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CONTIGO APRENDÍ

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AL PROFESOR

JOSÉ LUIS CARAMÉS LAGE

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UNIVERSIDAD DE OVIEDO

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When They Were Puerto Rican: Transnational Spanish Voices of the American Mosaic

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Universidad Complutense de Madrid

1. Introduction: The US as a Mosaic

The first chapter of Thomas Sowell's book *Ethnic America: A History* is entitled "The American Mosaic", where he explains how the peopling of America is one of the great dramas in all of human history. Over the years, a massive stream of humanity –45 million people– crossed every ocean and continent to reach the US. They came speaking every language and representing every nationality, race, and religion. Today, there are more people of Irish ancestry in the US than in Ireland, more Jews than in Israel, more blacks than in many African countries. There are more people of Polish ancestry in Detroit than in most of the leading cities in Poland, and more than twice as many people of Italian ancestry in New York as in Venice (Sowell, 1981: 3). Moreover, Latinos are now a majority in numerous places, so that the Hispanization of the US is advancing ceaselessly. On the other hand, the setting in which the history of all these peoples unfolded is no less impressive than the numbers and varieties of the peoples themselves. The US is one of the largest cultural-linguistic units in the history of the world. From San Francisco to Boston is the same distance as from Madrid to Moscow. Yet here there is one (official) language, one set of laws, and one economy in an area that, in Europe, is fragmented into a multitude of nations, languages, and competing military and political blocs (Sowell, 1981: 4).

For his part, in *A Most Imperfect Union, a Contrarian History of the US*, Ilan Stavans presents an animated alternative history of America, giving full voice to the country's unsung people. From African slaves to accused witches, from Puerto Rican radicals to Arab immigrants, Stavans uses sardonic humor to introduce some of the most captivating characters in an American history that mainstream

accounts often ignore. His argument is that in the US the powerful and privileged have usurped American history. The true story of the US lies not only with the founding fathers and their story of American exceptionalism, but with the country's most overlooked and marginalized peoples: the workers, immigrants, exiles, and slaves who built America from the ground up and made the US the country that it is today. The geographic distribution has been as diverse as the nationalities that these emigrants represented. Some immigrants to the US simply settled in those parts of the country closest to their places of origin –the Orientals in Hawaii and on the West Coast, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Cubans in Florida–. On the other hand, Germans and Scandinavians settled in the upper Midwest, and the Scotch-Irish along the Appalachian region. Those groups that arrived virtually penniless from Europe –the Irish, the Italians, and the Jews– settled right in the northeast ports where they arrived. Blacks were concentrated in the South, and the concentrations of West Indians and Puerto Ricans in and around New York City[1] reflect the accessibility of air and shipping routes in the twentieth century (Sowell, 1981: 13). So, America is indeed a mosaic; it is "a postmodern culture, an immigrant culture whose master story is composed of many other stories." (Bigsby, 2011: 23) In addition, things have become even more complicated for Americanists after the arrival of the so-called "transnational turn" in American studies.

It has been said that one of the most prominent developments in American Studies from the 1990s has been its "transnational turn", the increasing interest in approaching the study of the US in a more international framework, in terms of both the questions being asked and the resources deployed to answer them (Heise, 2008: 381). The effect of this turn was dislocating the imaginary identification of American subjects with their native context, "whose guiding theoretical premise was based upon the supposedly exceptionalist qualities of the US environment." (Giles, 2019: 31) As Ursula Heise explains, the theoretical projects that inform the transnational turn are by no means uniform, so that while some scholars aim to approach American Studies hemispherically by linking explorations of Anglo-American and Latin American literatures and cultures, others focus on transpacific connections around the "Pacific Rim." Yet other theorists focus on transatlantic cultural bridges, diasporic communities or islandic sites. As Ramazani summarizes, transnationalism can help the US citizens understand and imagine a world in which cultural boundaries are fluid, transient, and permeable, and thus read themselves "as imaginative citizens not of one or another hermetically sealed national or civilizational bloc, but of intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge (Ramazani, 2006: 355).[2]

The reason why I have chosen this topic to be included in a *Festschrift* to honor José Luis Caramés is that *collaboration* is a key word in transnational approaches to American literature, a term and a professional practice that Caramés elevated to its maximum expression. He always was, as Shelley Fisher Fishkin recently put it during a lecture she gave during the 2019 ASA Conference in Honolulu, a "serial collaborator", for he did not understand his research without

[1] In fact, Puerto Ricans in the US tend to be called "Newyorkricans", according to the Urban Dictionary (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Newyorkrican).

[2] For a more extensive explanation, see Durán, 2019: 202-3.

including in his projects his group of doctoral students or colleagues from Spain and beyond. Another key feature of the transnational turn is its comparativist and interdisciplinary vocation, a vocation that Caramés partook of. Indeed, for a number of years, he gathered scholars from many universities and disciplines around art and all its manifestations, during the interdisciplinary conferences on "Artistic Discourse" that he conceived and organized at Oviedo University, which dealt with topics as varied as madness, utopias, North and South, fin de siècle, or cinema and literature, as understood and analysed from many parts of the world. Finally, without knowing it, Caramés always practiced transnationalism, for he often set in contrastive and comparative dialogue various Anglophone literatures in his scholarship (namely, English, Indian, and African). Likewise, he also explored the Spanish, Cuban and Puerto Rican traces in Anglo-American literature, and this further explains my choice.

Puerto Rico is a very unlikely course to be taught at an English Department of a Spanish University. Therefore, the only manner I conceive is to do it in dialogue with other literatures; in a transnational and comparative perspective; focusing on what is specifically Puerto Rican and what Puerto Rican authors share with other Latino/a and American writers. And this view is shared by a large number of scholars and academic publications that choose to engage in a "transethnic approach" to ethnic literatures in the US. One example that I cannot avoid mentioning is a volume edited by Begoña Simal, entitled *Selves in Dialogue: A Transethnic Approach to American Life Writing*. The volume establishes dialogues (understood as comparative or contrastive views of at least two different cultural traditions in each of the essays) that cultivate a spirit of "mixing rather than segregating." (2011: 13) The nine essays that compile the volume apply a comparative lens to the study of authors from different ethnic groups, but some also incorporate dialogues between traditional, mainstream texts and other, less canonized life-writing expressions. Similarly, in his 2006 publication *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*, David Cowart maps the most recent chapters in the literature of a country that has long been marked by a history of arrivals from remarkably heterogeneous origins. Cowart's readings of writers from Saul Bellow to Jamaica Kincaid, from Julia Álvarez to Chang-Rae Lee, or from Cristina García to Ursula Hegi, offer new interpretations of some of the most important contemporary immigrant literature and develop a general typology of shared features of these books that complicate the dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. His approach shows immigrant writers drawing inspiration from and contributing to the Western literary tradition, rather than resisting it. In writing a book organized around the dominant tropes and formal elements of diverse immigrant fiction (namely, the acquisition of language, the dual identity of the immigrant, the place of the homeland, and the nature of citizenship), Cowart seems to demolish the walls of "ghettos" erected by the kind of scholarship that is totally guided by identitarian politics. So, instead of relegating immigrants from the Caribbean and Pacific Islands to "ethnic laundries" (Ferens, 2100: 130), Cowart reads Álvarez, García and Kincaid alongside Hoffman, Nabokov and Bellow, making multiple cross-references to Western and ancient classics.

In many ways, these and many other books seem to respond to some critical views that have argued for the need to transcend group-specific approaches to ethnic literatures. Paul Lauter's defence of a comparativist model for the study of

American Literature is acknowledged as an inspiration for Simal's volume. But I also hear responses to Werner Sollors' views against obsessive ethnic essentialisms and their resulting isolationist, group-by group approaches that emphasize cultural heritage within the particular, and somewhat idealized group –at the expense of dynamic interaction and syncretism. Therefore, following in the trail established by such recent scholarship, my discussion of two Puerto Rico women writers (Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer) will be based on a cross-ethnic reading: some would call it post-ethnic, transethnic, or interethnic. The term does not really matter; what matters is that such readings and critical approaches suggest a revisionist agenda regarding ethnicity, often grounded on comparative approaches that create bridges and cultural connections between the many voices that compose the chorus of American Literature.

It is a fact that more than sixty million Americans speak at home a language other than English. Are they non-Americans because they would rather be bilingual than monolingual? What is at stake here is a discussion around nationalism, identities, language policies and social/cultural history, among other fields. All of which have had their expression in many types o literature, but more specifically in testimonial or autobiographical literature, which is the genre I shall explore in the lines that follow, in order to gain a wide picture of the ethnic American mosaic we are describing. And when we talk of autobiography, we also talk of memory, because memory is of crucial importance for the exiled or the immigrant being. The need to go back to one's roots; to recapture a lost language or a lost culture, and the quest for what is in danger of being forgotten; the fight against *el olvido,* as Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer lyrically presents it in her poem with the same title, included in *Silent Dancing*:

> It is a dangerous thing
> to forget the climate of your birthplace,
> to choke out the voices of dead relatives
> when in dreams they call you
> by your secret name.
> It is dangerous
> to spurn the clothes you were born to wear
> for the sake of fashion;... dangerous
> to disdain the plaster saints
> before which your mother kneels
> praying with embarrassing fervor
> that you survive in the place you have chosen to live:
> a bare, cold room with no pictures on the walls,
> a forgetting place where she fears you will die
> of loneliness and exposure.
> Jesús, María, y José, she says,
> *el olvido* is a dangerous thing.
>
> *El Olvido*, (1990: 68)

In his memoir *Return to Centro Histórico*, Mexican-American writer Ilan Stavans expresses a similar idea in one single sentence: "the imperative is to explain to ourselves not how far we've travelled in our journey of assimilation

but how truthful we've remained to our origins." (2012: 102) Finding the reply to that conundrum is what most Latino/a life writing in the US is all about.

2. Voices of Latino/a Life Writing

"My book is necessarily political" states Richard Rodriguez in the first chapter of his autobiography *Hunger of Memory* (1982: 7), and indeed, this sentence could be applied to every Latino/a autobiography. This literary form has historically been a space full of political consequence because it allows what is normally disallowed: the voicing of silenced or repressed ideas and values; and, for those who wish to stress a Latino/a identity, a shared group history becomes a relevant topic in their life writing. Although some of the authors I shall be naming below (Gloria Anzaldúa, Richard Rodríguez, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Sandra Cisneros, Esmeralda Santiago or Judith Ortiz Cofer) tell of their individual histories, their stories are also balanced by a story of group identity. We only have to listen to what Cuban-American writer and scholar Pérez Firmat says in his autobiography of exile, *Next Year in Cuba*:

> The portrait is also a group picture. […] Although the narrative relies on the circumstances of my life in a foreign and familiar land, I share these circumstances with countless other immigrants. I can't presume to speak for all Hispanic Americans, or even for all the Cuban-Americans; yet it would be disingenuous for me to think that my words, my feelings, my experiences, are mine alone […] they emerge *from a choral or communal setting* and resonate with shared experiences and expectations (Pérez Firmat, 1995: 13. My emphasis)

Besides this sense of a choral subjectivity, the so-called "pastiche personality" also becomes an empowering vision of the self. In so doing, the idea of a "real identity" disappears giving way to an ever-changing self that bases its identity on its changing relationships with the other language and the other culture. That is, exiled, immigrant or ethnic autobiographers live in the American mosaic of the 21st century, in which there is no longer a central ethos to seek or emulate, but the pros and cons of multiplicity; a culture that fragments into multiple perspectives, identities, voices, and discourses. Therefore, Latina/o autobiographers write as this conjunction of cultures, working in the very "interzone" where their two languages and cultural ideologies of self overlap, for it is *there* that identity must be discovered and a compromise negotiated (Durán, 2007: 123).

The now classic *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa is probably the first contemporary Chicana autobiography to offer a response to earlier representations of border identity and cultural hybridism. Anzaldúa's text emphasizes the capacity of autobiographical writing to provide a distinctive voice in which personal memory becomes a political act, when the metaphors of hybridity, border crossings, transculturation, and *mestizaje* become the space from this Mexican-American woman negotiates the reconstruction of her "self." In a historical first chapter, she explains how, after the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the 16th century, a new race was born, the *mestizo* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood). Hence, Mexican-Americans are the offspring of those first matings,

and the continual intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa, 1999: 7). Anzaldúa's intention in writing this book is to raise what she calls a *mestiza* consciousness, one that enables her to reject all those binary oppositions or frontiers between black/white, American/Mexican, man/woman, English/Spanish that she sees as simplistic products of Western thought. And she feels she has to find her own race in an amalgam identity that she calls *mestiza*:

> As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races (1999: 102).

Anzaldúa's challenging border metaphor also affects her use of language, because her book is written in the three languages spoken at the border: Spanish, English, and Nahualt. Indeed, her language is the code-switching language of the Borderlands, and this is why at the beginning of her autobiographical manifesto she defies the monolingual reader and warns him/her that she will leave those languages intentionally untranslated:

> The switching of "codes" in this book from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language –the language of the Borderlands. […] Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel the need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture –to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway (Anzaldúa, 1999: 20).

Exactly the same feeling of being met halfway has inspired Ilan Stavans to elevate Spanglish to the category of a *mestizo* language. [3] As a matter of fact, the issue of bilingualism and its metaphors has occupied almost all Latino life writers whose lives are divided between the two logos, very often using Spanish as their private tongue and English as their public language. Ilan Stavans, Mexico-born Jew who emigrated to the US in 1985, captured his existential and linguistic journey (from Yiddish to Spanish and English) in his 2001 memoir *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language*, where he weaves personal reminiscences with an investigation into language acquisition and cultural code switching. In fact, Stavans has devoted a large part of his intellectual life to reflect on the status of Hispanics/Latinos in the US, and on that border language called Spanglish. In his previous autobiographical book of essays *The Hispanic Condition* (1996) Stavans discusses bilingual education and concludes thus:

> What is applauded in today's multicultural age is a life happily lost and found in Spanglish [...] a round trip from one linguistic territory and cultural dimension to another, a perpetual bargaining (1996: 13-14).

[3] See Stavans, 2004.

A very different view of Spanglish as a solution to intercultural and interlingual "vertigo" (Pérez Firmat, 1995: 249) is offered again by Gustavo Pérez-Firmat in a second autobiographical book written in 2000, *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*. In this particular book, written entirely in Spanish, Firmat does not believe that the two languages can merge into an amalgam called Spanglish. Rather, the bilingual person, Pérez Firmat thinks, lives in a constant shaking between each language, depending on the circumstances: "If my life depended on a sentence, I would write it in English ... if my life depended on a *spoken* sentence, I'd die if I couldn't speak it in Spanish." (1995: 53. My emphasis) Without explicitly saying it, in this sentence he is in fact telling us that his professional or public language is English, while his private and emotional language is Spanish. When he turned fifty, though, the time came when he felt he had to "desaprender el inglés" (Pérez Firmat, 2000: 9) and work in Spanish as well, as he did in *Cincuenta Lecciones*, a book that conveys the feeling of the linguistic disjunction and "dyslexia" that exile brings along.

3. Puerto Rican Expressions

These proclamations about bilingualism lead me to finally explain the title of my essay, which is self-explained after reading the title of one of the two books of memoirs I will be discussing henceforward, both written in the 1990's: Esmeralda Santiago's *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993) and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990). Both women were born in Puerto Rico, and both of them migrated to the US as children, where they live today as recognized writers.

The story of Esmeralda Santiago begins in the rural part of Puerto Rico, where her parents and seven siblings, in continuous struggles with each other, lived a turbulent life, if full of love and tenderness. As a child, Esmeralda learned to appreciate how a *guava* is eaten, to identify the ingredients in the *morcillas*, to distinguish the song from the *coquí*, and to help the soul of a dead baby ascend to Heaven. But just when Esmeralda seemed to have learned everything about her culture, they took her to New York, where the rules - and the language - were not only different, but puzzling as well. A story of success, Santiago narrates how she overcame adversity, earned entrance to Performing Arts High School and then went on to Harvard.

Ortiz Cofer's hybrid memoir, for its part, journeys through dreams, memories, and cultural folklore to discover what it means to be a Puerto Rican woman. *Silent Dancing* is built as a collection of poems and personal essays, which is also Ortiz Cofer's attempt to communicate to her own daughter the fragile position in which immigrant women of color find themselves in the US. The author concludes her collection with an indication of her inability to resolve her memories with her mother's, which represents the clash of cultures and generations she experienced living sometimes on the continent and sometimes on the island.

In both cases, we are facing two bicultural coming-of-age stories of migration that present lives lived between English and Spanish, between *Los Nuevayores* and *la Isla*, between being a *jíbara* (a Puerto Rican country dweller) or a modern *americana*. And that is why our two female migrant writers find it difficult to

speak of any particular "national identity", because both their projects articulate how migration shapes and re-defines national identities. One could position Santiago and Ortiz Cofer alongside the majority of recent exiled or immigrant memoirs or testimonios, where the authors write from their 'in-between' spaces and have to rediscover and redefine their in-between identity. Note how Pérez Firmat expresses this impossibility of describing his very slippery sense identity:

> En busca del nombre exacto de la cosa: neocubano, poscubano, excubano, transcubano, semicubano, alticubano, recubano, subcubano, contracubano, omnicubano, pancubano, monocubano y un largo archipiélago de otras incubaciones" (Pérez-Firmat, 2000: 109).

And note how this sense of identitarian complexity sounds strikingly similar to that expressed in Spanglish by Puerto Rican poet Sandra María Esteves in her poem "Not Neither:"

> Being Puertorriqueña Dominicana
> Born in the Bronx, not really jibara
> Not really hablando bien
> But yet, not Gringa either
> Pero ni portorra, pero si portorra too
> Pero ni que what am I?
> Y que soy, pero con what voice do my lips move?[4]

The fact of the matter is that at a time of unstoppable migratory flows and crossing of borders, as Arjun Appadurai argues in *Modernity at Large*, "ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality, has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders." (1996: 41) While traditional immigrant literature in the US was defined by its boundaries or the lines between here and there, and the distinctiveness of the two places, immigrant writers like Ortiz Cofer and Santiago locate themselves in a hybrid space whose stance, according to Carmen Faymonville, can be described as "transnational", neither assimilationist nor necessarily oppositional. They separate geography from identity and come to understand that national belonging and cultural roots are not a question of place and land (Faymonville, 2001: 130). That is, for the protagonists Esmeralda and Judith, Puerto Rico has become an idea that transcends the geographic boundaries of the island; it is a transnational space that may also be experienced in the US. In order to illustrate this idea let me quote Pérez Firmat again. There exists, he believes, a correspondence between past, homeland and lineage on the one hand, and between present, country and physical location, on the other:

> In Spanish the word for country is *país*, while the word for fatherland is *patria*. For one-and-a-halfers like me, Cuba remains our *patria* but the US has become our

[4] 1984 Sandra María Esteves. Printed in *Tropical Rain: A Bilingual Downpour* and *Contrapunto In the Open Field*. http://www.sandraesteves.com/images/PRDiscovery_3.NotNeither.SandraMariaEsteves.pdf.

> *país* […] When I assert that Cuba is my *patria*, I'm telling you where I come from, I'm naming the father and the mother who engendered me. The other word, *país*, doesn't have to do with lineage but with location […] Thus, if *patria* sends you back to the past, *país* plants you in the present […] Cuba is my *patria*, the US is my *país*. Cuba is where I come from, the US is where I have become who I am (Pérez Firmat, 1995: 271).

This is exactly what these two Puerto Rican women's memoirs transmit: Puerto Rico is their motherland, and the US is their country. However, they do not mourn their acculturation. On the contrary, their memoirs are exercises in *transculturation* in the sense that they seek to overcome the partial loss of their land of origin by mutual interchange of language and culture.[5] This is how Santiago expresses her feelings upon leaving Puerto Rico for *los Nuevayores*:

> For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another was created. The Puerto Rican *jíbara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting (Santiago, 1994: 209).

They will never forget their origins. However, their books transmit a new, fresh and open sense of Puerto Rican transnational identity that can be maintained independently from geographical location, as both of them have declared in interviews:

> SANTIAGO: 'I have learned to insist on my peculiar brand of Puerto Rican identity. One not bound by geographical, linguistic, or behavioral boundaries, but rather, by a deep identification with a place, a people and a culture which, in spite of appearances, define my behavior and determine the rythms of my days.'[6]

> ORTIZ COFER: 'There used to be a time when the Puerto Rican experience was the experience of the people on the island; then it became the experience of people in New York City. Now it is the experience of people like me, who started out in New Jersey, and now I am in Georgia and it is a different reality.'[7]

Following the trail of Cowart's emphasis in organizing his volume (quoted above) around the dominant tropes of diverse immigrant fiction, I will now proceed to do a reading of Santiago's and Ortiz Cofer's texts as coming of age memoirs, or autobiographies of childhood, since both precisely close their books when their protagonists become *señoritas* and reach puberty. Richard Coe's book *When the Grass was Taller* is probably the most comprehensive study on autobiographies of childhood to date, a subgenre that he calls "the Childhood" (1984: xi). Although Coe does not deal with any Latino/a memoir of childhood,

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[5] See Durán, 2016: 164-66

[6] Esmeralda Santiago, "The Puerto Rican Stew", *New York Times Magazine*, 18 December 1994: 34-36

[7] "The Infinite Variety of the Puerto Rican Reality: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer". Rafael Ocasio Callaloo, vol. 17, n.º 3, Puerto Rican Women Writers (Summer, 1994): 735

our Puerto Rican authors have a place in Coe's anatomy of childhoods, even if his book was published in 1984, before Santiago's and Ortiz Cofer's books were written. In some ways, and with some variables, both *Silent Dancing* and *When I Was Puerto Rican* partially follow the pattern of what Coe calls the "Schizophrenic Childhood" and describes as

> The narration of an experience of the past self, in which two cultural backgrounds clash so violently that the eventual writing of an autobiography becomes something of an exercise in psychotherapy, an attempt to rescue the adult self from the void to which contradictory forces have consigned it (Coe, 1984: 228).

This is the case of the "divided self" where the inherited cultural traditions of the race come into collision with the alternative standards of an adopted country. In other words, the "them" vs. "us" or the "here" vs. "there" of practically every exile and immigrant autobiography, regardless of the nationality and ethnic origin of his/her author. Just to mention one possible "comparative pairing" of Santiago and Ortiz Cofer with other "Schizophrenic Childhoods" would be to read them alongside Maxine-Hong Kingston's classic *The Woman Warrior*, which depicts on the one hand, China, with its millennial traditions, its magic, rituals, but also its superstitions and its inhumanity, and on the other, get-rich-quick California, with its liberty but its philistinism, its opportunity but its blind materialism, always inhabited by white "ghosts." Similarly, in *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer recalls the fragmented nature of growing up in two disparate locations and the feeling of never really belonging to either. The frequent trips back to Puerto Rico for six months at a time, which were followed by the inevitable return to Paterson (New Jersey) where her father worked, were a constant disruption to her life. This back and forth movement from the US to Puerto Rico continued for most of her childhood -a situation that is described by the narrator, precisely, as "Cultural Schizophrenia":

> (My mother) dedicated her time and energy to creating a "reasonable facsimile" of a Puerto Rican home, which for my brother and me meant that we led a *dual existence*: speaking Spanish at home with her, acting out our parts in the traditional play, while also daily pretending assimilation in the classroom (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 152. My emphasis).

To continue with Coe's description of Childhoods, one of the traumas frequently described in childhood memoirs is the existence of certain factors, which threaten to destroy the child's sense of identity. Among these factors, Coe raises the trope of names, indicating that something as insignificant as a nickname, bestowed without the reason for its being understood, can disrupt the supreme security of "knowing myself to be Me." (Coe, 1984: 55) Many memoirs of childhood display incidents regarding names and nicknames, and that is certainly the case with Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, as is also fully described in the chapter entitled "Names" of Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, first published in 1957. The first event narrated in "Names" evokes Mary's efforts at the convent school to make friends with the popular girls of the ninth grade, those who invent nicknames for the younger, less popular students. "CYE" is the name

they call Mary, a name she does not identify with but which she has to accept; a name that "solidified (her) sense of wrongness" and "turned (her) into an outsider" (McCarthy, 1983:117):

> I loathed myself when I said it, and yet I succumbed to the name totally, making myself over into a sort of hearty to go with it -the kind of girl I hated [...] This false personality stuck to me, like the name (McCarthy, 1983: 118).

The young Esmeralda of Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* is not named Esmeralda, but Negi. In chapter two of her memoir, Negi asks her mother the reason for that nickname, and she is told it comes from *Negrita*, due to her skin color. Negi wonders why she and her three sisters (they ended up being eleven siblings) should all have nicknames, and concludes: "It seemed too complicated, as if each one of us were really *two people,* one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not." (1994: 14. My emphasis) Later on, when the family moves form rural Macún to urban Santurce, Negi will have to bear another "nickname" from her school mates, who mock her and call her *Jíbara*:

> Already I had been singled out in school for my wilderness, my loud voice, and large gestures, better suited to the expansive countryside but out of place in concrete rooms [...] I let that girl [the *jíbara*] walk home while I took in the sights of the city, the noise and colors, the music, the pungent smells of restaurants and car exhaust (Santiago, 1994: 39).

From that moment on, Esmeralda will suffer another type of schizophrenia, in a total and recurrently mentioned separation of two different selves, very often a bodily and a spiritual one, when she feels sad or unjustly treated. For example, in chapter eight she describes Doña Leona, a horrible teacher who hates Negi and makes fun of her, and her salvation strategy is to dissolve into her two selves: "I left my body standing in front of her, suffering spitballs and whispered insults. I sent the part of me that could fly outside the window to the *flamboyán* tree in the yard." (Santiago, 139)

To continue with the thematic aspects of "Childhoods" as depicted by Richard Coe, we now focus on a chapter of *When the Grass was Taller* devoted to the analysis of certain irreducible archetypes of experience. Let us not forget that Coe does a comparative study of autobiographies of childhood from the past 150 years and from European, American, Australian and African literatures. In every Childhood, Coe explains, there will be parents, teachers, lovers; there will be schools and rebellions, all of which become particularly interesting for the reader in so far as they are a deviation from the norm. In his view, "the writer who in later life uses his childhood as the subject of literature, originates in nine out of ten cases, from a family in which there is a strong element of emotional imbalance." (1984: 140) According to Coe, there emerges a pattern far too insistent to be attributed merely to chance in which there is a *father* presented as harsh, domineering and tyrannical, or else, more frequently, dead, absent, weak, or a failure, and a *mother* who is very occasionally cruel and vicious, but more usually deeply beloved yet hopelessly inadequate -powerless against the world, subservient, or superstitious; pious uneducated, or vulgar; frivolous or futile (Coe,

1984: 141-157). No account could be more adaptable to describe the two texts we are considering in this particular respect -which, again, posits our two Puerto Rican memoirs for an apt transnational reading, and for comparative analyses with other childhood autobiographies from every continent. In both our cases, the *fathers* are depicted as absent figures (in Judith's case because he was in the navy and would spend half of the year away from his family, and in Esmeralda's case because he would simply abandon his family after every marital fight, not to return in many days). And it is always the *mother* who keeps Puerto Rico alive for the girls after they have migrated to the US. Yet, even if the two books are lovingly dedicated to their mothers, or rather because of that fact, they also give us wide grounds to explore a recurrent theme in women's personal literature: the difficult mother-daughter relationship.

In her now classic *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) Adrienne Rich alerted us to the silence that has surrounded the most formative relationship in the life of every woman: "the cathexis between mother and daughter -essential, distorted, misused- is the great unwritten story." (Rich, 1987: 227) Since Rich demonstrated the absence of the mother-daughter relationship from theology, art, sociology and psychoanalysis, and its centrality in women's lives, many voices have come to fill this gap so that it has become a central issue in feminist scholarship. Three main trends have emerged: one of them draws on the Freudian-oedipal paradigm and on neo-Freudian theory, a second trend is represented by Jungian studies, and a third trend emerges in the work of French feminist theory, in particular Luce Irigaray's and Julia Kristeva's work, all based in Jacques Lacan.[8] Needless to say I will not do a Freudian, Jungian or Lacanian study of the mother-daughter relationship in our to Puerto Rican women's texts; all I am trying to say is that *Silent Dancing* and *When I was Puerto Rican* could be used as samples for that kind of Feminist scholarship, and be related to other classics of Anglo-American literature as, for instance, the titles studied in volumes like *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, edited by Cathy Davidson (such as Jane Austen, George Eliot or Emily Dickinson, among many others).

In her book *Transnational Matrilineage*, Silvia Schultermandl proposes a reading of how contemporary Asian American writers portray second-generation women who look at their family's histories through their confrontations with their own mothers. Even if referred to Asian-American mother-daughter literature, we could adopt the term used in the title, "Transnational matrilineage" for our purposes. One the one hand, Schultermandl explains, the term transnational "refers to the distance and sense of disconnectedness the daughter protagonists feel as they investigate their matrilineal heritage from within an American perspective." But by *Transnational* she also refers to "the gaps and breaks in the line of cultural heritance and the sense of disconnectedness from this heritage that the daughters feel." (Schultermandl, 2009: 10) Moreover, the term matrilineage defines the difficult relationships these protagonists have with their mothers, but it is also a metaphor "that addresses the daughter protagonists' struggles with their families' histories – histories they misinterpret, are unfamiliar with, or even downright reject- as possible incentive for transnational feminist solidarity." (Schultermandl, 2009: 10)

[8] See Hirsh, 1981: 204-5.

We could just quote two sentences from Santiago's and Ortiz Cofer's books that could serve us as a perfect example of the connection between mother and daughters that is fraught with tension and loaded with pain, as is often analysed in much Feminist scholarship. This is how the two Puerto Rican girls see their young, beautiful and exotic mothers, once they are in the process of becoming American (Judith), or an urban Santurce *señorita* (Esmeralda). For Ortiz Cofer,

> [My mother] was so different from my classmates' mothers that *I was embarrassed to be seen with her*. While most of the other mothers were stoutly built women with dignified grey hair who exuded motherliness, my mother was an exotic young beauty, black hair down to her waist and a propensity for wearing bright colors and spike heels. I would have died of shame if one of my classmates had seen her sensuous walk and the looks she elicited from the men on our block (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 126. My emphasis).

And, while young Esmeralda watches her plain schoolmates' mothers "dressed in simple skirts and blouses, with hair neatly combed, no paint on their faces," (Santiago, 1994: 140) this quintessential motherly image stands in sharp contrast with that of her own *mami*:

> Mami had come back with cropped hair that formed a curly black ring around her face. Her nails were long and painted deep pink. She wore high heels and stockings [...] on the way to the bus, men stared, whistled, mumbled *piropos* [...] During the entire bus ride home I was miserable [...] I kept replaying the men's stares, their promises, and the nakedness her accessible beauty made me feel! (Santiago, 1994: 189-90).

Not only do their mothers make the daughters feel ashamed because they are different from the other, less sexualized mothers, but Judith and Esmeralda's mothers embody the ghost of the past that the girls wish to leave behind; they are a constant reminder of the sense of disconnectedness from their cultural heritage that the daughters feel. So, Ortiz Cofer and Santiago's feelings of matrophobia induce them to know that they have to break with their mothers' past if they wish to find a life that will lead them beyond the prescribed goal for a Puerto Rican woman of getting married as teenagers, being constantly pregnant, and living a life of hardship and even marital abandonment. Judith says:

> My mother carried the island of Puerto Rico over her head like the mantilla she wore to church on Sunday. She was "doing time" in the US [...] She kept herself "pure" for her eventual return to the island by denying herself a social life; by never learning but the most basic survival English; and by her ability to create an environment in our home that was a comfort to her, but a shock to my senses [...] having to enter and exit this twilight zone of sights and smells that meant *casa* to her (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 127).

And so, she knows she has to find her own Puerto Rican-American life away from that *casa*: "I liberated myself from her plans for me, got a scholarship to college, married a man who supported my need to work, to create, to travel and

to experience life as an individual." (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 53) Just like Judith, Santiago also closes her book with the determination to escape from the nightmare of a shabby and overcrowded flat in Brooklyn, which is the only ceiling her husbandless mother can offer her eleven children:

> I decided I had to get out of Brooklyn. Mami had chosen this as our *home*, and just like every other time we'd moved, I'd had to go along with her because I was a child who had no choice. But I wasn't willing to go along with her on this one (Santiago, 1994: 260. My emphasis).

However, in the end, and in spite of the initial matrophobia that builds the narrative thread of their transnational feminism, both Puerto Rican women pay homage in their memoirs to their brave, warrior mothers who fought against poverty, racism and marital abandonment (in Santiago's case) or against homesickness and unadaptation (in both cases), to give their daughters what they could not embrace and enjoy themselves: the American dream.

Like Maxine Hong Kingston or Sandra Cisneros, Ortiz Cofer also resorts to what Billson and Smith have called "the strategy of the Other", a relational narrative strategy that allows women autobiographers to speak for themselves, and to express in different forms than those permitted by conventional narrative, what their sense of themselves is. This is a form of female autobiography that validates a speaking voice by placing it in the service of another, by defining itself through speaking of others, or by telling its own story as interwoven with others. Kingston, for example, dwells on her mother's talk-story to finally become a storyteller herself by writing the lives of other women who had no voice, like her aunts, her own mother, the warrior Fa-Mu-Lan, or the Chinese poetess. And she closes *The Woman Warrior* with two intertwined stories; one her mother's and another one, her own: "Here is a story my mother told me [...] recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." (Kingston, 1977: 240) Even if her voice is very different from that of her mother's, the autobiographical journey has made it possible for Maxine to find the interstitial space where the two cultures and the two voices of mother and daughter can finally embrace. In the same manner, Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* has her narrator, Esperanza, utter a communal voice, the voice of the inhabitants of Mango Street, that speaks for the silenced voices of many Latinas in the same conditions as hers; those of many women sitting in windows and watching life go by; those of women enduring domestic and sexual abuse in their homes; those of women who have lost the hope that her name symbolises. Likewise, Ortiz Cofer also mixes her own story with portraits of other women, such as those of libertine Vida, fallen woman Providencia, or transvestite Marina/Marino; life stories that give a communal portrait of Puerto Rican womanhood, or that speak of the type of woman she could become and would hate to become. Some other stories are borrowed from her Grandmother's Puerto Rican stories and legends, like that of the Black Virgin, María Sabida or María la Loca:

> The tree was a magic space where her *mamá* told stories. Some from ancient folklore, some based on older myths of Greek and Roman origins [...] It was under

> that mango tree that I first began to feel the power of words [....] And later, as I gained more confidence in my own ability, the voice telling the story became my own (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 76, 85).

Ultimately, what all of these texts teach is that the building of a transnational solidarity between mothers (or other female characters) and daughters relies on two aspects: the daughters' ambivalence about the mother; and their realization that reconciling with her matriarchal heritage is vital to bringing closure to their quest for identity (Schultermandl, 2009: 10).

To continue with other thematic aspects, I will now pause on issues regarding transnational biculturalism. In his essay "Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao: the Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity", Juan Flores outlines the four stages in the development of the Puerto Rican identity in the US: in a *first* stage, the immigrant talks about the total disillusionment with the reality of life in New York city -the poverty, welfare, discrimination, unemployment, etc. At this point, a sense of total despair prevails. In the *second* stage, Puerto Ricans begin to look at a mythical notion of their island in hopes of a paradisiacal refuge/escape from New York. This feeling is followed, in the *third* stage, by a re-entry into the community, reaffirming their presence on the continent with a strong sense of cultural context and belonging. In the *fourth* and final stage, Puerto Ricans identify with other ethnic groups and recognize in them their own painful experiences. That is, they have learned to embrace other ghettoized communities, without giving up their own sense of cultural identity. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, for his part, identifies three similar stages as typical for the development of migrant identities: first, *substitution*, when one tries to reduplicate "home"; second, *destitution*, "a feeling of alienation and rootlessness" when one feels that "the ground has been taken down from under" one so that one "no longer know one's place;" and a third, *institution*, the "establishment of a new relation between person and place." (quoted in Faymonville, 2001: 144)

Given Flores' and Perez Firmat's similar description of the process in the development of a migrant's sense of identity, one may be led to think that the past tense of the verb (*was*) in Esmeralda Santiago's title *When I* was *Puerto Rican,* indicates that she writes from a feeling of "*destitution*" (Pérez Firmat), which corresponds to Flores' third stage (reaffirmation of one's presence on the continent). Clearly, it seems that the title indicates a total division between the Esmeralda Santiago writing the book from the perspective of the assimilated American, and the young Negi who was Puerto Rican. Moreover, this impression is heightened when we read the Prologue, entitled "How to eat a Guava." This is the situation: the adult American sees guavas in her American supermarket; she recalls how to eat a guava (a synecdoche of Puerto Rico) and reflects:

> I had my last guava the day I left Puerto Rico. [...] Today, I stand before a stack of dark green guavas, each perfectly round and hard, each $1,95. The one in my hand is tempting. It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hop-scotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I'm no longer a child. [...] I push my cart away toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet (Santiago, 1994: 4).

However, in spite of this foody metaphor, where Santiago seems to discard the tree-picked guavas of her Puerto-Rican childhood in favour of the processed apples and pears of her American adulthood, the final impression is that writing this book is an act of reconciliation between past and present, between two nations, two languages, and two cultures, for, after relocation, national identity "need no longer become the object of nostalgia and desire and no longer function as the repository of all that is experienced as absent and lacking." (Faymonville, 2001:136) Santiago's memoir demonstrates that this form of hybridization or "transculturation" must be understood, paraphrasing Fernando Ortiz, not as a single process but as many interrelated processes of assimilation, of adaptation, of rejection, of parody, of resistance, of loss (and gain), and of transformations of both the native and the adapted culture. Ortiz's term undermines the impact of "acculturation" for, whereas acculturation implies the loss of one's roots and traditions, "transculturation" seeks to overcome that loss by mutual exchange of language and culture through various stages of adjustment and re-creation – cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal- that allow for the rise of new configurations out of the initial clash of cultures (Ortiz, 1996: 103). As Juan Flores has said of much Puerto Rican literature, geographic separation and distance, rather than deadening all sense of community and cultural origins, may have the contrary effect of heightening the collective awareness of belonging and affirmation. In that sense, Díaz Quiñones contends that "la pertenencia, el sentido de hogar y comunidad, se afirma sobre todo en la distancia, con la incertidumbre del lugar." (quoted in Flores, 2000: 341)

A similar sense of initial estrangement or sense of foreignness from her silenced Puerto Rican past is implied in the title of Ortiz Cofer's book. The title comes from the eighth chapter, also entitled "Silent Dancing", a chapter in which a very uncanny and symbolic scene is described. For years, the narrator tells us, she has had dreams in the form of a five-minute movie of a family party in Paterson, a movie in which "silent revellers come in and out of focus." (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 87) In the movie, the room is full of people, and it ends with those people from her family dancing in a circle. The scene appears both comical and sad to watch because people appear frantic, their faces too intense. In her dream, the characters gain an uncanny life of their own and they speak directly to the dreamer, as if a Freudian return of the repressed were in action. In her dreams, she sometimes sees faces she does not recognize and asks "Tell me who these people are." (Ortiz Cofer, 1990: 95) No more explanation is given. My personal reading of this chapter is that the silent dancing scene is Puerto Rico; the land, the people and the customs she silenced and left behind, but that keep returning in her dreams with a hint of nostalgia because, the narrator reflects, "I have to hear the dead and the forgotten speak in my dream." (1990: 98) So, she unconsciously feels the need to give a voice to the Puerto Rican "silent dancers" of her motherland that she had kept repressed after becoming an American. And she finds that voice in her dreams, which represent a new "intermittent time and interstitial space." (Faymonville, 2001, quoting Homi Bhabha: 131) That is, a transcultural, transnational *third space* where her two cultures intertwine and find a new voice.

Our two books of memoirs, thus, present a transnationalist perspective that does not portray a quasi-linear movement from immigrant to American citizen;

nor does it express absolute loyalty to either the nation/culture of origin or the American one, but lives in between. As Pérez Firmat put it in his own memoir of exile *Next year in Cuba*,

> Where am I most me? Which of these two locales that I have described is my true place? [...] Miami or North Carolina? Cuba or America? This book grows out of my need to find an answer to these questions, or at least to understand more completely why I cannot answer them [...] I write to become who I am, even if I'm more than one, even if I'm *yo* and you and *tú* and two (1995: 8).

In fact, most autobiographers write "to become who they are". If Firmat goes on to assert towards the end of his autobiographical journey "I didn't grow away from Cuba, for I'm as Cuban now as I ever was. I'd rather say that I grew out of Cuba," (Pérez Firmat, 1995: 196) exactly the same can be said of the native Puerto Rico of Ortiz Cofer and Santiago: they simply "grew out" of it, while becoming transnational, proud *puertorriqueñas.*

Conclusion

After going through various expressions from different Latina/o voices, let us go back to the initial idea of America as a multicultural Mosaic. John Porter, in his book *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, explained as long ago as 1965 that the term "Mosaic" is often contrasted with the American concept of "melting pot", which implied that immigrants and their descendants were discouraged from maintaining close ties with their countries and cultures of origin and instead were encouraged to assimilate into the American way of life. Many Canadians pointed with pride to the alternative Canadian multiculturalist paradigm that encouraged immigrants and their descendants to maintain important aspects of their ancestral cultures. However, Porter also speaks of a "vertical mosaic," to convey the concept that Canada is a mosaic of different ethnic, language, regional and religious groupings but with unequal status and power. His analysis of the vertical arrangement of multiculturalism in Canada revealed that in income, occupation and education, this supposedly beneficial policy worked to the advantage of some ethnic groups and to the disadvantage of others. Porter revealed that some groups in Canada (namely, those of British origin) had better incomes, education and health than others (e.g., those of Eastern and southern European origin), while Native Indian and Inuit people were the most disadvantaged.

However, over fifty years after this book was published, the harsh distinction between a multiculturalist Canada versus a melting-pot America no longer holds. Today, the trend in the US has verged toward multi- and transculturalism, not assimilation. The old "melting pot" metaphor has given way to new metaphors such as "salad bowl" and (vertical) "mosaic", mixtures of various ingredients that keep their individual characteristics. If autobiography is an expression of personal, but also of racial and ethnic identity, we must jump to the conclusion, after doing a comparative, dialogical reading of autobiographical literature from the three largest Latino groups in the US (Mexican-American –Richard Rodriguez, Gloria

Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros and Ilan Stavans–; Cuban-American –Gustavo Perez Firmat–; and Puerto Rican-American –Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer–) that there is no such thing as a pure "Latina/o identity," because Latinas/os consider themselves brown, mestizos, hybrid, or intercultural, a mixture of races, and therefore, of identities. We may also conclude that their life experience brings to their work a sort of existentialism which affirms that existence precedes essence. Pérez Firmat, expresses this idea in his use of the metaphor of the hyphen that separates his two nationalities as a Cuban exiled in America. The hyphen, although graphically a "minus" sign, does not represent substraction for him, but summation: "that hyphenation is not a minus sign but a plus, a sign of life, a vital sign. For us, hyphenation is oxygenation; a breath of fresh air into a dusty and musty *casa.*" (Pérez Firmat ,1987: 7). His "dusty and musty *casa*," as Ortiz Cofer's Puerto Rican *casa* quoted above, is a spatial metaphor that indicates their sense of belonging to a new home/*casa* that does not dwell in their original *homeland*, but that integrates their two cultures, their two languages, and their two identities as transnational Americans who can also be proud Latinas/os simultaneously.

Lastly, I wish to re-state my emphasis in situating Puerto-Rican and Latino/a texts in dialogue with one another, and in trying to find connections with similar texts (coming-of age life-writing) by writers form other "nationalities" (namely, Maxine Hong Kingston and Mary McCarthy). The transnational, transethnic approach proposed in this essay does not imply erasing the very difference and diversity that makes American autobiographies all the more thrilling to read and study. Indeed, group-specific research of an "intra-ethnic" nature should and will continue to thrive; however, I hope my essay has proved that the "transnational turn" applied to literary studies is as inevitable as it is enriching for our present and future scholarship.

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