santiago. In this last section, I also identify the incompatibilities between the idea of the *mestiza* consciousness and the experiences of the women in the texts analyzed. I also consider the ways in which the works by the Caribbean authors explored in this project shed new light on Latina

feminist understanding of hybrid identity in the Hispanic diaspora. Finally, I address future research lines which arise from this study.

CHAPTER II: “SHE HAS NEVER FELT AT HOME IN THE STATES:” YOLANDA GARCÍA  
IN JULIA ALVAREZ’S *HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS*

“With bare feet planted on familiar ground, she had trusted her perceptions. Yet assaulted by the unfamiliar and surrounded by hard concrete and looming buildings, she had become as vulnerable as even the Trujillo regime had failed to make her feel.”

—Loida Maritza Pérez, *Geographies of Home*

**Dominican Literature in the United States**

Dominicans make up the second largest Hispanic group in New York, and the fifth largest in the whole United States, yet their presence in mainstream American culture is practically nonexistent compared to other authors from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. In *The Dominican Americans*, Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernandez discuss the late introduction of Dominican literature to the American canon. According to the authors, the gradual increase in popularity and visibility of Dominican writers came, initially, through the translation into English of works originally published in Spanish, but also due to the rise of Dominican authors writing in English. Furthermore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a group of academics interested in the dissemination of knowledge about the Dominican experience in the United States began writing compilations and anthologies of works by Dominican-American authors. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, and except for writers such as Julia Alvarez

or Junot Díaz, Dominican authors remain mostly unknown both to the general public and to literary scholars specialized in U.S. Latina literature as well.

In the case of Dominican women writers, the lack of representation in the literary scene is even more striking. Daisy Cocco De Filippis was the first critic who attempted to bridge this gap in the knowledge about Dominican women's literature. She is the editor of numerous anthologies such as *Sin otro profeta que su canto: antología de la poesía escrita por dominicanas* or *Combatidas, combativas y combatientes: antología de cuentos escritos por dominicanas*. More recently, Sintia Molina has defended the necessity of an anthology which compiles the most important works by Dominican women in and outside the island. In the introduction to her *Dominican Women Writers on the Edge: Alienation, Pain and Resistance*, the critic explains how the lack of texts by female authors is rooted in the traditional attitudes of Dominican culture. "Women writers," Molina observes, "have been marginalized and ignored by their society and consequently remain unknown by many in their own country and abroad, except for Julia Alvarez" (11). Similarly, in *Daring to Write: Contemporary Narratives by Dominican Women*, Erika M. Martinez declares how this lack of knowledge about the most prominent female literary figures of Dominican descent inspired her to create a compilation of works exclusively authored by women.

Rooted in the Dominican Republic and transplanted into the United States, Dominican literature of displacement is characterized by contradictions, inconsistencies, bilingualism, plurality and hybridity. As Giulia de Sarlo states,

un acercamiento híbrido, plural, polifónico, que elige sin aniquilar las demás posibilidades, [es] la clave para entender la realidad plurilingüista de la creación

dominicana en Estados Unidos. Una realidad entre dos mundos, pero que pertenece a los dos y al mismo tiempo es única (205).

The works by Dominican authors living in American land, thus, must be understood in terms of hybridity. Even when they are written in English, published in the United States, and for the most part set in New York, these texts are created in a liminal space at the crossroads between the Dominican and American culture which define them. The subject's Dominican upbringing prevents them from completely identifying with American culture, but their experience of displacement in the United States marks them so that they need to come to terms with their original Dominican values.

### **Rafael Trujillo's Dictatorship, U.S. Intervention and Dominican Migration**

In order to understand the nature of Dominican exile in the United States, it is necessary to explain the ways in which American intervention in the island has shaped the relationship between the two nations. Whereas the Dominican presence in America is relatively recent, the United States has been involved in the internal affairs of the island from the beginnings, which can be interpreted as a form of neo-colonial control due to the nation's dependence on American economy. Migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States was not significant until the early 1960s, after the death of dictator Rafael Trujillo. His ascent to power had been facilitated by the U.S. Marine Corps Occupying Force in the Dominican Republic, which recruited him into the National Guard. When the Corps left, Trujillo was in charge of the armed forces, and in 1930 led a coup against president Horacio Vásquez and proclaimed himself president. With the help of the SIM<sup>3</sup>, who did not hesitate to use intimidation and violence to

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<sup>3</sup> Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (Military Intelligence Service).



make sure that Trujillo's regime was not challenged by his opponents, the dictator remained in power for over three decades.

In 1961, after numerous failed attempts to overthrow him, Rafael Trujillo was assassinated with the intervention of the CIA, and the island was invaded by the United States. Until this moment, Dominicans had been prevented by the government from leaving the island, with the exception of a select elite of people who were granted a visa to leave the island and migrate to the United States. However, after the dictator's death, settling in a new country became a possibility for a larger number of people, and a second wave of immigration began, greater than the one which had taken place during Trujillo's years,<sup>4</sup> this time motivated by the precarious economic situation of the island during such a turbulent historical moment. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in spite of its small size, the first wave of immigration resulted in the dislocation of political dissidents and their families, who arrived to the United States as refugees when their lives in the Dominican Republic were threatened due to the SIM's prosecution.

Dominican exile greatly differs from other migration movements from the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States. "Unlike the Puerto Rican migrants," Peter Winn observes, "the new Dominican community in New York is largely composed of middle-class people whose educational and financial resources are greater than those of most of their compatriots." Dominican displacement implied, for the most part, the transition from a comfortable life of luxury and abundance in the island to a life of economic hardship and sacrifice in the mainland. Nevertheless, even though most émigrés were initially "forced to accept work that was beneath

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Migration Policy Institute, the Dominican immigrant population in the United States grew rapidly after Trujillo's death, going from 12.000 in 1960 to 350.000 in 1990.

their occupational status in the Dominican Republic,” those were “jobs they left as soon as they had accumulated the capital to open their own businesses” (617). Immigration, thus, did not automatically grant the possibility of a better life, but the American dream seemed more attainable for Dominicans expatriates due to the privileges they already enjoyed at the time of arriving in the United States.

This, nonetheless, does not mean that the Dominican experience of immigration and adaptation to the American way of life was not hard. Political exiles experienced an identity struggle between the homesickness for their Dominican roots and the need to adapt and prosper in the United States to survive, since they had not migrated out of economic necessity but due to the dangerous situation in the island. Their homeland, on the one hand, represented an ideal past characterized by a more comfortable life which could not be recaptured in their American present. On the other hand, it also meant a threat to their own stability and safety under Trujillo’s reign of terror. The United States, on the contrary, was presented as the land of freedom and opportunity, but was also a place where Dominican expatriates experienced financial struggles and ethnic discrimination for the first time.

For most Dominicans, the transition from their life in the island to their new American reality was not a personal choice, but a temporary solution until the situation back home was safer, at least initially. This was also true for Cubans, but unlike Dominicans, their massive displacement resulted in the formation of exile communities in the United States, such as the Little Havana in Miami. Immigrants from the Dominican Republic, however, did not enjoy the support of their compatriots in the diaspora, as those who made it out of the island were scattered across big cities like New York. Besides, whereas the Cuban exile after Castro’s ascent to power generated the sympathy of an anti-communist America, the situation of the Dominican Republic

remained unknown in the United States, and therefore Dominican immigrants were generally not well received in the mainland. The Dominican experience of displacement, thus, was characterized by the psychological trauma of being practically forced into a new culture, without the support of an exile community and the burden of having to assimilate into American culture to achieve a better life.

### **The Case of Julia Alvarez**

Julia Alvarez was one of the few writers whose family fled from Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic and reflected on her experience as a political exile in the United States as an adult. In her essay "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic," she explains how her mother's side of the family granted her a privileged position which allowed their escape. The fact that her relatives had strong connections with the United States would eventually enable their salvation from the SIM's prosecution:

What kept my father from being rounded up with the others each time there was a purge [...] was his connection with my mother's powerful family. It was not just their money that gave them power, for wealth was sometimes an incentive to persecute a family and appropriate its fortune. It was their strong ties with the United States [...] This obsession with American things was no longer merely enchantment with the States, but a strategy for survival (80).

Alvarez was born in 1950 in the United States and was raised in the Dominican Republic from the time she was a few months old. When she was ten, her family decided to leave the island again to seek political refuge in the United States after her father's involvement in an unsuccessful government coup to overthrow Trujillo. Once settled in Brooklyn, Alvarez had trouble adapting to her new life in a country that was foreign to her in spite of her American

nationality, a struggle which eventually became a main theme in many of her works. Contrary to other Dominican writers who had trouble finding a space in the American literary scene, Alvarez has been an extremely successful author. In her prolific career, she has authored many different types of publications such as novels, poems, essays and children's books. In *Something to Declare*, she deals with her mixed feelings about her own identity, explaining:

I am not a Dominican writer. I have no business writing in a language that I can speak but have not studied deeply to craft [...] I'm also not *una norte-americana*. I'm not a mainstream American writer with my roots in a small town in Illinois or Kentucky or even Nuevo Mexico. I don't hear the same rhythms in English as a native speaker of English. Sometimes I hear Spanish in English (and of course vice versa). That's why I describe myself as a Dominican American writer. That's not just a term. I'm mapping a country that's not on the map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper (172-173).

### **The *Mestiza* Consciousness in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents***

Alvarez's first and most popular work, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), is a fictionalized account of her experience of displacement in the United States as a political exile during Trujillo's dictatorship. This chapter analyzes a number of vignettes<sup>5</sup> in Alvarez's composite novel.<sup>6</sup> For this purpose, I will compare Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness as described in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to the hybrid identity of Yolanda, one of the García sisters and the main character in the novel, in terms of class, ethnicity and gender.

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<sup>5</sup> The word "vignette" is used instead of that of "chapter" when referring to a composite novel.

<sup>6</sup> Even though it fits into the category of the composite novel, I will be referring to *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* simply as "a novel" for the rest of the chapter to avoid unnecessary repetition.

The objective is to find the ways in which Anzaldúa's consciousness of the borderlands as described in Chapter I is related to Yolanda's development of social class consciousness in Alvarez's novel.

Some critics have already linked the transnational subjectivity depicted by Anzaldúa to that of Alvarez, focusing on the relationship between form and content. Such is the case of David T. Mitchell, who studies the way Alvarez's work mirrors Anzaldúa's hybrid narrative by using multiple perspectives to represent both the individual and the community's experience.

Similarly, Judy Rivera-van Schagen argues that the mininarratives which compose the novel reflect the fragmentation of the women in this text, which is characteristic of the new *mestiza*, of the individual who inhabits the borderlands. According to the critic, Alvarez "uses her borderland, her (dialogical) oppositional consciousness, to critique the different ways the dominant culture uses to subjugate women" (153). Loes Nas also explores the link between the structure of the text and its message. In her article, the scholar shows how the combination of the elements of the short story with those of the novel is comparable Anzaldúa's technique in her borderland text, which combines different genres as well. Catherine Romagnolo observes that "[b]y strategically utilizing the form of her narrative to foreground the recessive nature of beginnings and origins, Alvarez mirrors the struggle of her central character, Yolanda, as a 'border woman'" (186) in Anzaldúa's definition of the term.

Manuela Matas Llorente deviates from the general analysis of the formal elements in novel and briefly points out that the girls' inability to speak English without an accent explains their sense of displacement in the United States. The author observes that, as Anzaldúa remarks, "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity" (71). Nevertheless, one of the most recent articles dealing with the connection between *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and

*Borderlands*, and probably the most relevant to the present discussion, is Victoria Cabrera-Polk's essay, where she claims that Alvarez's novel is a failure of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. According to the critic, "the García girls' attempts at maintaining multiple identities only serve as a continuous reminder to them that they do not belong anywhere" (1). In Cabrera-Polk's view, the *mestiza* consciousness can be "liberating," but it is also "utopic," claiming that it is "only achieved at the price of losing [the original] culture and heritage" (10). However, as I will show in this chapter, the García sisters do belong somewhere—in the borderlands, which does not imply the loss of their roots but a transformation in their understanding of what being Dominican means.

### **A Borderland Text**

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* tells the story of the García de la Torre family. The novel deals mainly with the lives of the four daughters, Sofía, Sandra, Yolanda and Carla, who were born in the Dominican Republic and, just like Alvarez, had to flee the country after their father's involvement in a failed attempt to end Trujillo's dictatorship. Therefore, even though it is a fictional story, the similarities between the experiences of the García sisters and the author herself are undeniable. Throughout the novel, readers learn the journey of the young girls, who initially arrived to the United States for a short period of time, but as the title reveals, stayed long enough to lose their accents. Alvarez depicts the struggle these Dominican sisters experience between the values of their original culture and the need to adapt to their new reality in the United States, as "they literally move from a position of dominance to a racially marginal position in the U.S." (Mitchell 29).

As part of the first wave of immigrants who left the Dominican Republic for political reasons, the García family had enjoyed a comfortable position back in the island. "Like the first

wave of anti-Castro exiles,” critic William Luis observes, “the Garcías were privileged and professionals” (841). The grandfather on the de la Torre side had studied in the United States, was a diplomat and a landowner, and the whole family had built their mansions in the same area. The girls spent their early childhood playing with expensive toys specially brought from the United States, studying in private schools with American children, used to the attentive service of the live-in help. Although these privileges help the father receive a visa to work in the United States with a renown American doctor, the García family is still subject to economic hardship and ethnic discrimination in their host country.

The story is told from different perspectives, with each of the girls as the protagonist of different vignettes, occasionally joining together as one narrative voice in some sections, incorporating other narrators in the García family and their household as well. The result is a polyphonic blend of voices and points of view in and outside the island that both complement and contrast with each other. This narrative technique allows for the inclusion of people who experience the effects of Trujillo’s dictatorship in different ways than the girls, notably their black servants. According to Rivero-van Schagen “in an indirect way, they participate in the creation of meaning by providing, or rather, by forcing the recognition of their importance as essential parts of the community” (156). Through the inclusion of their stories, the critic argues, “their unequal and unjust treatment becomes a glaring critique of the upper class” (157). By pointing out the differences between the privileges of the García de la Torre clan and the life of people from lower classes, “instead of speaking for her ethnic group identity, Alvarez writes both inside and outside her group identity.” The author nevertheless “avoids becoming a spokesperson for a generalised US Latino/a experience” but rather “considers the complex intersections of class, nationality and race” (Nas 128-129). The mixed narrative perspective, rather than

attempting to appropriate other people's stories, aims to "invoking a site of borderlands and creating a postcolonial, i.e. hybrid, stance" (Nas 130).

### **Yolanda García's Hybrid Identity**

The hybrid point of view Alvarez uses is central to the themes and messages in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and since it provides a narrative which takes into account different perspectives and experiences which are part of a larger whole, it is also comparable to Anzaldúa's mosaic-like technique in *Borderlands*. Nevertheless, due to the constraints in length of this thesis, in this chapter I will only focus on Yolanda, since she is widely considered the protagonist of the novel, as she is the only one who tells the story in the first person and the one who narrates the largest number of stories. As the strongest voice in the text, Yolanda represents the author's alter ego (Luis 840), symbolically conveyed by her nickname "Yo," which means "I" in Spanish, and by the fact that she is a writer. Furthermore, she is the only daughter who returns to the island with the intention to stay, which reflects her liminal position as a borderland subject trying to find her place.

Yolanda's experience is similar to that of her sisters, to the point that they are called "the four girls" and her mother uses the same pet name for all of them, "Cuquita" (42), since "[w]ith four girls so close in age, she couldn't indulge identities" (41). As Julie Barak notes, their "stories are bound to repeat themselves like islands clustering in the archipelago; throughout their lives the same issues and complications reprise" (175). Therefore, since Yolanda's perspective mingles with that of her sisters in some vignettes, her voice will occasionally appear in the plural in the present analysis. The novel begins and ends with her as the narrator, which according to Rivera-van Schagen, "creates a frame of reference within which both Yolanda's and the other women's selves are established [...] It is within this bi-cultural frame that the women



construct their identities and their characters are revealed” (155). The circular movement produced by Yolanda’s narration of the first and the last story, as Romagnolo observes, “implies an unbreakable, nonhierarchical connection between Yolanda’s U.S. identity and her Dominican identity” (191). This structure, the critic explains, “offers an alternative to the binary construction of U.S. versus Dominican identity; the circular structure forges an alternative subjectivity with connection to both cultures” (192).

### **A Journey to the Roots**

In the first vignette, “Antojos.” Yolanda is an adult woman visiting the Dominican Republic, trying to find a sense of belonging in her original motherland. In the last story, Yolanda is a child whose life is about to be altered forever as her parents prepare to leave the island and migrate to the United States. The chronological timeline of the novel, thus, moves backwards, from 1989 to 1956, so that the book starts with what would be the current lives of the adult García girls and progresses towards their childhood days back in the Dominican Republic.<sup>7</sup> This way, the reader learns how the García girls lost their accent, that is, how the transition from their lives in the island to the United States occurred, and the implications of this movement. The García sisters find themselves at the borderlands between both worlds, since their origins will always mark them as foreign to Anglo American culture, whereas their present reality in the United States is conceived as the loss of their Dominican roots by their relatives in the island. This reverse coming of age story evidences Yolanda’s necessity to go back to her roots to make sense of her troubled existence. As Silvio Sirrias explains, this journey is a part of the “immigrant experience,” of “the individual who recently arrived to a new country and is always looking back to give meaning to his or her experiences” (14).

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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of clarity, I will follow Alvarez’s chronology in my own analysis.

The first story shows how, after experiencing a mental breakdown, Yolanda travels to the Dominican Republic with the secret intention of staying. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that Yolanda does not feel at ease in the island she had idealized. The girl is perceived as foreign by her own family, who see her as “shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband” (3). The fact that Yolanda does not fit into Dominican standards of fashion due to her American, hippie style, foreshadows the impossibility of her belonging in the island. “When she reverts to English, she is scolded, ‘¡En español!’ The more she practices, the sooner she’ll be back into her native tongue” (7), signaling that she needs to recapture her lost Dominican language, and therefore her identity, at least to the eyes of her family. Yolanda’s alienation from Dominican culture is accentuated when she declares that she wants to go pick guavas and her aunt Carmen states: “This is not the States [...] A woman just doesn’t travel alone in this country. Especially these days” (9). This feeling of estrangement continues when the young girl suggests she can take the bus and her family reacts by saying: “‘A bus!’ [...] ‘Yolanda, *mi amor*, you *have* been gone long’” (9), not realizing that the Dominican Republic she once knew does not exist anymore.

Yolanda is nevertheless determined to find her place in the Dominican Republic. When she blows out the candles on the island-shaped cake, she wishes: “Let this turn out to be my home” (11). After having experienced a turbulent life in the United States, filled with “so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them” Yolanda envies the lives of “her cousins, women with households and authority in their voices” (11). However, as she becomes aware of their apparent power, she “pictures the maids in their mysterious cluster at the end of the patio” (11). Earlier in this first vignette, Yolanda had also noticed how her aunts were seated “in the white wicker armchairs [...] dressed in the greys and blacks of widowhood” whereas “their

nursemaids [...] sit on stools at the far end of the patio, a phalanx of starched white uniforms”

(4). The contrast between the aunts, comfortably seated and dressed in dark colors, and the maids, seated on stools so that they are always ready to respond to the children’s “mother-annoying” squabbles and dressed in white, stresses the differences among classes. The authority Yolanda’s aunts have is only possible at the expense of other women’s position in an inferior status. After her own experience being part of the lower classes in the United States, Yolanda is now conscious of these subtle details she ignored as a child.

Even though “she has never felt at home in the States” (12), Yolanda will continue to discover that she does not belong in the Dominican Republic either. It is not only her family who perceives Yolanda as American, but also complete strangers she encounters in the island. This can be noticed in the scene where she tries to find guavas:

“*¡Buenas!*” Yolanda calls out.

An old woman emerges from a shack behind the cantina, buttoning up a torn housedress.

[...]

“Can I serve the doña in any way?” the old woman asks. “*¿Un refresco? ¿Una Coca Cola?*” By the pride in her voice, Yolanda understands the old woman wants to treat her to the best on her menu (15).

When Yolanda greets the lady in Spanish in order to ask her where she can find guavas, representative of Dominican land, the woman answers in English and offers her an American product instead.

Later the same day, when Yolanda gets a flat tire and two dark men approach her, “she begins to speak English [...] The two men stare at her, uncomprehending, rendered docile by her gibberish. Only when she mentions the name Miranda do their eyes light up with respect. She is

saved!” (20). In this scene, Yolanda speaks English when she had been told that ““no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one’s mother tongue” (13). Besides, she is perceived as “Americana” (20) and her connections with the powerful Miranda family constitute her way out of an apparent dangerous situation. As Ricardo Castells notes, “[a]lthough she has returned to the Dominican Republic in search of a place to call home, her linguistic shortcomings and her cultural awkwardness suggest that she is as much out of place in the land of her birth” (37). Nevertheless, he explains, “this babbling encounter does not mean that she fully belongs in the United States either” (Castells 37).

In this first vignette, which is the conclusion of the story in spite of its placement at the beginning of the book, Alvarez shows that the Dominican Republic Yolanda wishes to return to is not there anymore because it never existed in the first place. As Mitchell explains,

Yolanda’s return is tempered by her growing awareness of the servant classes who make the family’s life of relative luxury possible. Rather than smoothly assimilate back into her prior existence as the pampered daughter of a wealthy political official, Yolanda has been provided by her experiences in the United States with a politicized context of class consciousness that troubles the family’s once naturalized Dominican lifestyle [...] The benefits which she and her immediate family have reaped at the expense of the servant classes they employ lose their luxurious gloss” (31).

Yolanda’s in-betweenness is expressed, on the one hand, in her rejection of the cultural values of the country where she has spent the great majority of her life and yet does not feel like home. On the other hand, the young woman cannot escape the American system in which she does not belong because, now that she is aware of its inner workings, she is able to identify it in the island as well. As Luis explains, “the prejudice that the girls experience in the United States,

toward the beginning of the narration, allows them to uncover an earlier one found in the Dominican Republic, toward the end of the novel” (841). Yolanda’s displacement in the United States, where her family did not enjoy the same advantages they had in the Dominican Republic, has subjected her to the discrimination and exploitation that the García de la Torre family profited from back in the island. Now that she is aware of the existence of this oppressive system in the Dominican Republic as well, the former gap between both countries disappears, since they are essentially the same. The island is perceived as an extension of the United States rather than the untouched Caribbean paradise of her childhood memories, and therefore Yolanda remains in the borderlands between both places.

### **Displacement in the United States**

In “Joe,” Yolanda’s fragmentation is expressed through the different variants of her name in the two languages which define her: “Yolanda, nicknamed Yo in Spanish, misunderstood Joe in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, Yoyo—or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, Joey” (67). The impossibility of having her name recognized in Anglo-American culture is also shown in another instance, when she explains why she owns “a box of pencils ‘my color,’ red, and inscribed with my so-called name in gold letters: Jolinda. (My mother had tried for my own name Yolanda, but the company had substituted the Americanized, southernized Jolinda)” (89). Yolanda’s split identity, divided between languages and cultures, affects her profoundly, so when she leaves her husband, she writes a note full of slashes, saying “I’m going to my folks till my head-slash-heart clear. She revised the note: I’m needing some space, some time, until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul—No, no, no, she didn’t want to divide herself anymore, three persons in one Yo” (77). Yolanda wants to put all her identities together, so when she falls in love with a doctor in the mental health institution where she is sent, she

fantasizes that “[h]e would save her body-slash-mind-slash-soul by taking all the slashes out, making her one whole Yolanda” (79).

In “The Rudy Elmenhurst Story,” we see a younger Yolanda struggling with an identity crisis during her college years in the United States. Even though she was “a lapsed Catholic” and her sisters and her “had been pretty well Americanized” (86), Yolanda was still not at home in the United States. At this point, the girl explains, “English was then still a party favor for me—crack open the dictionary, find out if I’d just been insulted, praised, admonished, criticized” (87). Furthermore, in her first day of English class, Yolanda describes how the professor, “stumbling over my name and smiling falsely at me, a smile I had identified as one flashed on ‘foreign students’ to show them the natives were friendly” makes Yolanda feel “profoundly out of place” (87-88). She feels out of place, an “intruder upon the sanctuary of English majors” (88). Yolanda’s Latina identity affects not only the way people perceive her, but also her understanding—or lack thereof—of American culture, which adds to her feeling of alienation in relation to the Dominican, Christian values she was raised into.

The strict values of Yolanda’s Dominican parents, in opposition to the stereotypical conception Americans have of Latinas, affect the young girl’s relationship with her own sexuality. When Yolanda does not want to have intercourse with her college boyfriend, Rudy, she declares: “I started wondering if maybe my upbringing had disconnected some vital nerves” (96). Rudy, in turn, confesses that, because of Yolanda’s Dominican upbringing, he had expected her to be “hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you’d be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools” (98). After this incident, the young girl states: “I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism,

Hispanic and American styles” (98). This experience of alienation from American mainstream behavior makes her retreat to her Dominican origins for an answer:

I did something that even as a lapsed Catholic I still did [...] I opened my drawer and took out the crucifix I kept hidden under my clothes, and I put it under my pillow for the night. This large crucifix had been a “security blanket” I took to bed with me for years after coming to this country (98).

Furthermore, when Yolanda meets Rudy’s parents, they also show that, because of her origins, they had expected her to speak the language with an accent, as if being Hispanic and speaking English well were two incompatible things. So “talking too slowly to me as if I wouldn’t understand native speakers; they complimented me on my ‘accentless’ English and observed that my parents must be so proud of me” (99). Having an accent, therefore, is conceived as a negative trait to avoid at all costs, whereas, on the contrary, speaking English without an accent is a virtue to be praised. Nevertheless, even though Yolanda has become naturalized and lost her Spanish accent, she is still seen as foreign. Americans, therefore, automatically place stereotypical expectations upon her and change their attitudes towards her, which is a constant reminder for the young girl that she does not belong in the United States in spite of her efforts to adapt.

In this vignette, Alvarez establishes a connection between linguistic and sexual development. Yolanda does not have the words in the English language to describe her erotic desires, which is used to depict her lack of sexual experience, both connected to her Dominican identity. For Yolanda, Rachel Adams argues, “language is essentially the key to her sexuality” (14). Thus, when recalling her boyfriend’s verbal advances, the young girl states that “[h]is vocabulary turned me off even as I was beginning to acknowledge my body’s pleasure” (14). As

Adams asserts, “Yolanda’s awareness of her own sexuality is directly affected by her struggles with the English language” (14), and to a larger extent, with her struggles to adapt into American culture. When in her class nobody understands her sonnet but all are able to decipher the pornographic hidden meanings behind Rudy’s lines, the young girl feels that she is not part of this world:

Suddenly, it seemed to me, not only that the world was full of English majors, but of people with a lot more experience than I had. For the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex and smoking dope; I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would be saying things like “no shit,” without feeling like I was imitating someone else (93-94).

The fact that Yolanda has lost her accent does not equate to a full command of the English language in non-literal situations. Her naïveté evidences her Dominican religious background, even when she does not identify with the Catholic faith anymore. This prevents her from integrating into American culture in a time characterized by sexual liberation and experimentation with drugs. At a college party, she recalls, everybody “seemed so caught up in a rhythm I didn’t feel part of” (100). As Adam explains, Yolanda lacks “the vocabulary necessary to begin negotiating the boundaries surrounding her sexuality” (14) and therefore “remains in a liminal space, torn between her Dominican upbringing and the expectations of United States’ 1960s sexual culture” (15).



## **How Yolanda García Found Her Class Consciousness**

The García family had moved to the United States with the initial intention of staying just until the situation in the Dominican Republic became safe enough for their return. Yolanda and her sisters could not wait to get back to the island, so “the four of us shifted from foot to foot, waiting to go home” (105). However, when this was no longer a possibility, the girls “wailed and paled, whining to go home. We didn’t feel we had the best the United States had to offer” (105). The García de la Torre family had gone from living in a mansion and enjoying a comfortable life of live-in help and conspicuous luxuries to a moment where they “only had second-hand stuff, rental houses in one redneck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines” (105). The sisters felt they had the worst of both worlds, since they did not enjoy the comfort they had in the Dominican Republic, nor the liberties available to other young American girls, so “the rules were as strict as for Island girls, but there was no island to make up the difference” (105). Furthermore, in spite of their parents’ efforts to send them to good schools where they would “meet and mix with the ‘right kind’ of Americans,” the García girls did not blend with the other kids. They “met the right kind of Americans, all right, but they didn’t exactly mix with us” (106).

The collective voice of the four sisters in this vignette describes themselves as “fish out of water” (106), as they were struggling to find a sense of belonging not only as teenage girls, but also as the daughters of immigrant parents. As time passes, however, the girls begin to gain more independence from their parents, and therefore, from their strict Dominican rules. Their situation of displacement changes as they experience the freedom other American kids have and which is not available to teenagers in the island:

We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was an old hat, man. Island was the hair-and-nails crowd, chaperones, and icky boys with all their macho strutting and unbuttoned shirts and hairy chests with gold chains and teensy gold crucifixes. By the end of a couple of years away from home, we had *more* than adjusted (107).

The girls' conflicted identities result from the tension between the values of their parents, who, on the one hand, want them to become adapted to the life in the United States and, on the other, were "worried they were going to lose their girls to America" (107). Therefore, it was decided that, since the situation on the island had calmed down, "we four girls would be sent summers to the Island so we wouldn't lose touch with *la familia*" (107). Whereas at the beginning they would beg their parents to return to the Dominican Republic, later on this return was used as a threat by their parents, so "whenever one of us got out of line, Mami and Papi would march out the old 'Maybe what you need *right now* is some time back home to help set you straight.'" (107).

The García girls "were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were" (135). In this process, Yolanda figures out that she is a poet, which symbolically represents the moment she finds her voice. At the beginning of the vignette entitled "Daughter of Invention" we can see how, as a young girl in a new country whose language she was still learning, Yolanda was "mortified" because she "still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public, subjecting herself to her classmates' ridicule" (138) who would scream at her and her sisters "Spic! Go back to where you came from!" (167). In her website, Julia Alvarez describes a similar situation when referring to her own struggle between Dominican and American life:

I couldn't tell where one word ended and another began. I did pick up enough English to understand that some classmates were not very welcoming. *Spic!* a group of bullies yelled at me in the playground. Mami insisted that the kids were saying, *Speak!* And then she wonders where my storytelling genes come from. When I'm asked what made me into a writer, I point to the watershed experience of coming to this country. Not understanding the language, I had to pay close attention to each word -- great training for a writer. I also discovered the welcoming world of the imagination and books. There, I sunk my new roots.

For Yolanda, just as for Alvarez, books become a refuge from her confusing, painful reality, whereas writing allows her the possibility to redefine her identity in her own terms:

Back in the Dominican Republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book. But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class (138).

If Yolanda could dominate the English language through the written word, she was no longer an immigrant with an accent, but rather became an example to her American classmates. Becoming a writer, then, was a way to deal with her conflicting displaced experience, a strategy for survival. Writing

was Yoyo's time to herself [...] Hunched over her small desk, the overhead light turned off, her desk lamp poignantly lighting only her paper, the rest of the room in warm, soft, uncreated darkness, she wrote her secret poems in her new language [...] coaxing out of a labyrinth of feelings (133).

After finishing a speech to read in front of her school, Yolanda feels that she “finally sounded like herself in English” (140). This symbolically marks the moment where the young girl develops her poetic voice. The fact that “Yoyo and her sisters were forgetting a lot of their Spanish” (139), that she has found her voice in English and that this voice was inspired by Whitman’s poetry, does not mean that the young girl had abandoned her Dominican identity to become Americanized. As Alvarez explains in an interview when referring to her own experience, this is a much more complicated, hybrid process: “It’s not that I’ve totally lost my Spanish, but my dominant tongue is now English, and yet I’m also a person in Spanish” (Caminero-Santangelo 16). Poetry becomes a way for Yolanda to deal with her shifting, contradictory identity growing up Dominican in the United States. As their nursemaid Chucha had anticipated before the girls’ departure to American land: “They will invent what they need to survive” (219).

### **“A Failure of the *Mestiza* Consciousness”?**

With *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Julia Alvarez not only introduces Dominican literature into American mainstream culture, but also voices her own experience of displacement, and by extension, that of many of her compatriots who struggle to find a space where they belong when they have been uprooted from the place they used to call home. Yolanda’s identity as the daughter of Dominican exiles in the United States is split between the traditional values of her Hispanic heritage and the American ideals of the 1960s. Writing becomes an outlet for the young girl to navigate her complex emotions regarding her divided identity. The young girl is beginning to develop a hybrid, in-between consciousness which aims to embrace aspects of both her Dominican and her American side. Since the cultures which

inform her existence uphold opposed values, her liminal identity is characterized by contradictions, movement and transformations, as Yolanda straddles both worlds.

As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Cabrera-Polk defends that *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* reflects the failure of the *mestiza* consciousness. According to the critic,

Anzaldúa's theory can either set the marginalized free or, in the García sisters' case, send them into a never-ending cycle of searching for home [...] As harmonious as 'mestiza consciousness' seems, it could also mean losing connection to one's definitive heritage roots thereby becoming culturally diluted and part of no home whatsoever (1).

Anzaldúa's consciousness of the borderlands, nevertheless, should not be understood as a definite, fixed destination, but is rather "in constant state of transition" (25). As the Chicana author explains, "[t]he *mestiza*'s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness" (100), so that she "constantly has to shift out of habitual formations" (101). According to Anzaldúa, "[e]very increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing" makes the *mestiza* "again an alien in new territory. And again, and again" (70). Therefore, the "never-ending cycle of searching for home" which Cabrera-Polk interprets as the failure of the *mestiza* consciousness in Alvarez's novel, is the very motivation for the development of a *mestiza* consciousness, which succeeds because "its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (102).

Yolanda's identity is fragmented because she has been made to believe that she can only be Dominican or American. At the beginning of the book, that is, at the end of the story, the girl still hopes that the Dominican Republic can become her home because she has come to realize that she does not belong in the United States. Nevertheless, the first vignette also depicts

Yolanda's rejection of her original Dominican culture as the sole foundation of her identity when she gradually becomes aware that it is a system based on the exploitation of other minority groups. This is something she is aware of now that her family has been subjected to the same ethnic oppression and discrimination in the United States. As Mitchell explains, the novel contemplates the exploitative social conditions of each culture and refuses to privilege the country of origins over the newly adopted nation—each exists in a dialectical tension within the minds of the narrators in such a way that the binary of national identity gradually falls away to be replaced by the more indeterminate identity of a multi-nationed clan (29).

Similarly, Anzaldúa rejects those aspects of her Mexican culture which oppress her, stating: "I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me" (44). In so doing, she builds her own *mestiza* identity: "if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" (44). Thus, the adoption of a *mestiza* consciousness does not imply the complete rejection of her Dominican heritage, as Cabrera-Polk suggests, but a reconfiguration of the original values to incorporate them into her present identity, as exemplified by Yolanda in her return to the Dominican Republic. In her article, Adams states that "it remains unclear whether, for the García de la Torres, their transnational identities are a source of power or a site of irreconcilable fragmentation" (3). To answer this question, as I have shown in this chapter, the girls' transnational identities are a site of fragmentation, but this very fragmentation is the first step towards the formation of a *mestiza* consciousness that will heal this split, serving as a source of change and empowerment.

CHAPTER III: “EVEN THOUGH I’VE BEEN LIVING IN BROOKLYN ALL MY LIFE, IT  
DOESN’T FEEL LIKE HOME TO ME”: PILAR PUENTE IN CRISTINA GARCÍA’S

*DREAMING IN CUBAN*

You are an amazing hybrid—a tree that gives forth both  
mangoes and magnolias. And Carmita, you don’t  
have to stop eating the fruit to smell the flower.

—Carmen Agra Deedy, “Growing Together”

**Cuban Literature of Displacement**

The conflicted identity of the displaced self is one of the most recurring themes in Cuban literature. The first waves of migration from the island to the United States took place during the Spanish colonial rule. Cuban identity, therefore, has been shaped from outside the island since the nineteenth century, as authors such as José María Heredia, Cirilo Villaverde, José Martí, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda were already dealing with the theme of exile in their works. Nevertheless, the exodus that followed the Revolution in 1959 has become the most massive movement of people from the island-nation to the United States. The Cuban exile differs from other migration movements from Latin America in that, whereas other émigrés maintain their connections with the homeland, there is a great fracture between those who stayed in Cuba and those who left the island. This gap has become wider as generations of Cubans born in the United States continue to lose touch with their Caribbean roots and become assimilated into

American culture. Consequently, although displacement is still characteristic of the Cuban works produced in the United States, it has gradually ceased to be a central topic in contemporary Cuban-American literature.

Nevertheless, for many decades following the massive Cuban migration to the United States the literature by Cuban authors depicted a struggle between the nostalgia for the motherland and their steady adaptation into American life. Once the idea of returning to the island had been abandoned, hybrid texts which represent Cuban subjects and preoccupations in American contexts and settings, sometimes combining Spanish and English, become representative of this period. The discourse by authors who were born in Cuba but spent a great part—if not most—of their lives in the United States is characterized by the depiction of a hyphenated identity at the intersection between its original Cuban values and the adopted American culture. As Belén Rodríguez-Mourelo explains, “once in exile, uprootedness reflects on the writers, who create a double consciousness because their reality in a new land draws the past into consideration” (31). The literature of the Cuban expatriate, thus, is informed by the author’s experience of displacement in the United States, so that the literary self is never isolated from the circumstances in which they have come to exist.

### **The Cuban Revolution and the Exile in the United States**

In order to understand the complex nature of the Cuban literature of exile, it is necessary to first become familiar with the conflicting sociopolitical context in which these texts originate. Large-scale migration from Cuba to the United States began in 1959 when Fidel Castro led an armed revolt which overthrew Fulgencio Batista’s regime and replaced it with a socialist state. The first immigrants initially left Cuba with the intention of staying abroad for a couple of days until the situation in the island returned to normality, not knowing that they would never go back



to their homeland. During the first decade of Castro's government, the population of Cubans in the United States grew from 79.000 in 1960 to 439.000 in 1970. Immigration from the island to the mainland continued to increase for decades and, nowadays, Cubans are the seventh largest immigrant group in American soil, with an estimate of 1.272.000 Cubans living in the United States, which has become the country with the largest number of Cubans abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the socialist character of the Cuban Revolution, many professionals abandoned the island so that they could continue their careers wherever there was a more favorable political, economic and ideological climate for their activities. As Rodríguez-Moureló observes, between 1960 and 1962 exiles were mostly land and businesses owners who rejected the nationalization of private property through the First Agrarian Reform Law. Besides, after the Address to Intellectuals by Castro in 1961, where the leader pronounced his famous "Por la revolución, todo; contra la revolución, nada," many artists and intellectuals were practically forced into exile in order to enjoy the freedom to denounce the situation in Cuba (44).<sup>9</sup> Since the communist government could not afford having political dissidents in the island who could organize and dismantle the revolutionary regime, they did not put great efforts into preventing migration from Cuba to the United States.

Unlike other immigrants from the Hispanic Caribbean, Cuban émigrés were well received in the United States. The Cold War atmosphere in America at the time suited their rejection of Castro's communist regime, and people in the United States were generally sympathetic with their situation. Those who arrived in American shores escaping the Revolution were admitted for humanitarian reasons and qualified for government assistance and permanent residence. A great

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Migration Policy Institute.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the different waves of Cuban migration following the outbreak of the Revolution, see Silvia Pedraza's "Cubans in exile, 1959-1959: The State of the Research."

number of Cuban exiles settled in their port of entry, Miami, creating tight-knit communities such as the one in Little Havana, slowly adjusting to their new reality in the United States while also recreating their former Cuban life in the American diaspora. As Maria Cristina García<sup>10</sup> explains, many Cubans in the first wave of immigrants "hoped to return to their homeland one day, [and] maintaining a sense of *cubanidad* in exile was crucial for the distant day when repatriation would become possible; in the meantime it would ensure their survival as a distinct community" (2). Back in Cuba, expatriates were called *gusanos* (worms), since their departure was a betrayal to the success of the Revolution. Cubans on both sides of the Strait resented each other, and a division among families and entire communities emerged.

### ***“Los atrevidos” of the 1.5 Generation***

The Revolution and its resulting exile generated not only a split between Cubans in the island and in the United States, but also a clear division among the first few generations of writers in the Cuban diaspora.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the authors who left the island as adults kept very close ties to the motherland, maintaining Spanish as their first language and the lost homeland as the main trope in their works. On the other hand, those who arrived at a younger age and became writers in the United States perceive exile with different eyes. This usually means the use of English or Spanglish to express realities and preoccupations that are rooted in their Cuban origins, but which are different than those of their parents and grandparents. As scholar Eliana Rivero explains, in the works by the Cuban authors from the younger generations “one can notice that particular fluid character of a biculturalism and bilingualism that still [...] continues an impossibility for older émigrés” (170).

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<sup>10</sup> American historian, not to be confused with novelist Cristina García.

<sup>11</sup> Isabel Alvarez Borland offers one of the most comprehensive studies of the Cuban literature of displacement in her book *Cuban American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona*.

The writers that spent part of their childhood or adolescence in Cuba and were raised in the United States, referred to as “*los atrevidos*” in Carolina Hospital’s homonymous anthology, produced a literature of their own. Some of the most well-known names include Pablo Medina, Pau Llosa, Roberto Fernandez, and Gustavo Pérez-Firmat. Their works do not fit into the earlier category of exile authors that wrote in Spanish about the island, nor do they belong to the tradition of Cuban-American writers born in the United States and assimilated into American culture. Instead, they can be placed somewhere in between those two canons, in a third space that originates in the borderlands between Cuban and American culture. According to Rivero, these authors are aware of their difference, “of a double identity [...] manifesting often as a sense of belonging nowhere, neither here nor in Cuba” (170).

“*Los atrevidos*” write about their experience as part of the “1.5” generation, described by Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut as

Children who were born abroad but are being educated and come of age in the United States [...] These refugee youth must cope with two crisis-producing and identity-defining transitions: (1) adolescence and the task of managing the transition from childhood to adulthood, and (2) acculturation and the task of managing the transition from one sociocultural environment to another [...] Members of the “1.5” generation form a distinctive cohort in that in many ways they are marginal to both the old and the new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them (61).

One of the most well-known texts which deals with the cultural production of the 1.5 generation is Pérez Firmat’s *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way*. In this collection of essays, first published in 1994, the author defines the works by this in-between generation as a hybrid between Cuban and American culture. His interpretation of the hyphen in Cuban-

American identity, described as “not a minus sign but a plus” (14), is best understood through his parallel between the experience of the exile and the mambo’s hybridity as a genre, which has received many influences from different cultures. According to the author, “this music remains a powerful example of bicultural boldness and hybrid wit” (93):

The mambo’s oddity, its breathless tempo, its convulsive choreography, its stridencies and dissonances, are symptomatic of a taut agglutination of diverse musical traditions. It is no coincidence that the English-language title for its first mambo is “Mambo Jambo,” for the mambo is indeed a jumble, a forum for foreignness and a haven for the heterogeneous. The great Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz aptly described it as an “estofado de sonoridades,” a stew of sounds. Since for Ortiz the essence of Cuban culture was also its nourishing combinations of foreign ingredients, the mambo’s impurities did not make it any less Cuban (72).

### **The Case of Cristina García**

The experience of many Cubans in the diaspora was a transplanting more than an uprooting. Pérez Firmat, for instance, had the same teachers and classmates in Havana and Miami. However, those that did not join the Cuban community that rebuilt Havana on the Calle Ocho had to deal with fragmentation and feelings of displacement. This is the case of Cristina García, who was born in Havana in 1958 and grew up in the United States since the age of two, when her parents fled from Cuba after the outbreak of the Revolution. In an interview with Iraida H. López, the novelist expresses how she “didn’t grow up as part of any Latin or Cuban community” and therefore her life was “bifurcated” (606). “At home,” García states, “I felt very Cuban and that identity was very much instilled in me” but nevertheless she “knew virtually no

other Cubans except for cousins, and a couple of Puerto Ricans” (606). However, after a visit to Cuba in 1984, the author explains,

I got a larger sociopolitical context for being Cuban. For me, Cuba had been a black and white situation up to that point. Half of my family came here, half stayed there, and most of them didn’t speak to each other for twenty years. There was very little shading, very little room for gray or for interpretation (607).

After this pivotal moment in her life, García says, “I started synthesizing things more for myself and ingested them and they became part of me, on a deeply emotional level” (607), as she learned the other side of the story of her family. Nevertheless, the writer expresses her struggle to belong in the Cuban diasporic community when she lived in Florida, explaining how, two years after her visit to Cuba, “I went to Miami and met the Cuban community for the first time in my life. It was a shock, it really was.” (607). Here, García declares, “I felt extremely alienated [...] I feel that I’m not a welcome daughter in the community. I feel part of it and yet somewhat rejected. It’s very hard to reconcile” (608). It can be argued that, for those authors who continued to live a Cuban life in the United States, the feeling of displacement is not so strong as in the experience of other émigrés who lacked the support of an exile community. Therefore, the fact that the Cuban diaspora in Miami did not welcome García explains her conflicted identity, since she was rejected by Americans who told her “Go back to your country!” (607), but also by the Cuban community, which according to her “is not a tolerant exile community” (608).

Even though she was born in Cuba and raised in the United States, most scholars do not consider García as part of the one and a half generation, but as second-generation or ethnic writer, and are very critical about the Cubanness presented in her works. Pérez Firmat, for instance, states that in García’s literature, “[t]he voice that speaks [...] is that of someone who

retains ties to Cuba but is no longer Cuban” (136). Andrea O’Reilly Herrera has described how, as the daughter of Cuban and Irish parents, her sense of *lo cubano* comes from listening to her relatives talk about their way of life on the island. The critic argues that “Cubands,” meaning Cuban and something else, like Cristina García, are the recipients of a “second-hand exile condition” (179). García, nevertheless, declares “I always thought of myself as Cuban” (López 607), and defends her right to write about her Cuban heritage regardless of the language, declaring that

Those of us who kind of straddle both cultures are in a unique position to tell our stories, to tell our family stories. We’re still very close to the immigration, and yet we weren’t as directly affected by it as our parents and grandparents were. So we are truly bilingual, truly bicultural, in a way the previous generations were not (612).

### **Dreaming in Cuban and the *Mestiza* Consciousness**

The understanding of the Cuban experience of exile requires the elimination of strict boundaries between what is regarded as purely Cuban and what stands as prototypically American. Critics such as Jorge Duany have made a case for more flexible definitions of transnational identity which “transcend the insular territory, the juridical definitions of citizenship and nationality, the traditional postures of political ideology, and even the standard opposition between Spanish and English” (“Reconstructing Cubanness” 36). García’s experience is not marked by dualistic conceptions of *cubanidad* and Americanness, but rather corresponds to the *mestiza* consciousness developed by Gloria Anzaldúa in her canonical *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. García explores this tension between cultures in her autobiographical novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, where her literary “alter ego” (López 610) presents

a hybrid identity that is neither Cuban nor American, but both at the same time, which is characterized by the character's inability to define herself in strictly American or Cuban terms.

In this chapter, I study the connection between the *mestiza* identity developed in the context of Chicana feminist theory and the in-betweenness of the main character in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar Puente. For this purpose, I analyze a series of scenes in the novel to explore the ways in which García's text depicts a girl who is torn between two cultures. The aim is to show how Pilar finds her own *mestiza* consciousness in a borderland space in which Cuban and American culture interweave, a third space that is examined through the lens of Anzaldúa's borderland theory. In short, this chapter attempts to understand the ways in which Chicana definitions of hybridity and multiplicity applies to the experience of Cuban-Americans of the 1.5 generation, some of whom do not conform to the strict definitions provided by critics writing about the Cuban exile specifically.

It is undeniable that the work by Cuban authors such as Alvarez Borland or Pérez Firmat has contributed enormously to the understanding of the life on the hyphen. Nevertheless, as Annabel Cox has already noted, the novel "moves beyond the definitions of Cuban-Americanness offered by critics such as Pérez Firmat." Furthermore, Cox argues, "it indeed expresses a wider sense of identity than the predominantly bicultural one argued for by analysts such as Isabel Alvarez Borland" (375). Critic Anja Mrak coincides with Cox, stating that "[h]yphenated identity as a term that implies a dual identity can [...] be read as a limited construct based on essentialist sentiment and simplistic affiliations" (188-189). A Latina feminist perspective, on the contrary, sheds light into García's work in ways that authors who write specifically about the Caribbean have not. The prominence of feminist borderland theory developed in the context of the Mexican-American context, added to the lack of a more flexible

theory specific to the case of Cuban expatriates in the United States, explains the use of Chicana perspective for an understanding of works like García's. In this sense, the feminist theory by authors such as Anzaldúa reflects a similar hyphenated experience of people who manifest a multiple, hybrid consciousness when their identity is denied both in their original culture and in the United States.

Some critics have already suggested a connection between Chicana hybrid identity and the experience of Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*, paving the way for an analysis of this kind. Such is the case of Nara Araújo, who claims that there is “a more complete acceptance of the border situation in the Chicana than is the case for the Cuban-American” (98). Literary critics, she points out, have not considered Cuban literature “in connection with other Hispanoamerican hybrids such as Chicano or Nuyorican literatures” (95), a comparative approach that would allow new interpretations of these texts. Barros-Grela links textual hybridity in *Dreaming in Cuban* to the representation of a hybrid identity by the author (19). As autoethnography, Samantha L. McAuliffe suggests, “[t]he reader is able to experience the conflict those with a hybrid identity experience” whereas “García herself is able to reconcile issues of culture and identity through the writing of the novel” (1). Raphael Dalleo studies the similarities between *Dreaming in Cuban* and Chicana author Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, claiming that García's novel “positions itself as the inheritor of hybrid versions of Latin American, Caribbean, and North American cultures” (3).

Other scholars have established a more specific connection between García's first novel and Anzaldúa's seminal text. Mariana Mussetta, for instance, interprets Pilar's search for identity and eventual realization that she does not belong in one place instead of the other as a celebration of hybridity, so that the character acts as a bridge between the two worlds which define her



identity: “celebrando la propia hibridez y ofreciéndose como puente entre dos mundos: eligiendo, como Gloria Anzaldúa en su *Borderlands*, servir como mediadora.” Veronica Popescu briefly compares Pilar’s in-betweenness to Anzaldúa’s definition of borderlands (157). Furthermore, some authors have recently begun to offer a more developed approach to García’s text from the theoretical framework of borderland theory. Such is the case of Macarena García-Avello and Nadia Der-Ohannesian, who have introduced Anzaldúa’s text to their respective interpretations of *Dreaming in Cuban*. Nevertheless, the possibilities allowed by a thorough analysis of the novel through the lens of Chicana feminist theory in *Borderlands* remain virtually unexplored.

### **Pilar’s Hybrid Identity in *Dreaming in Cuban***

*Dreaming in Cuban* narrates the story of the del Pino women, who have been divided politically and geographically as a result of the Cuban Revolution. The matriarch of the family, Celia del Pino, is a strong Castro supporter who has found a purpose in her involvement with the revolutionary cause: “Celia is pleased. What she decides makes a difference in others’ lives, and she feels part of a great historical unfolding” (111). She embodies the ideals of the Revolution, which prescribe the sacrifice of the individual for a greater cause. The woman fantasizes with the figure of “El Líder,” watches the coast “to protect her stretch of shore from foreign invaders” (112), acts as a judge in the People’s Court to solve problems within the community, and even goes to the field to help harvest sugar cane. Her daughter Lourdes, on the contrary, abhors the communist ideals of Castro’s regime, adhering to the capitalist values of the American dream. She left the island shortly after the outbreak of the Revolution, has become an entrepreneur with her Yankee Doodle bakery, patrols the streets of her Brooklyn neighborhood, celebrates the Fourth of July, and enjoys the Thanksgiving parade. Lourdes wants nothing to do with Cuba:

“Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful [...] She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her” (73).

*Dreaming in Cuban* is not a political manifesto in the sense that the novel follows the lives of the del Pino family throughout the years and across the sea in a way that there is not a hero nor a villain, just different perspectives regarding a common reality. As Araújo explains, “[t]he fact that none of the characters prevail, that the story doesn’t impose a precise or unique way of understanding identity, ideology or political position, comes perhaps from an equidistant attitude which places the narrative in the border” (100). When explaining her intentions at the time of writing her first novel, García says: “I wanted to examine very closely the personal cost of what happened in Cuba after 1959. And I wanted to very specifically examine how women have responded and adapted to what happened to their families after 1959” (López 609). This exploration of the aftermath of the Revolution includes not only its effects in the lives of women at both sides of the Strait, namely Celia and Lourdes, but also covers the experience of young girls who are torn between complete assimilation into the new culture and the nostalgia for the lost motherland, such as Lourdes’ daughter, Pilar Puente.

While Celia and Lourdes represent the two extremes of the political climate which resulted from Castro’s regime, Pilar is symbolically divided between the cultural values that the two female role models in her life represent. Born in Cuba but raised in the United States, the young girl struggles to figure out her position in this conflict throughout the whole narrative. Pilar has spent the great majority of her life in the United States, yet she is never completely disassociated from her Cuban origins. At the beginning of the novel, she is determined to go back to Cuba, where she hopes to find a sense of belonging she has never known in the United

States. The girl explains: “Even though I’ve been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn’t feel like home to me. I’m not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out” (58). The story unravels as Pilar declares “I’m going back to Cuba. I’m fed up with everything around here” (25). Her quest for identity becomes the main plot in *Dreaming in Cuban*. Although García offers a polyphonic story where the perspectives of the different women in the family switch and intertwine, the only parts of the book that are narrated in the first person are the sections where Pilar’s voice speaks, whereas a third person omniscient narrator relates the experiences of the other characters, which makes the youngest of the del Pino women the protagonist of the story.

It is true that Pilar did not experience the immediate effects of the Revolution the way her mother and her grandmother did, since she was only two by the time her parents decided to leave the island. Nevertheless, as a young Cuban woman living in the United States, the Cuban exile which results from the Revolution affects her directly in her struggle to define and understand her displaced identity. “Pilar is the personification of the meeting between two cultures, languages and histories which form something entirely new” (McAuliffe 6). On the one hand, because she was born in Cuba, she does not identify as American, even though she has spent the great majority of her life in the United States and has become naturalized. On the other hand, due to her young age at the time of arriving and because of her inability to communicate fluently in Spanish, Pilar is not wholly Cuban either. She is suffering, in Anzaldúa’s words, from “an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other” (41). Therefore, she “will have to stand and claim [her] space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*” (Anzaldúa 44), constructing a space in which she will reconcile the two sides that divide her identity.

## **Torn between Languages**

One of the ways in which cultural affiliation has been traditionally defined is through language. In the works by the 1.5 generation, Spanglish and code-switching are used to express the ambivalence between cultures. However, as Cox explains, “while García herself may feel a part of this bicultural, bilingual generation, it is clear that *Dreaming in Cuban* itself is not a bilingual text” (365). English is the language used throughout the whole text, except for the occasional inclusion of a few words in Spanish. However, code switching is implied every time the perspective of the polyphonic narrator moves in time and space between Cuba and the United States. According to Araújo, “[a]lthough there is a difference with the bilingualism of Chicano or Nuyorican literatures—where the intermingling of Spanish and English creates a new linguistic dimension—the switching parallels the alternate sequences of action in the US and Havana” (100). Thus, García’s novel transcends monolithic demarcations of linguistic identity.

One of the most noticeable ways in which Pilar’s in-betweenness is depicted in *Dreaming in Cuban* is through language. From the very beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that Pilar has a stronger command of English, even though her mother tongue is Spanish. Due to the harsh political divisions between Cuba and the United States, Pilar feels that she needs to conform to one language or the other, so that the character experiences the tension between two languages as the tension between the two opposite cultures which define her existence. When reflecting upon her own identity, the young girl expresses opposing ideas, since she feels that she can only be defined by one culture or the other. The ambivalence between her Cuban origins and the American context where she lives becomes the main conflict in the text.

Celia states that Pilar “writes to her from Brooklyn in a Spanish that is no longer hers. She speaks the hard-edged lexicon of bygone tourists itchy to throw dice on green felt or asphalt”

(7). Pilar's Americanized Spanish is perceived as a sign of her otherization. In the eyes of her grandmother, she is no longer Cuban but a tourist, representative of the U.S. abuse of the island for the sake of capitalism and vice, as depicted by García's use of symbolism characteristic of gambling. A language that should bring these two women closer, thus, functions as a barrier between them, a border Pilar will have to transcend in order to make sense of her identity. The young girl's poor command of Spanish, interpreted by Celia as proof of her complete assimilation to American life, and consequently of the loss of her Cuban identity, makes her alien to the Caribbean island. "Pilar's eyes, Celia fears, are no longer used to the compacted light of the tropics [...] She imagines her granddaughter pale, gliding through paleness, malnourished and cold without the food of scarlets and greens" (7).

Pilar is symbolically unable to make sense of her existence exclusively in monolingual terms. Even though English is the language she dominates best, it proves inadequate when the young girl attempts to communicate intense emotions. Thus, Pilar fails to express her teenage angst in her predominant language, saying "I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in heap" (59). The young girl also finds Spanish more suitable to express love, so that when talking about her relationship with Rubén, her Peruvian boyfriend, Pilar confesses "[w]e speak Spanish when we make love. English seems an impossible language for intimacy" (180). The fact that Spanish becomes the language of love in the novel should not be interpreted as García's simplistic stereotyping of the romance tongue, as some critics have suggested. On the contrary, this strategy is used to convey that, even though Pilar communicates mostly in English, Spanish is also part of her identity, being the language that voices some of her most profound feelings.

As Cox observes, “the areas in which Spanish does predominate are so important that one of them, dreaming, informs the title of the novel itself” (366). When Pilar returns to Cuba for her aunt’s funeral, she declares “I’ve started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible” (235). Dreaming in Spanish, an act which happens subconsciously and does not take the place of speaking English, is understood as a transformation of the self, a process of becoming hybrid, of incorporating the two languages to her identity. Pilar, Mrak states, “realises that it is possible to occupy more than one cultural and national space at one time” (188). Therefore, this journey back to her Cuban roots, as I will explain later, becomes central in the young girl’s development of a *mestiza* consciousness.

### **Artistic Expression of Hybrid Identity**

Pilar lives in constant struggle between English and Spanish, continuously trying to reconcile the cultural values that the two languages represent. Thus, when words cannot describe her displaced experience, she is forced to express herself in a different language of her own. While this conflict results in the use of Spanglish in texts by other Cuban-American authors of the time, in *Dreaming in Cuban* the inability to be perfectly fluent in Spanish and to convey emotion in English leads to the protagonist’s use of art as a means of communication. Pilar believes that “[p]ainting is its own language ... Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English” (59). Therefore, artistic creation becomes her tongue for expressing her hybrid, conflicted identity. The girl wonders “who needs words when colors and lines conjure up their own language?” (139). When she paints, she aims to “find a unique language, obliterate the clichés” (139), which she achieves through abstract painting, a style that

“is more up my alley. I feel more comfortable with it, more directly connected to my emotions” (233).

Through the use of artistic language, Pilar finds a way to express her discomfort with having to strictly adhere to Cuban or American culture. Thus, when Lourdes asks her daughter to paint something for her patriotic-themed bakery, the young girl depicts the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of the corrupted values of the American dream her mother holds on to, but to which she does not personally adhere. Pilar says “I make Liberty’s torch float slightly beyond her grasp, and [...] I paint her right hand reaching over to cover her left breast, as if she’s reciting the National Anthem or some other slogan” (141). To this already controversial depiction of such a significant American symbol, she paints

black stick figures pulsing in the air around Liberty, thorny scars that look like barbed wire. I want to go all the way with this, to stop mucking around and do what I feel, so at the base of the statue I put my favorite punk rallying cry: I’M A MESS. And then carefully, very carefully, I paint a safety pin through Liberty’s nose (141).

For Pilar, artistic creation is hybrid. She uses images traditionally associated to American freedom and transforms them to represent her displaced experience in the so-called land of the free, where she feels that the American dream is unattainable, constricted, as represented by the torch out of Liberty’s reach and the barbed wired which prevents the entrance of immigrant families like hers. According to Cox, “the role of imaginative transformation in [the novel] has strong political connotations” (374). Pilar’s manipulation of the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty “shows *Dreaming in Cuban*’s commitment to using hybrid images precisely as a political tool, and not just to create a culturally defunct but aesthetically pleasing vision” (Cox 374). This is explained by the fact that, as Pilar declares, one of the many legacies her grandmother has left

her is “a disregard for boundaries” (176). This disregard for boundaries is linked to her hybrid, at times contradictory identity, that is not limited by words, and finds in painting a way of transcending the boundaries placed by linguistic constrictions.

In a decisive point of the novel, Pilar is sexually assaulted in a park in New York. She describes how

Three boys surround me suddenly in the park, locking me between their bodies. Their eyes are like fireflies, hot and erased of memory. The rain beads in their hair. They can't be more than eleven years old.

The tallest one presses a blade to my throat. Its edge is a scar, another border to cross. [...] The boys push me under the elm, where it's somehow still dry. They pull of my sweater and carefully unbutton my blouse. With the knife still at my throat, they take turns suckling my breasts (201-202).

This incident, which is described as a border, becomes a scar that will mark her and which mimics the scar-like black lines she painted around Liberty, another boundary to transcend.

Pilar uses art to make sense of her traumatic experience when “nothing makes sense” (202), in an attempt of understanding her divided identity, to cross the border that scars her. The very night of her sexual assault, she takes a bath and goes to bed, and then: “At midnight, I awake and paint a large canvas ignited with reds and whites, each color betraying the other. I do this for eight more nights” (203). This becomes a routine for over a week, until the young girl says: “On the ninth day of my baths, I call my mother and tell her we're going to Cuba” (203). As foreshadowed by the image of the boys suckling her breasts, the way Pilar makes sense of her trauma is by turning to the motherland, realizing she needs to return to Cuba and deal with her split identity.



## ***La facultad: A Bridge between Two Cultures***

After being sexually assaulted, Pilar develops the ability for clairvoyance. “Since that day in Morningside Park,” the girl explains, “I can hear fragments of people’s thoughts, glimpse scraps of the future. It’s nothing I can control. The perceptions come without warnings or explanations, erratic as lightning” (216). This rather implausible twist can be linked to Anzaldúa’s definition of “*La facultad*,” which is “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (60). *La facultad* is “an instant ‘sensing.’ A quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols” (60). This explained by the Chicana author as a survival tactic against pain:

When we’re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. We’ll sense the rapist when he’s five blocks down the street. Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate (60-61).<sup>12</sup>

Pilar’s trip to Cuba is not experienced as a return home, as she had anticipated earlier in her life when she ran away from her family house in Brooklyn, with the intention of moving back to Cuba with her grandmother. Instead, her time on the island helps her realize that, just as she does not belong in the United States, her place is not in Cuba either. This scene is significant in the novel, as her grandmother had just had surgery to remove her breast, which symbolizes how the return to the motherland is a return to a place that is no longer there. As the days pass

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<sup>12</sup> This acute sensitivity, a state frequently reported by survivors of sexual assault, is described as “hypervigilance” by contemporary trauma theorists such as Judith Herman.

by, Pilar gradually becomes aware of the fact that, as much as she enjoys the life in the island and her grandmother's company, she would eventually become "the other" in Cuba as well. Pilar realizes that she does not conform to Castro's Revolution in the same way that she does not feel represented by mainstream American values.

Pilar's life in the United States has marked her identity not only in the way she looks, but also in the person she has become: "I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. It's hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed" (235). Furthermore, her artistic self would be compromised by the situation in post-Revolutionary Cuba:

I ask Abuela if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and can't afford the luxury of dissent. Then she quotes something El Líder said in the early years, before they started arresting poets. "Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing." I wonder what El Líder would think of my paintings (235).

In the island, as Odile Ferly observes, Pilar "recognizes the full implications of the Revolution for those who live it daily, gradually realizing its shortcomings, notably its intolerance for dissent and its failure to eradicate sexism" (146). The girl's inability to belong to either Cuba or the United States comes from her disillusionment with certain aspects of both places, as she realizes that she is unable to belong in either of them. Pilar had initially thought her place might be in Cuba, but after the awakening of her hybrid consciousness, she realizes the island she has idealized does not exist: "Cuba is a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it in a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all" (219). The

solution to this conflict is found in the adoption of a multiple, hybrid identity, where her Cuban and her American selves are not mutually exclusive.

Pilar's multiplicity, thus "reconciles mainstream U.S., U.S.-Cuban, and Cuban tradition" (Ferly 145). The symbolism in her name, Pilar Puente, reveals the fact that she acts as a bridge between cultures, "as a pillar supporting the bridge that links the diaspora to the islanders" (Ferly 145). Towards the end of *Dreaming in Cuban*, the protagonist realizes that "sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here" (236). Some critics have interpreted this sentence as the young girl's recognition that her place is in the United States. This is the case of Alvarez Borland, who states that "Pilar tiene que reencontrarse con Cuba para descubrir su verdad y para conseguir averiguar que es a Nueva York adónde pertenece" ("Literaturas de exilio" 21).

However, the emphasis García places on the "not *instead* of here, but *more* than here," reveals that Pilar's decision of returning to the United States does not mean that she fully belongs there, but that she has accepted the borderland space in between both cultures that she now occupies mentally, but which does not exist physically. "Pilar ultimately establishes a connection with her lost heritage and reconciles her place between the two worlds ... She learns that her hyphenated identity does not comprise two contradicting halves, but a cross-fertilization of ideas, concepts, beliefs, languages, and truths" (Mrak 188). For this reason, the young girl decides to continue residing in New York, where she at least can embrace her identity as an artist, this time knowing that her place is in-between Cuba and the United States, and in neither of them at the same time.

## Understanding *Dreaming in Cuban* through Anzaldúa's *Mestiza* Consciousness

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina García deals with her own transnational identity through the character of Pilar. Nevertheless, in spite of the success of her novel, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, she would receive significant backlash from the Cuban diasporic community in Miami. The author has been criticized, among other things, due to her use of English in her famous text, which has been interpreted as a sign that she is not writing for a Cuban audience, but for an American public. However, a reading of the novel through Anzaldúa's definitions of *la mestiza*'s linguistic dilemma in *Borderlands*, where the author defends that identity should not be restricted to language, offers an opposing perspective. "A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish", the author says, "is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish" (Anzaldúa 81). Thus, speaking mainly English and having lost fluency in her native Spanish should not make Pilar, and by extension García, any less Cuban than those who live in exile communities and only speak Spanish in order to remain connected to the island.

García has also been accused of appropriating and misrepresenting a Cuban culture that, as some critics defend, does not belong to her. As we have seen through the eyes of Pilar, when her identity is experienced in ways words cannot explain, whether in English or Spanish, the young girl uses art. Similarly, García uses artistic creation, writing in this case, not to portray an unquestionable reality, but in order to make sense of her experience. Her fiction, therefore, should not be approached as a historical document but as an epistemic journey towards the understanding of her own identity. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, as this chapter has shown, art is used to deal with psychological trauma. Anzaldúa explains that, as a *mestiza* author, "writing invokes images from [her] unconscious," images which are "residues of trauma" (92). "In reconstructing

the traumas behind the images,” the Chicana author states, “I make ‘sense’ of them, and once they have ‘meaning’ they are changed, transformed” (92).

In the case of Pilar, it is not the act of writing but that of painting which is connected to her unconscious. Her abstract art, as it has been explained before, results from her condition as an exile, but also from her traumatic experience as a young woman in a patriarchal society. For Pilar, like for Anzaldúa,

An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up that bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness (91).

Since art is closer to Pilar’s conflicted emotions than words, painting is the outlet for her feelings of displacement.

As she develops a pluralistic mode of understanding, Pilar becomes a bridge between Cuba and the United States, between her grandmother and her mother, between her Cuban roots and her American present. After her return to the motherland, Pilar is able to mediate both identities as a *mestiza* in Anzaldúa’s terms: “It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch” (71). The novel concludes alluding to Pilar’s—and by extension García’s—responsibility to embrace both sides of her family’s story, the Cuban and the American one. Celia writes in her letter to her lover “My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. It is also my birthday. I am fifty years old. I will no longer write to you, *mi*

*amor*. She will remember everything” (245). With that, she hands off the baton to her granddaughter.

CHAPTER IV: “DO YOU THINK WE’RE AS PUERTO RICAN IN THE U.S. AS ON THE ISLAND?”: NEGI IN ESMERALDA SANTIAGO’S *ALMOST A WOMAN*

Every day I crossed the border of two countries.

I would spend the day in the pine-scented parochial school building where exquisitely proper behavior was the rule and return home to our apartment where we spoke Spanish.

—Judith Ortiz Cofer, *Silent Dancing*

### **Puerto Rican Literature in the United States**

The experience of the displaced self has been a recurring theme in Puerto Rican literature, especially in the decades following the Second World War. However, different waves of migration have led to different preoccupations in the writings by Boricua<sup>13</sup> authors. There is a noticeable contrast between the early Puerto Rican literature of exile, written in Spanish and from the perspective of the outsider, and the literature produced in the aftermath of “The Great Migration” of Puerto Ricans to New York, which resulted in the origination of what is known as Nuyorican<sup>14</sup> literature. In the Nuyorican movement, “Puerto Rico became a symbol of ethnic

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<sup>13</sup> “Boricua” is a word used to refer to Puerto Ricans, especially those living in the United States.

<sup>14</sup> The term “Nuyorican” originally had negative connotations in the island, where it was used to refer to the Puerto Rican émigrés whose experience in the United States had influenced their speech and behavior. However, it was later appropriated by the Puerto Rican community in New

pride and political resistance against the racism, economic and political oppression, and marginalization that many Puerto Ricans living in New York endured” (Montilla 53).

Nuyorican and post-Nuyorican literature is mostly written in English and occasionally in Spanglish, and offers an insider’s perspective that was not present in the previous Puerto Rican literature of the exile. This perspective is often understood in terms of ambiguity and hybridity, due to the tension that originates between the values of the culture of origin, to which the generations growing up in the United States do not belong anymore, and those of the culture in which Nuyorican authors try to construct their identities, but where they do not completely belong either. Puerto Rican literature in the American diaspora, thus, offers the possibility of creating a hybrid, ambivalent identity that bridges the two cultures. As Domínguez Miguela explains, “[e]l texto literario sirve como espacio estético privilegiado donde representar formalmente una concepción fluida de la identidad puertorriqueña” (25).

### **Unincorporated Territory, Dislocated Identity**

The borderland experience of Puerto Ricans living in the United States, who are American citizens but do not completely assimilate into mainstream culture, is different to other types of migration studied in this thesis in terms of its historical motivation and circumstances. In 1898, the Spanish-American War culminated with the U.S. acquisition of the island of Puerto Rico. Nineteen years later, in 1917, the Jones–Shafroth Act made Puerto Ricans American citizens, but the island’s status as a Commonwealth or *Estado Libre Asociado* since 1952 limits its autonomy and representation in the federal government. Puerto Rico, thus, remains a colony *de facto*. As such, the island is neither a sovereign nation nor a U.S. state. This means that

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York to protest the rejection they experienced in the island and reclaim their identity in the United States.



“Puerto Ricans born in Puerto Rico, unlike other immigrants or migrant groups, hold the unique position of being United States citizens while still remaining part of the greater Latin American family” (Mohr 265).

The movement of people from the island to the United States has been facilitated by the fact that, as American citizens, Puerto Ricans who wish to leave the island to find better economic prospects in continental America do not face any legal limitations for their relocation.<sup>15</sup> In 1910, before they became citizens, the population of Puerto Ricans in the United States did not reach 2,000 people. Twenty years later, they still only accounted for roughly 20,000 more. However, after the Second World War, migration exploded. In New York City alone, the Puerto Rican population went from 13,000 people in 1945 to more than 50,000 the next year. These numbers continued to increase, at a rate of 25,000 Puerto Ricans entering continental America every year.<sup>16</sup> After the “Great Migration” which took place between the 1950s and the 1960s,<sup>17</sup> more than a million Puerto Ricans lived in the United States. Nowadays, Boricuas make up the second largest Hispanic group in the country, and in the 2012 census they

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<sup>15</sup> It is generally considered that Puerto Ricans in the United States should not be referred to as immigrants, because as American citizens, they do not need a visa to enter mainland United States. According to the Library of Congress website, “the people of Puerto Rico can move throughout the 50 states just as any other Americans can—legally, this is considered internal migration, not immigration. However, in moving to the mainland, Puerto Ricans leave a homeland with its own distinct identity and culture, and the transition can involve many of the same cultural conflicts and emotional adjustments that most immigrants face.” To emphasize the displaced Boricua identity analyzed in this thesis, I will occasionally refer to their transition from the island to continental America as “migration” or “exile,” since it is motivated by U.S. neocolonial practices in Puerto Rico, even though, technically, this movement does not correspond to the traditional definition of such terms.

<sup>16</sup> Source: Library of Congress

<sup>17</sup> For more information, refer to: José L. Vázquez Calzada. *La población de Puerto Rico y su trayectoria histórica*.

accounted for 1.5% of the population of the United States, with an estimate of 5 million Puerto Ricans living in continental America.

### **Puerto Rican Hybridity**

The first Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States settled mostly in New York's Spanish Harlem, the Bronx and Brooklyn. These areas where exiles established their own communities, known as el Barrio, became increasingly important in the construction of a Puerto Rican diasporic subjectivity in the United States. However, the island never ceases to influence the Boricua identity that persists even in generations of Puerto Ricans who have never been to the island. Life in el Barrio is full of complexities and contradictions for Boricua migrants who remain connected to the island. As Domínguez Miguela observes, "Puerto Rico sigue siendo la patria para todos ellos aunque comienzan a experimentar los problemas de sentirse ligados a un espacio en el que [muchos] no han vivido pero con el que tienden a identificarse" (21).

On the one hand, as Puerto Ricans arrived in the mainland, they found that they did not become part of the so-called melting pot, even though they were documented immigrants who had—in theory—virtually the same access to the same opportunities as other Americans. As Lourdes Miranda King observes, Boricuas rather "encountered numerous problems—their scanty knowledge of English, differences in customs, experience in a racially mixed society that ill prepared them for confronting racial inequities. All these factors conspired to sour the 'American dream'" (125). In the late 40s and early 50s, as the Puerto Rican population in the United States continued to increase, the stereotypes that associated Boricuas to violence, crime, laziness and promiscuity grew. By the 1960s, when Puerto Rican migration was reaching a historical peak, these stereotypes were aggravated and perpetuated by the depiction of the life in el Barrio in *West Side Story*, hindering the integration of Boricuas in the United States.

On the other hand, when transportation between Puerto Rico and the United States became more affordable and Boricuas began to return to their motherlands more frequently, people in the island became aware of their compatriots' acculturation in the mainland. Puerto Ricans who had assimilated into American culture were rejected in the island, since they were considered sellouts and traitors of the Spanish language (Domínguez Miguela 23) as they spoke and behave differently. Furthermore, Boricuas who had spent a significant amount of time in the United States noticed the Americanization of the island due to increasing U.S. intervention and denounced the hypocrisy and impossibility of claiming a culturally pure Puertoricanness. "Tanto en la isla como en el continente," Domínguez Miguela explains, "persiste el debate complejo de determinar hasta qué punto la identidad cultural puertorriqueña se ha visto transformada por cuestiones relacionadas con la historia, cultura, lengua, raza y política en ambos espacios" (231).

Puerto Rican in-betweenness, therefore, is often experienced as an identity crisis. This personal conflict is related to the history of colonization the island has seen, first by the Spanish and then by the United States, since they have never had the chance to develop a strong national identity. According to Domínguez Miguela, for the Boricua exile,

Sin un país con el que identificarse plenamente, la importancia de la relación entre espacio e identidad invade todas las facetas de la experiencia puertorriqueña. A caballo entre dos culturas y dos espacios fundamentales, el puertorriqueño de la diáspora ha desarrollado una identidad transnacional y trans-local. Es ésta una identidad pendular, en vaivén, que se mueve constantemente entre varias culturas sin permanecer asida a ninguna de ellas (24).

Puerto Ricans, thus, are hybrid by definition. Artist Pepón Osorio declares that their status as unincorporated territory is "an example of our ambiguity—we're neither here nor there,

like the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico” (Ramírez). Furthermore, whereas Cuban and Dominican immigrants arrived in the United States as political refugees, leaving behind a relatively comfortable life in their respective islands, Puerto Rican migration has been the response to economic hardship in the island, and therefore answers the promise of a better life in the continent. The consideration of Puerto Rican migrants in the United States as exiles has received some pushback, since there is not an authoritative figure of power in the island that motivates their necessity to relocate. Nevertheless, the invisible forces of American capitalism and colonialism still operate in Puerto Rico, and therefore Boricuas are compelled to migrate in order to prosper economically. Consequently, Puerto Ricans in the United States are torn between the appeal of their native island where they originally belonged and the desire to achieve the American Dream from which they are consistently excluded.

### **The Case of Esmeralda Santiago**

Esmeralda Santiago was born in Puerto Rico in 1948, where she was raised until she moved with her mother and her ten siblings to Brooklyn in 1961. She is a former actress and the author of three autobiographical works that compose her memoirs from the time she was a child in San Juan through her adulthood in the United States. Santiago has also published several essays and opinion pieces in national and international newspapers, and has authored numerous anthologies and works of fiction, such as her well-known novel *America's Dream*. In an interview with Bridget Kevane, the author states “in the United States I’m called Hispanic or Latina [...] when I returned to Puerto Rico after twelve years of living in the United States, Boricuas on the island told me I was no longer Puerto Rican because I had lived *afuera* for so long” (130-131). This experience has influenced her writing, which deals with her feeling of

entrapment in between her early years in the island, to which she does not have access anymore, and the country in which she struggles to belong.

In her literature, “Santiago propone una puertorriqueñidad compuesta de una identidad híbrida que acepta su nueva situación en Estados Unidos sin olvidar sus orígenes, que constituyen uno de los elementos fundamentales de ésta” (Dominguez Miguela 230). In her note to the reader in her first memoir, *When I was Puerto Rican*, Santiago refers to this hybrid identity she experiences as a Puerto Rican living in the United States, describing

the feeling that, while at one time they could not identify themselves as anything but the nationality to which they were born, once they’ve lived in the U.S. their ‘cultural purity’ has been compromised, and they no longer fit as well in their native countries, nor do they feel one hundred percent comfortable as Americans.

However, it is in her second memoir, *Almost a Woman*, published in 1999, that Santiago’s liminality becomes especially evident, as the author narrates her arrival to the United States since the age of ten until the time she is twenty-one and decides to move out of the family house.

### **Negi’s Borderland Identity in *Almost a Woman***

In this chapter, I examine in-betweenness in the specific context of Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States. For this purpose, I study the formation of a hybrid identity in Esmeralda Santiago’s *Almost a Woman* from the theoretical point of view of Anzaldúa’s Chicana feminism in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Negi, which is Santiago’s pet name and the name the author’s narrative voice receives in her memoirs, presents a borderland subjectivity due to the languages she speaks, the opposing cultures which define her idea of womanhood, and her ethnic identity as a *mestiza*. The young girl struggles to navigate her new reality of displacement and marginalization in continental United States, while drifting away from the Puerto Rican

community in New York, represented by her claustrophobic relationship with her family. The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Chicana feminist theory relates to the hybrid experience of Puerto Rican women in the United States.

Some scholars have already established a link between Negi's identity in Santiago's autobiographical works and the *mestiza* consciousness Anzaldúa develops in *Borderlands*. Marta Vizcaya Echano analyzes "the memoirs' portrayal of the complex interactions between Santiago's geographical locations, the changes in her understanding of class and ethnicity triggered by her physical displacements, and her fluctuating attitudes towards the various communities" the author describes (112). The critic applies Anzaldúa's metaphor of the borderlands to the experience of Santiago, stating that the Boricua author's "literary self-reconfigurations evidence that the borderland, a shifting landscape of contradictions, is 'not a comfortable territory to live in'" (113). Similarly, Carmen Haydée Rivera examines Santiago's memoirs considering Anzaldúa's definition of *amasamiento*<sup>18</sup> in her interpretation of the works by the Puerto Rican author, which according to the critic, are characteristic of "the fluid and flexible mobility between two geographic and linguistic spaces that blur the lines separating originary and host cultures" (104).

Furthermore, Carmen Rivera observes that, in *Almost a Woman*, the protagonist's quest for identity mirrors the development of the Nuyorican community. Even though the scholar does not directly comment on the relationship between her analysis of Santiago's work and

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<sup>18</sup> For Anzaldúa, *amasamiento* is "the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet [...] an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that has produced [...] a creature that questions the definitions of light and darkness and gives them new meaning" (81).

Anzaldúa's technique, Rivera's approach resembles the connection the Chicana author makes between Mexican history and her personal experience in *Borderlands*, arguing that

Negi's painful childlike point of view resonates with the collective experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York. The clashes and disillusionment with the "American dream" and "the land of the free" leads to the fragmentation of what is perceived to be the Puerto Rican identity, until, that is, the voices begin to emerge from the spaces of ambiguity and ambivalence to proclaim an identity from the margins of the ghetto (5).

### ***Put a or Pendeja? Conflicted Definitions of Womanhood***

Boricua women are marginalized not only because of their origins, but also due to their ethnicity and gender, which makes their stories worth examining in special depth. A clear indicator of this is the fact that hybridity in the literature by Puerto Rican male authors has been widely studied, whereas the literary criticism dealing with the women who go through the same experience of displacement is quite limited. Women are further conflicted between cultures, since the levels to which they suffer oppression and marginalization vary in each of the spaces they exist. Even though discrimination on the basis of gender occurs in the United States as well, the situation in Puerto Rico is even more repressive. As Domínguez Miguela explains,

En la isla las mujeres no deben acudir a bares donde los hombres beben y juegan; no deben trabajar salvo en el hogar, sin embargo, en Estados Unidos todo es diferente. Las mujeres no se hallan tan reprimidas por las normas culturales y morales. El machismo no es tan recalcitrante como en la isla, donde una mujer soltera es objeto de burlas y mofas (243).

This conflict is true for Santiago as well, whose hybrid identity is not only marked by her origins, but also by her ethnicity as a woman of color. "The Puerto Rican woman in the mainland

United States feels the impact of double discrimination as a woman and as a Puerto Rican—often as a woman, a black and a Puerto Rican” (King 128). Furthermore, in an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández, Santiago declares “I am really interested in women’s lives, mostly because I’m a woman. I think my writing is woman’s writing. I write for women” (160). For U.S. Puerto Rican women writers, the narration of their experience of displacement is a way “through which to critique patriarchal society in Puerto Rico as well as on the mainland, and question conventional notions of gender and sexuality” (Montilla 53).

If we consider both the strong patriarchal ideas of femininity in the island and the movement for women’s emancipation taking place in continental United States at the time, the tension between cultures becomes even more intricate for female writers of color, as they have to come to terms with their identity in terms of gender, culture and ethnicity. Thus, Rivera links Santiago’s experience to the concept of “cultural schizophrenia” developed by Judith Ortiz Cofer in *Silent Dancing*, explaining that “[i]t is as if Esmeralda is sinking into the ‘cultural schizophrenia’ of becoming a woman in two different worlds” (12). The cultural struggle Negi faces, then, is not only the result of the author’s displaced identity, but also of her female condition.

One of the ways in which Santiago reflects the tension of being torn between the values of Puerto Rico and the United States is through the commentary on the different definitions of womanhood within each culture. In spite of the more liberal American attitudes of the time, Negi is forced to confront the sexist attitudes in the two places that shape her identity. On the one hand, in the case of Puerto Rican moral values, the young girl realizes that “[t]here was a midpoint between *puta* and *pendeja* that I was trying to figure out, a safe space in which decent women lived and thrived and raised their families ... One false move, and I ran the risk of



becoming one or being perceived as the other” (15). Thus, she experiences a struggle between being too naïve and being too promiscuous. On the other hand, Negi has to face “[t]he stereotype of the hot-tomato Latina” (247) proper of *West Side Story*, where “the only virgin in the entire movie—sweet, innocent Maria—was always played by an American, while the sexy spitfire was Puerto Rican” (121). Thus, even though she was still “the virginal Maria of *West Side Story*,” the girl states, men “envisioned me as the promiscuous Anita” (247).

Santiago grew up in the sixties, a decade in which second-wave feminism was bringing new changes to the lives of women in the United States. Some of these changes were especially unwelcome in the Puerto Rican community, since women’s sexual liberation seemed to be in conflict with the traditional values of the island. This becomes clear in a passage where Negi’s family is discussing the introduction of contraceptive methods: “Birth control was in the news because of the recently developed pill to prevent pregnancy. Whenever we discussed it at home, it was agreed by the adults around the kitchen that ‘the Pill’ was nothing more than a license for young women to have sex without getting married” (156-157). The young girl, on the contrary, distinguishes herself from her family’s ideas by stating: “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). Her feminist consciousness is confirmed when her German boyfriend attempts to compliment her by saying “You are not American girl. They are very free,” and she declares “I want to be free” (189).

### **Linguistic Identity: From *Hispana* to Americanized**

Almost as soon as Negi sets foot in Brooklyn, her Puerto Rican identity is erased. In the United States, the girl is perceived only as Hispanic, as if this label could encompass all the

different identities which compose the Latina experience. This happens when she meets a girl who asks her

“¿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.” (4).

After this exchange, a confused Negi reflects on the fact that, until that moment, she never had to face the question of her identity. The girl had always been Puerto Rican, and her arrival to continental United States automatically made her someone different, even though she was the exact same person: “I’d always been Puerto Rican, and it hadn’t occurred to me that in Brooklyn I’d be someone else ... Two days in New York, and I’d already become someone else” (5).

Santiago realizes that, in spite of her American citizenship, in the United States she is “the other.” Therefore, she attempts to fight the simplistic reduction of her identity to “Hispanic,” and the consequent discrimination this label implies, by teaching herself English, as a way of trying to fit in American culture, to avoid standing out from the crowd. Negi states how “[i]n class, I seldom raised my hand, because my accent sent snickers through the classroom the minute I opened my mouth” (17). Her commitment to learning English grows when the economic fate of her family lies in her hands, as she is the only one able to help her mother at the welfare office. As the young girl stumbles upon words and has trouble communicating, she decides “that even when it seemed that my head couldn’t hold many new words inside it, I had to learn English well enough never again to be caught between languages” (20-21).

Negi is conflicted between her Puerto Rican identity, whose preservation is something to be proud of in her family, and cultural assimilation, which was the goal to achieve for the experience of uprooting to be successful. The tension arises from the fact that the girl is

supposed to acculturate in order for her displacement to have a purpose, but at the same time, is punished for becoming too American. Her integration into her new life in the United States is perceived as a sign of defiance by her mother, as an assault to her Puerto Rican upbringing and values: “When she said I had changed, she meant I was becoming Americanized, that I thought I deserved more and was better than anyone else, better than her. She looked at me resentfully, as if I had betrayed her, as if I could help who I was becoming, as if I knew” (59).

For Negi and her family, the adoption of English as the means for communication is not conceived as compatible with the Spanish language they already spoke, but as mutually exclusive. When speaking of her cousins, who had been in the United States for a long time already, the girl says

They spoke English to each other, and when they talked to us or to their mother, their Spanish was halting and accented. Mami said they were *Americanized*. The way she pronounced the word *Americanized*, it sounded like a terrible thing, to be avoided at all costs, another *algo* to be added to the list of ‘somethings’ outside our door” (12).

Negi and her siblings learn to accommodate language to express their in-between identity. “We invented words if we didn’t know the translation for what we were trying to say, until we had our own language, neither English nor Spanish, but both in the same sentence, sometimes in the same word” (18). Furthermore, English brings Negi closer to the other side, to the American society that does not conceive the possibility of speaking Spanish and not being something other than Hispanic. This way, the narrator explains how “[s]lowly, as our vocabularies grew, it became a bond between us, one that separated us from Tata and Mami, who watched us perplexed, her expression changing from pride to envy to worry” (18). Learning English meant the construction of another borderland space, this time a linguistic one that separated Negi and

her siblings from the adults in her family, who were at the other side of this boundary, but which still prevented them from integrating into American society, where she would never be regarded as American even if she lost her accent.

Ramona, Santiago's mother, is grateful that Negi is learning English fast, since this means that her daughter can help her communicate with social workers at the Department of Public Welfare. However, English builds a wall between the two, since Negi becomes something her mother will never be and which escapes her control. Ramona continuously reminds her daughter: "Don't think because we're here you can act like those fast American girls" (29). As Negi would come to realize: "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" (25). Because of the conflicted messages she receives, the young girl cannot make sense of her identity and embrace hybridity. This tension is not only reflected in the language she speaks, but also through the culture Negi consumes:

The problem was that it was hard to tell where Puerto Rican ended and Americanized began. Was I Americanized if I preferred pizza to *pastelillos*? Was I Puerto Rican if my skirts covered my knees? If I cut out a picture of Paul Anka from a magazine and tacked it to the Wall, was I less Puerto Rican than when I cut out pictures of Gilberto Monroig? Who could tell me? (25).

### **Performing *Mestiza* Hybridity**

In terms of ethnicity, Santiago faces yet another borderland experience in the United States which complicates her identity formation during these years even further. The girl studies drama in a predominantly white institution where "almost all the students and teachers were

white” (69) with the exception of “fourteen black, three Puerto Rican, and two Asian” (69). This is not a world for an “illegitimate” Puerto Rican girl who shares a bedroom with her ten siblings and whose family is on welfare, but a world of abundance, of “trips to Europe during vacations, extra classes on weekends with dance masters or voice coaches, plastic surgery to reduce large noses or refine broad ones” (69). At the beginning, Negi says “the advantage was not talent, nor skin color, it was money” (70). However, she is only cast in roles for women of color, so that she will later realize that her skin color will also be another burden to her displaced experience.

Because of her appearance and her Spanish accent, Negi does not have the same opportunities other girls in her school enjoy. As soon as she starts her drama classes, the young girl is told that “[a]ccent eradication is important” (68). This implies the eradication of her Puerto Rican identity as well, to the point that she is advised that even her name, the only thing reminiscent of her former Boricua self, should be changed, “since Esmeralda Santiago was clearly too long to fit on a marquee, hard to remember, and definitely foreign” (68). The girl discovers that, in this industry, she is “only good enough to play Cleopatra and other exotic characters” (88-89) when she “wanted to play Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Eliza in *Pygmalion*, Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*” (105).

Nevertheless, when there is a part of a Puerto Rican character, Negi is told “[y]ou don’t look Puerto Rican enough” (151) because she has perfected her accent and does not conform to the stereotypes of Puertoricanness:

More than once I was told I didn’t “sound” Puerto Rican. “You don’t have a Puerto Rican accent,” Mr. Merton, one of the supervisors, remarked [...] When he implied that I didn’t “act” Puerto Rican, I swallowed the insult. “Maybe you haven’t met enough of us,” I

suggested, hurt that he was surprised Puerto Ricans could be competent, chaste girls who spoke good English (169).

Clara E. Rodríguez explains that “in Puerto Rico, racial identification is subordinate to cultural identification, while in the U.S. racial identification, to a large extent, determines cultural identification” (245). Therefore, in the United States it is the color of Negi’s skin that determines the behavior she is expected to perform, even after she has lost her Spanish accent.

Santiago’s *mestiza* identity makes her situation of in-betweenness even more acute. As she learns in her experience of displacement, “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” (57). Sociologist J. Jorge Klor de Alva observes that “[m]estizo or *trigueño*-looking Puerto Ricans, who could not pass for white but lacked a predominance of black features, resisted attempts to acculturate into either community by highlighting their distinct hispanicity” (114). This is the case for Santiago, whose experience in continental United States makes her aware that she is not strictly white or black, and therefore will always be marked as “the other.” When she was just a child newly arrived to Brooklyn, she realized that American strict definitions of ethnicity did not include her *mestiza* identity, stating: “When I had to indicate my race, I always marked “Other,” because neither black nor white was appropriate” (57). This goes on throughout her years in New York, as she learns that, as a *mestiza*, she lives in a racial borderlands: “I wasn’t black, I wasn’t white. The racial middle in which I existed meant that people evaluated me on the spot” (242).

Since Negi does not conform to any of the definitions of Puerto Rican or American identity offered to her, the young girl explores her hybrid identity through the performing arts. Santiago reveals how she had to constantly perform different roles depending on the context

surrounding her. On the one hand, the girl uses performance to escape her unpleasant reality as a Puerto Rican girl in Manhattan, creating

*a simulated reality [...] in which I spoke fluent English, felt at home in the harsh streets of New York, absorbed urban American culture without question as I silently grieved the dissolution of the other me, the Spanish-speaking, Puerto Rican girl most at home in a dusty, tropical road (74).*

On the other hand, in her Puerto Rican home, she says,

*I wiped off my makeup, then stripped. Esmeralda Santiago remained in the folds of each garment I took off and put away. Naked, nameless, I lay on my bed and slept. Half an hour later, Negi emerged, dressed in the comfortable clothes I wore at home. Another performance was about to begin, this one in Spanish (169).*

Negi's life in the United States is a borderland experience. Not only is she unable to completely assimilate into American culture, but also feels like "[e]very day we spent in Brooklyn was like a curtain dropping between me and my other life, the one where I knew who I was" (31). The girl is at the intersection between worlds, which are not two but three: her former life in the island, where her father still loves her, her current Puerto Rican life in a Brooklyn ghetto, and her American life as a performer in Manhattan. As she becomes used to switching identities through the performance of her American and Puerto Rican selves, Negi fantasizes with transcending labels. The young girl dreams about not being strictly Puerto Rican, nor American, but something undefined, everything at once, so that

*"everywhere I went people were happy to see me and no one asked where I was from ...*

*In my secret life I wasn't Puerto Rican. I wasn't American. I wasn't anything. I spoke*

every language in the world [...] my skin was no particular color, so I didn't stand out as black, white or brown" (84).

Negi's utopic fantasy is a denial of her *mestiza* identity. She responds to the anxiety of living in the borderlands by creating a world in her imagination where there are no boundaries, no races, and where she is able to communicate without any issues. However, this world with no nationalities, no colors and no linguistic limitations, which initially serves an imaginary escape to her unpleasant reality, will eventually disappear as the young girl becomes aware that she belongs in an in-between space, admitting that she will have to learn how to inhabit all these spaces as they are all part of her:

That world in Brooklyn from which I derived both comfort and anxiety was home, as was the other world, across the ocean, where my father still wrote poems. As was the other world, the one across the river, where I intended to make my life. I'd have to learn to straddle all of them, a rider on three horses, each headed in a different direction (153).

### **Negi's Coatlicue State**

In *Almost a Woman*, Negi's conflicted identity makes her stuck in between worlds, unable to move literally and symbolically, so that when she finishes her first show, she describes being "pulled by Mami, Don Carlos and my siblings in one direction, while my peers and teachers towed me in another. Immobile, I stood halfway between both, unable to choose" (145). According to Anzaldúa, this is a consequence of the life in the borderlands: "Blocked, immobilized, we can't move forward, can't move backwards" (43). Santiago remains trapped between the impositions of the Puerto Rican values and the expectations of American culture for a young woman living in the sixties. Whereas she is proud of her Boricua roots and never hides



her identity, the machismo of the island has been brought to the United States by the strict rules and impositions of her mother in their Brooklyn home.

Author Juan Flores distinguishes four stages in the development of Puerto Rican identity in the United States: an initial disillusionment with New York City, the idealization of the island left behind, the return to the community with a strong sense of belonging, and the identification with other marginalized ethnic groups. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Black Power “provided a model for the Chicano movement and the Nuyorican movement” (Burgos 129), which resulted in the formation of the Young Lords.<sup>19</sup> A clear example of this ideology is Jaime, Santiago’s fellow actor, who is “proud of his heritage, determined to do what he could to preserve Puerto Rican culture in New York. In El Barrio and the Bronx, in parts of Brooklyn, other young Puerto Ricans, some of them members of the Young Lords, campaigned to prove the lives of their *compatriotas*” (286).

Nevertheless, this is not the case for the young Negi, who does not establish a direct connection with the rest of the Puerto Rican community in New York. In one of her exchanges with Jaime, the girl asks “[w]hat do you think happens to us here?” [...] “Do you think we’re as Puerto Rican in the U.S. as on the island?” (286), referring to the fact that she does not feel Puerto Rican in the exile, at least not the way she used to in the island, after the interference of American culture in her identity formation. To this, her friend states that they are not as Puerto Rican in the diaspora as they were back in Puerto Rico, but “[m]ore,” because they “have to work at it here.” (286), meaning that they have to struggle with the stereotypes against Boricuas to accommodate their original culture to their experience in the United States. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>19</sup> Puerto Rican civil rights movement with a strong presence in New York and Chicago during the 1960s.

girl confesses “[m]y own social conscience was pathetically underdeveloped. I felt no obligation to ‘our people’ in the abstract, felt, in fact, weighed down by duty to my people in the concrete: Mami, Tata, my ten sisters and brothers” (286).

Santiago’s second memoir is not so much about the reconciliation of the multiple selves that form the main character’s identity, but rather deals with the identification and exploration of the tension between the two cultures which define her existence. Throughout the book, Negi gradually begins to realize that she belongs in a third space that is located at the crossroads between the multiple worlds she inhabits. In spite of this evolution in Santiago’s understanding of her own identity, she never embraces her Puerto Rican *mestiza* identity in the United States, but instead retreats from her family as she is not able to reconcile her traditional Puerto Rican origins with her present American experience. Negi is in a phase that Anzaldúa describes as “the Coatlicue state.”

Coatlicue, Aztec goddess of birth and death, “represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (68). For the Chicana author, Coatlicue is “a prelude to crossing” (70) that occurs because the *mestiza* has yet to embrace her hybridity, her borderlands identity:

We are not living up to our potentialities and thereby impeding the evolution of the soul—or worse, Coatlicue, the Earth, opens and plunges us into maw, devours us. By keeping the conscious mind occupied or immobile, the germination work takes place in the deep, dark earth of the unconscious (69).

The refusal to accept the *mestiza* condition, “to know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, that depression—brings on a Coatlicue state. At first I feel exposed and opened to the

depth of my dissatisfaction. Then I feel myself closing, hiding, holding myself together rather than allowing myself to fall apart” (70).

The *mestiza*, Anzaldúa explains, emerges from the Coatlicue state in a moment of regeneration, which is symbolized by a serpent leaving the egg:

It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a new perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch [...] Suddenly, the repressed energy rises, makes decisions, connects with conscious energy and a new life begins (71).

On the contrary, not leaving the Coatlicue state, has the opposite effect. According to Anzaldúa, “her reluctance to cross over [...] forces her into the fecund cave of her imagination where she is cradled in the arms of Coatlicue, who will never let her go. If she doesn’t change her ways, she will remain a stone forever” (71).

### **Towards a *Mestiza* Consciousness**

The fact that Negi does not actively participate in the efforts to improve the situation of her community does not mean that she wishes to renounce her Puerto Rican origins. Even though she initially escaped her reality through imagination and fantasy, by the end of the memoir the girl had a different strategy to fight discrimination and prejudice. As she drew stares when her theatre company toured the north, Negi initially “was intimidated,” then “grew defiant,” and finally “decided to educate people about Puerto Rico” (241):

I took every opportunity to mention Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, even when the subject of conversation had nothing to do with ethnicity or culture. Waiters, school custodians, the doorman at one of the hotels where we stayed, the clerk at a pharmacy

where I went to buy sanitary pads, a cashier at L. L. Bean—all learned that I was Puerto Rican, that Puerto Rico was in the Caribbean, that Puerto Ricans were American citizens at birth, that we spoke Spanish as our first language, that English was a required subject in our schools (241-242).

Although she claims that “Jaime’s judgement of me, unsparing and consistent, made me question my loyalty to my people” (287), Negi proves to be working for her community, at least indirectly, since her rationale behind this plan is: “If I relieved their ignorance about me, maybe they would look at the next Puerto Rican who came through with respect rather than suspicion” (242). Furthermore, the girl also struggled to set an example for her siblings, stating that,

To avoid the hot-tomato label, I dressed neatly but conservatively. I didn’t smoke or drink. If I was in a situation where drugs were being shared, I walked away, so as not to confirm the stereotype of Puerto Ricans as drug abusers. There were enough alcoholics in my family for me to know that it wasn’t fun, or pretty, and that whatever a drunk sought to abolish with liquor never went away (287).

Even though Negi is still not embracing a *mestiza* consciousness which encompasses her Boricua identity with her U.S. but rather addressing American stereotypes of Puerto Ricans, the girl will not remain stuck in the denial of the Coatlicue state since, as she claims “I had no desire to alter my consciousness, nor to escape reality” (287). The girl does not oblivate her origins through escapism as she once used to do, but instead accepts and defends her right to occupy the American space as Boricua.

By the end of *Almost a Woman*, Negi is starting to accept her own inconsistencies, her multiplicity as a woman living in between worlds, straddling two different cultures and three different worlds. The girl wants to follow her own path, to dissociate both from her family’s

impositions regarding how to be a decent Puerto Rican woman and also from American stereotypical definitions of her identity, which reflects the fact that a *mestiza* feminist consciousness is beginning to forge. As much as she loves her family, Santiago ends the memoir leaving her mother's house, eloping with the Turkish lover who will become the center of her third instalment. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa explains "I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me" (38). Similarly, for Negi, "[t]he home that had been a refuge from the city's danger was now a prison I longed to escape" (210). The search for identity is understood as a search for her own female voice, which has been silenced in her exile experience. The girl confesses how, after spending her whole adolescence listening to other people's definitions of her identity, she "longed to cup my hand to my mouth, the way singers did, and listen to myself. To hear one voice, my own, even if it was filled with fear and uncertainty. Even if it were to lead me where I ought not to go" (210).

CHAPTER V: “AN ABSOLUTE DESPOT DUALITY THAT SAYS WE ARE ABLE TO BE  
ONLY ONE OR THE OTHER:” CHICANA FEMINISM AND LATINA LITERATURE  
FROM THE HISPANIC CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

Flesh and blood beings live in the borderlands, struggling,  
surviving, creating, transforming, resisting. Borderlands  
in our minds, in our words, in the printed page. They are  
an invitation—to explore, to see anew, to transform.

—Mariana Ortega, *In-Between*

In the preceding chapters, I have explored the ways in which people from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds experience migration. Even though border crossing is a different ordeal for everyone affected by it, the texts by the Latina women writers from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean analyzed in this project share many commonalities. Yolanda, Pilar, and Negi, the protagonists in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, and *Almost a Woman*, are all young women who migrated from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean island at a very early age to settle in New York in the 1960s. In their coming of age stories, they experience issues that are common to most teenagers of immigrant parents in the United States at the time, such as being exposed to two completely different languages, struggling to adapt to their new reality while dealing with the nostalgia of their previous lives, or having controlling

mothers policing their sexuality in an age of female emancipation. In short, these girls deal with issues of class, race and gender specific to the diasporic experience.

The main element that links the three young girls together in the texts by Alvarez, García and Santiago is that they suffer, in Anzaldúa's words, "from an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other" (41). The opposing values of the original culture and those of the host country are experienced as a struggle because they are conceived as irreconcilable, at least initially:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision (100).

Nevertheless, the main characters in the texts by the Caribbean authors studied in this thesis not only suffer from a tension between cultures, but also embody resilience as they respond to their struggles by using different forms of art, which are literature, painting and acting respectively. "Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland," Anzaldúa explains, "is what makes poets write and artists create" (95). Thus,

The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem [...] lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the

beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war (102).

In the case of Yolanda García, her ethnic and socioeconomic background is completely different from that of Anzaldúa and the girls depicted in the other texts, which grants her certain privileges back in the island. The girl comes from a wealthy family of descendants from the Spanish *conquistadores*, lives in a mansion attended by the live-in help, studies in American schools, and her father is granted a visa to escape Trujillo's dictatorship. Nevertheless, these advantages do not spare her from experiencing similar struggles to those described by the Chicana author. In her host country, Yolanda becomes "the other," as she is torn between languages and cultures which she does not seem able to reconcile. When the girl seems to have become assimilated into life in the United States, she experiences an emotional breakdown that makes her aware of her fragmentation. Instead of embracing and inhabiting the borderlands space between her Dominican roots and her American present, like Anzaldúa does, she—at least initially—decides to reject her Americanness altogether and return to the island.

It could be argued that, as the novel progresses, the reader learns the process of the girl's adaptation to American life, and that the first chapter, the last part of the story chronologically speaking, only shows her inability to belong in the Dominican Republic after spending so many years in the United States. Nevertheless, in this key vignette, as I have shown in Chapter II, Yolanda seems to gradually develop a *mestiza* consciousness back in the island, as her experience in the United States has made her see Dominican reality with different eyes. The fact that she is beginning to develop a more class-conscious identity suggests that, like Anzaldúa, she will reject those values in each system which she cannot embrace, while creating a third, in-



between consciousness which straddles both worlds, realizing that none of them are home and becoming at home in her liminality.

Similarly, throughout *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar Puente initially rejects the American side of her identity in favor of her Cuban origins, instead of embracing both cultures. Influenced by nostalgia for the life in the island, a life which she has barely known in person but which is instilled in her by her grandmother Celia, Pilar decides that the solution to her problems of adaptation in the United States is returning to Cuba, a place where life was easier and better. Nevertheless, as I explain in Chapter III, at the very end of the novel she is already beginning to accept her hybrid subjectivity, realizing that she does not belong to either place, reconciling her nostalgia for the life in the island with the possibilities the United States offers her as an artist. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* contextualize her struggle to communicate with language and her choice of art as a means of expression, developing *la facultad* as a strategy for survival, but García's novel does not really compare to the text by the Chicana author in its treatment of issues related to language, class and ethnicity. Pilar does not struggle with English, since she arrived in the mainland at a very young age, her parents own a successful business, and the color of her skin never seems to be an issue in her attempts to feel at home in the United States.

In the case of Santiago's memoir, on the contrary, her mixed race and the precarious financial circumstances of her family are at the center of her inability to belong in America. Negi is a *mestiza* in the ethnic sense of the world, and her journey of transition from her life in Puerto Rico to the United States is probably the one that compares to Anzaldúa's experience the most. Even though she has not traversed any literal border, since she has always been an American citizen, Santiago's struggle between the Puerto Rican values of her family and the life in continental United States is very complex as a case of borderland subjectivity. As I explore in

Chapter IV, the author herself confesses that her consciousness was underdeveloped at the time and therefore she did not actively participate in the efforts of her community to fight marginalization. Nevertheless, in many instances throughout the book, it is suggested that she is submerged in a Coatlicue state which would precede her development of a *mestiza* identity that would embrace both worlds in a third, in-between space, as she never renounces her Puerto Rican identity, and even contributes in the struggle against discrimination by disseminating information about her culture and by avoiding to fall into the stereotypes of Boricua women.

If we apply Anzaldúa's theory in *Borderlands* to the lives of Yolanda, Pilar, and Negi, it becomes evident that the *mestiza* consciousness is a process and that each girl is at a different stage of it. In addition their stories demonstrate that the *mestiza*, although initially developed as a concept that describes ethnic identity, can be extended to other parts of a person's experience. To be a *mestiza* means to be caught in between two ideologies, two definitions of identity that are traditionally presented as mutually exclusive. Therefore, as the characters in the texts by Alvarez, García and Santiago prove, one can be in the borderlands in terms of language, place, nationality, age, and cultural affiliation. Initially, these women are divided because they think they can only be one thing or the other. "In attempting to work out a synthesis," Anzaldúa says, "the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness" (102). Thus, what the Chicana author does in her work, which is "developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (101) is still a work in progress for Yolanda, Pilar and Negi. In the texts analyzed, the protagonists become aware of what makes them *mestizas*, they still need to heal the split in their identities to be "on both shores at once" (100). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that these girls are definitely "attempting to work out a synthesis" (102) which is already beginning to come into existence.

My attempt in this project, as I stated in the introduction, was to use Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness as a framework to analyze *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, and *Almost a Woman*. Border theory in Anzaldúa's work has proven applicable to these three texts in varying degrees concerning common issues of the hybrid subject such as language, gender, ethnicity, and the identity of the artist as creator of her own identity. Furthermore, the texts by the Caribbean authors analyzed have also shed new light in Anzaldúa's definition of the *mestiza* consciousness, since class and age have been demonstrated to be another aspect of the life in the borderlands which the Chicana author had not contemplated in her canonical text. On the contrary, the levels in which Yolanda, Pilar, and Negi depict a feminist consciousness are nowhere near to Anzaldúa's *conciencia de mujer*, which is not surprising considering the time in which the texts by Alvarez, García, and Santiago are set and the time in which Anzaldúa is writing. Furthermore, Anzaldúa explicitly deals with issues of sexuality which are practically absent in the texts by the Caribbean authors in spite of the coming-of-age nature. Due to the constraints in length and time, it has not been a possibility to address in depth how Alvarez, García and Santiago differ from Anzaldúa in their depiction—or lack thereof—of a feminist consciousness, a task which remains a possibility in future research projects.

Even though it has been over 50 years since the events which inspired these texts occurred, and although many things have changed since the moment in which they were published around 20 years ago, the truth is that the texts studied in this thesis are still relevant nowadays. Migrants from the Caribbean and from other parts of Latin America continue to experience issues of identity similar to the ones depicted by Anzaldúa, Alvarez, García and Santiago. On both sides of the Atlantic, borders have become a current topic of discussion in the recent years as the result of a significant refugee crisis which has impacted the current world. As

immigration continues to increase, most times resulting from dictatorial regimes and military occupation which remind of the contexts studied in this thesis, it becomes increasingly evident that the issues described in this project should still be addressed. Literature, thus, can be a useful tool for turning the numbers and statistics we see every day in the media into concrete names, lives, and stories which humanize our study and understanding of such events.

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