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**BILDUNGSROMAN WRITTEN BY
PUERTO RICAN WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES:
NICHOLASA MOHR'S *NILDA*: A NOVEL
AND ESMERALDA SANTIAGO'S
*WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN***

At the end of the nineteenth century one colonial power was exchanged for another and Puerto Rico came under the control of the United States. Then, in 1917, Puerto Ricans were made United States citizens by the Jones Act. By 1946 Puerto Rico was allowed to have its first Puerto Rican governor. At the same time, reforms made to the Jones Act allowed Puerto Ricans to travel freely to America in search of "bread, land, and liberty." In 1948, the Department of Labor initiated the migration to the North that resulted in a mass evacuation of the island of Puerto Rico. Many Puerto Ricans left behind whatever they could not carry to embark on what they thought to be a voyage of freedom from the oppressing poverty of their island. In order to preserve the connection with the island, Puerto Ricans living in the United States began to try to preserve an artistic portrait of their whole experience of migration. The literature produced by Puerto Rican immigrants and their progeny in New York can be divided into three stages: a journalistic stage where the loss of home is a central theme; a second stage which reflects a twofold grieving over the dispossession of the past and a displeasure over what is missing in the immediate present; and finally, a third stage that advances to a conciliation with disconnection and difference. These three stages correspond to the stages of exile offered by Julia Kristeva as quoted in Nikos Papastergiadis' *Modernity as Exile*. The first of these stages "entails a 'shattering' of home and a 'loss of certitudes'," the second a "dual lament over the loss of the past with a resentment of the lack in the present." The third is the mode of exile which "moves to an affirmative reconciliation with liminality, fragmentation and difference which goes beyond the violence of negation to a reinscription of identity" (182).

Similar to the literature of other immigrant groups, in its initial

stage the literary production of Puerto Ricans in the United States consists principally of journalistic and autobiographical works that make an effort to capture the changes experienced by first-generation immigrants trying to accommodate themselves to American life. Representative of this period (which covers the first significant wave of Puerto Rican migration to the United States from 1917 to the end of World War Two) are the *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega* (edited by César Andreu Iglesias in 1977 and translated by Juan Flores in 1984) as well as Jesús Colón's 1961 novel *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches*. Written by first-generation immigrants, these books became the best contributions to the understanding of the development of the New York Puerto Rican community. Although classified as autobiographies, these books more accurately fit the category of "ethnobiographies" proposed by James Clifford, in which "the self is so strongly interwoven with its particular social and cultural environment that is generally not clearly distinguished from its context, and the characteristic events of the community's history are seen to be central to the individual's existence" (43). Miguel Algarín defines the principles on which these writers based their own stories of migration. Not only are these stories based on the experience of migration but also on a sense of rootlessness and a search for the roots of the New York Puerto Rican.

Those roots are really the debris of the ghettos, the tar and concrete that covers the land, the dependence on manual labor that is merely brute force, the force feeding of the young in schools that kill their initiative rather than nourish it, and the loss of trust. (90)

Puerto Rican migrants, like other immigrants of that time, had to establish themselves in ghettos, depend on hard labor in order to survive, and send their children to schools where they were taught about a land which was not theirs. Writers of this first period were concerned with their own experience as immigrants. Nevertheless, with so much to say about life in a deteriorating environment, it was impossible to keep the self as the central character of such literary manifestations. Life in the community and that community's search for identity became the overriding perceptions of the literature of the time.

A second period, from 1945 to 1965, which covers years of extensive migration by Puerto Ricans to the United States, sees the manifestation of the immigrant experience as a dominant theme in Puerto Rican writings. In this literature, which is definitely a literature concerning Puerto Ricans in the United States rather than the communities where they had chosen to live, New York is repeatedly

portrayed as the eventual and obligatory place of destruction to which colonialism submits Puerto Ricans before they determine to return (if they ever do) to recover their land.

Elements such as street violence, gangs, drugs, prostitution and family disintegration are major themes in the literature of this period. One example of this second period's resistance and power would be René Marqués' *The Oxcart* (1955), in which an entire family moves to New York, initiating the process of family disintegration as a result of street violence, prostitution, and the eventual death of the last remaining male character in a grim encounter with a machine. This disintegration prompts the female characters to return to Puerto Rico in search of whatever was left for them. Other examples of works belonging to this period are Lefty Barreto's *Nobody's Hero* (1977), a novel about a Puerto Rican teenager in a world of slums, street gangs, drugs, and prison along the same line as Manuel Manrique's *Island in Harlem* (1966). Both novels depict the struggle for survival in an alienating environment and the main characters' resistance to the dominating powers. Another theme found in the literature of this period is the different perception of the colonizing power to the realities of culture. Edward Said explains the relationship of the colonial power over the colonized and the struggle to find a tangible identity through literature:

Let us look at the literature of the first of these moments, that of anti-imperialist resistance. Its literature develops quite consciously out of a desire to distance the native African, Indian, or Irish individual from the British, French, or (later) American master. Before this can be done, however, there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination. Now if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical in it. (Eagleton 1990, 77)

This pressing need to recover the land through the imagination is a central theme in Marqués' play and Barreto's and Manrique's novels as well. The geographical alienation after migration, together with the elements of crime and prejudice, bring into being the desire for return migration found in the literature of the second period of Puerto Rican literature in the United States.

This second period of Puerto Rican literature in the United States is a clear effort to come to terms with the colonial status prevalent at the time. Writers sought to adhere to their own land as a place of repossession and restoration after the destruction of their identity as Puerto Ricans at the hands of a controlling culture. By this time, Puerto Rican writers in the United States had already realized that

they, as American citizens, could travel back and forth between Puerto Rico and the mainland. At the same time, they realized that Puerto Rico and the United States had an ongoing ambivalent relationship and that Puerto Rico must coexist with the United States.

A third development in Puerto Rican literature in the United States begins about 1965 and continues to the present day. It is delineated by second-generation Puerto Rican or “Nuyorican” writers, as some proclaim themselves. Their principal language is English and their literary compositions are a product of the New York Puerto Rican political and cultural awakening of the late 1960s. Not until this time, when writers exhibiting a particular “Nuyorican” voice such as Jesús Colón, Piri Thomas, and Manuel Manrique appeared on the American academic scene, did it occur to anyone to refer to a Puerto Rican literature originating from the experience of living in the United States. The term “Nuyorican” began to take shape as working-class Puerto Ricans born or raised in New York and who had experienced the Puerto Rican diaspora of the 1940s and 1950s, began to distinguish themselves from those brought up on the island of Puerto Rico. As Juan Flores asserts in a chapter in *Redefining American Literary History*:

Such relative newcomers, many lacking in basic literary skills in either English or Spanish, were assumed to be still caught up in the immigrant syndrome or, worse, to be languishing in what Oscar Lewis termed the “culture of poverty.” But in books like Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* and Pedro Petri’s *Puerto Rico Obituary*, there was suddenly a literature by Puerto Ricans, in English and decidedly in—and against—the American grain. (1990, 211)

Bilingual and bicultural, they lived within the confines of the metropolis and called themselves “Nuyorican” (or, more accurately, “New York Ricans”). The term became more inclusive during the 1960s and was later extended to all Puerto Ricans born or raised anywhere in the continental United States. Ultimately it was affixed to their literature.

The term “Nuyorican,” like “Chicano” or “Black” is a rescued expression. It was originally used by Puerto Ricans on the island as a derisive appellation for Puerto Rican exiles, most of whom had established themselves in New York City. It manifested, in the negative sense, assimilation to American life and working-class ancestry. It further connoted, as the term insinuates, a pattern of linguistic code-switching between English and Spanish and also the use of what is frequently referred to as Spanglish, the adaptation of English words into Spanish. Since preservation of the Spanish language has been associated with the strengthening of Puerto Rico’s national identity,

this linguistic infringement by Puerto Ricans in New York was perceived by Puerto Ricans on the island as an indication of assimilation and pro-Americanism. In the 1960s Puerto Rican authors began to reclaim this term. By doing so, they were affirming the immigrant community's particular experience, history, and popular practices, especially code-switching between English and Spanish.

The prose fiction of these "Nuyorican" writers draws together the first-hand testimonial stance of the writers from the first and second stages. Their works underline the imaginative or fictional reworking of the original testimonials and autobiographies by "Nuyorican" writers.

These imaginative testimonials of the third period, whether autobiographical or not, can be classified as *bildungsroman* or novels of character building and formation. Characteristic examples of these are Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda* (1973), Edward Rivera's *Family Installments* (1983), and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993). These novels of formulation describe the life of an individual as part of a marginalized group. In these novels, the fate and growth of the individual is affected not only by personal development but also by social and cultural influences. Personal formation and integration are major themes in these novels.

Describing this integration, Marianne Hirsch states that "twentieth-century manifestations [of the *bildungsroman*]... explore primarily the fate of outsiders; women, minority groups, artists (i.e. spiritual outsiders)" (297). She indicates that this may be so on account of the protagonist's integration into or accommodation "to an adverse or antagonistic social mandate [which] is one of the elements that structurally define[s] this genre" (297). Likewise, Jerome Hamilton Buckley in *Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman From Goethe to Golding*, states that these novels of formation constantly highlight a journey from a provincial community to the city or, as Hirsch maintains, from an agricultural and patriarchally aristocratic world to a metropolitan industrialized environment, from a world of feudal or semifeudal relations to one of completely developed capitalism. Structurally, novels in the tradition of *bildungsroman* present the locus of the exchange or conflict between those two poles (rural/capitalist) and all other values, themes, and authority struggles associated with them.

In addition, the individual journey of the Nuyorican *bildungsroman* strives to account for the common experience of modernization undergone by Puerto Ricans in the twentieth century. Whether the voyage is from an impoverished barrio in Puerto Rico to the metropolitan

industrial environment of New York (as in Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*) or from an underdeveloped or less privileged, metropolitan district like New York City's El Barrio to a more privileged one, such as the community of Long Island (as in Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*) or from the patriarchal territory monopolized by men to a space of personal freedom (as in Mohr's *Nilda*), the protagonist must struggle with those two worlds and the values and power relations connected with them, and yet attain a certain kind of accommodation.

Because of the diversity of the Puerto Rican experience, which encompasses both underdevelopment and advanced capitalism, both oral and written traditions, the Puerto Rican writer is in an exceptionally favorable position to explore the course of modernization as well as the process of greater commodification or consumerism in the First World which characterizes late capitalism in the United States during the 1960s. In the Puerto Rican writer's hands, novels in the *bildungsroman* tradition become not just stories of individual evolution, sold as statements of survival in the margins or perimeters of society for the singular tastes of middle America, but also stories of cultural identity in which the conflicting polarities are worked out in the reformulation of the self. Thematically, literature written by immigrants in their search for identity often moves outward from the most personal sphere to encompass social and spiritual dimensions. They also often show how identity is shaped by attitudes, traditions, and customs that make up an ethnic and cultural heritage.

In their construction of an identity, some Puerto Rican writers in the United States have felt the need to assert their differences both from mainstream America and from the original cultural matrices or national entity from which they have been exiled. Exile in this context, however, should not be perceived as a detrimental state or some sort of deprivation. Rather, it should be seen as a state of belonging to both sides of the imperial divide, feeling which provides the means for both author and reader to distinguish and understand both sides of that divide. As Edward Said asserts, exile

far from being the fate of nearly forgotten unfortunates who are dispossessed and expatriated, becomes something closer to a norm, an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classical canonic enclosures, however much its loss and sadness should be acknowledged and registered. Newly changed models and types jostle against the older ones. The reader and writer of literature—which itself loses its perdurable forms and accepts the testimonials, revisions, notations of the post-colonial experience, including underground life, slave narratives, women's literature, and prison—no longer need to be tied to an image of the poet or scholar in

isolation, secure, stable, national identity, class, gender, or profession. (1993, 317)

The process of historical development has forced some Hispanic writers in exile into ambiguous and contradictory strategies: on the one hand toward assimilation and admission into the literary canons in an effort to avoid becoming entrenched into a position of inferiority; on the other hand toward recognition of their particular ethnic traits, an acknowledgment of their claim to be different, their determination to remain unassimilated, and toward recognition of their determination to be creators of an original artistic expression. Integration, an acceptance of norms set by others, and the drive toward autonomic self-determination, are common themes in the literature of Hispanic writers in the United States. These two opposed tendencies may coexist in the same work. Self-determination and acceptance of norms set by others become important subjects in the *bildungsroman* written by Puerto Rican women.

Traditionally, the *bildungsroman* novel describes a male hero reaching mature self-awareness subsequent to having tested his inner sense of self against reality through a sequence of experiences in the world. Ever since Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Wehrjahre* (1795-1796), the *bildungsroman* has been a popular fictional form developing, in the nineteenth century, alongside the autobiography. Autobiographical accounts, insistent upon the exactness of the narrative content, often provide an exemplary function, indicating the path the reader's life should take, either by explicit or implicit advice. Together, the *bildungsroman* and the autobiography act as supplementary counterparts of the same expressive role: the fictional and nonfictional narrative of individuals in their development, in their perspectives into an increasingly industrialized, materialistic, and alienating bourgeois society.

In the twentieth century, however, as Sandra Frieden has shown, "the traditional autobiography was regarded more and more skeptically as a work in which 'truth' could at best be embedded in self-told fictions" (305). Fiction writers, in turn, began introducing into their novels a new authentic subjectivity. In such narratives, authors trace their own experiences and development in the process of contesting—or conforming to—their own societies and their ideas.

Ironically, for some exiles, the condition of not belonging, of being caught between two cultures, provides the opportunity to see things from outside the controlling frame of reference of their particular culture. For others, however, the discordant, profound, and often distressing emotional experience produced by having to redefine

themselves in a strange land, and trying to harmonize conflicting cultural values, forces a surrender of all ideas of safety, the comfort of familiar surroundings, and a common language.

The autobiographical data in recent *bildungsroman* is positioned within a fictionalized framework that displaces this new narrative from the realm of traditional autobiographies. The sermonizing expressions of earlier works have been abandoned, and the authors neither portray their actions as negative illustrations, nor present themselves as exemplary. Instead, writers consider the theme of hegemony as a central issue in their novels. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin astutely comments on the resurgence of the *bildungsroman* thus:

In contemporary American literature, however, the Bildungsroman is being resuscitated, revived not by males of the dominant culture but by societal outsiders, men and women of marginality groups. The Bildungsroman of these disenfranchised Americans—women, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, homosexuals—portrays the particular identity and adjustment problems of people whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society; it expresses their struggle for individuation and a part in the American dream, which society simultaneously proffers and denies to them. This new Bildungsroman asserts an identity defined by the outsiders themselves or by their own cultures, not by the patriarchal Anglo-American power structure; it evinces a revaluation, a transvaluation, of traditional Bildung by new standards and perspectives. (75)

This revaluation found in the new *bildungsroman* explores how culture plays an enormous role in shaping expectations attached not only to cultural roles, but to gender roles as well. This process determines how women writers evaluate their culture's ideas of what it means to be female.

The contemporary resurgence of interest in the *bildungsroman* by marginalized writers in America does not, however, signal a return to an antiquated, old-fashioned narrative genre. Rather, it presumes an abstract genre, one influenced by widely shared, if not ubiquitous, experiential phenomena and interpersonal relationships that figure eminently in the formation of personality. Viewed theoretically, the contemporary *bildungsroman* may appear as a more or less autobiographical novel, contemplative of a writer's aspiration to universalize individual experience in order to give value to personal identity.

A double liability is intrinsic to the self-development process of women in peripheral cultures for the reason that they are both female and members of a minority group—Black, Hispanic, Native American, or other “foreign” cultures. All too often marginalized women must struggle with prejudice and sexism not only from the controlling

colonizing culture, but also from others of their own cultural group—characteristically the males. Consequently, they must grapple on several planes to achieve maturity and self-understanding while being devalued both for their gender and for their ethnic origins.

Women writers who are aware of their roles have developed a different representation from the socialization process illustrated in the conventional *bildungsroman*. This representation develops from their reaction to the disapproval of restraining cultural roles and their repudiation of rigorous and oppressive patriarchal standards. Their purpose is to generate a different conviction which in turn conceives a new character and a distinct and assertive individuality. In literary works of this kind, technique and composition communicate the new creative consciousness by reshaping the established form and presenting a fresh claim upon it. Nicholasa Mohr's 1973 publication, *Nilda: A Novel*, and Esmeralda Santiago's 1993 memoirs, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, have been produced by women writers who belong to a marginalized group. Both writers have created a social and cultural space for themselves through their writings about Puerto Rican women who have migrated to America and remain living in the United States.

In the new America immigrants encounter not one comparatively monolithic society but a multicultural. America no longer offers one singular social idea to seek or emulate, and to communicate modern stories of migration, past models do not offer the conceptual shape or intellectual style needed.

Increasingly, women writers are writing at a conjunction of cultures, working in the very interzone where languages and cultural ideologies of self (and gender and race) overlap, for it is there that identity must be discovered and a transaction negotiated. In the new intercultural texts, a woman writer navigates between cultures, learning the distance between them, and sometimes thinking that she is the difference, the Great Divide.

These texts and others from across the United States exhibit contemporary American culture as a dynamic collision, often enigmatic, which makes new sorts of interpretive demands on the reader. If, as Janice Morgan argues, women's art traditionally shows "a sense of the self as plural" (8), then women's texts may be seen to disorient as well as define the issue of intercultural America. As Carolyn Durham asserts, "Many anthropologists of women's culture insist that women always function simultaneously within both dominant and muted culture" (58), and recently more and more women, as writers, are openly resisting cultural definition. Consequently, it is not

surprising that immigrant and first-generation migrant women bring to autobiography and to the new tradition of women's *bildungsroman* a heightened awareness of inter-identity, as the knowing subject of two cultures' representations of them.

Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda: A Novel* and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* are works based on themes of self-recognition and positive integration into a new accomplished role. These novels, one written by an immigrant (Santiago) and another by a first-generation migrant (Mohr), are replete with personal knowledge of inter-identity. Both novels present convincing examination of the plurality of being Puerto Rican and living in the United States. This plurality is experienced by most migrants and their children when they move from the island to the United States.

The chronicles reported in *Nilda*, Nicholasa Mohr's earliest narrative, open in 1941 when the main character is approximately ten years old, and close in 1945 when she is fifteen. Asked if she considers her novel an autobiography, Mohr asserts that despite its considerable autobiographical material "...the story is actually quite different from my life. There is as much material that's made up as there is autobiographical material in that book" (Natov and Deluca 117).

The community of Spanish Harlem in New York City where she lives, very much like the central character of the novel, is pubescent and vulnerable, fumbling its way within a new world. The neighborhood portrayed in *Nilda* has its own communal lifestyle which is introduced to the reader at the onset of the novel, in a scene in which the city heat is almost impossible to endure. The neighbors, with the help of one of the local merchants, determine to open the fire hydrant not only to cool themselves, but to fraternize as well. The sense of community is obvious when a fire hydrant is opened and everyone joins in the amusement.

The fun concludes when the police arrive to close the fire hydrant oblivious to the pleas of some of the neighbors who can only yell, hidden from the police by the darkened hallways. The police, when referring to the tenants of the area, address them with phrases such as "you people," "bunch of animals," and go as far as using the word "spick" to address the men and women who were gathered around the improvised fountain. At this point, the character of Nilda realizes how differently they are perceived to be from the rest of society by an establishment who is presumed to protect them. The alienation felt by her neighborhood is also perceived by the protagonist. The experience of alienation, common to marginality-group *bildungsroman*, deals with adjustment problems of communities whose sex or color

makes them unacceptable to the dominant society. Nicholasa Mohr herself describes her reasons for portraying life in Spanish Harlem. In 1987, dealing with the subject of Puerto Rican writers living in the United States, she stated:

My birth makes me a native New Yorker. I write here in the United States about my personal experiences and those of a particular group of migrants that number in the millions. Yet all these actualities seem to have little or no bearing on those who insist on seeing me as an 'intruder,' an 'outsider' who has taken on a foreign language. Perhaps even taken it on much too forcefully, using it to document and validate our existence and survival inside the very nation that chose to colonize us. (1987, 87)

Nilda's adolescent development illustrates the traditional tension between personal ideas and the social reality of inner city New York of the time, the self she must form has to assimilate or choose between these two. Even when her environment is rejected by the surrounding society, Nilda realizes that it is her milieu and feels secure in it. Later in the novel, she takes her first chance to go away from her familiar environment. Nilda is taken to summer camp to spend some days removed from the city. Her feeling of security quickly vanishes as the train pulls out of Grand Central Station in New York City and leaves behind not only the familiar face of her mother, but the familiar world known to this inexperienced girl only ten years of age.

The protagonist realizes that the outside world, the world she feared, is decaying and offers no security whatsoever. Nilda returns to the relative security of her neighborhood and the apartment she shares with her family. This neighborhood is the same one in which the writer Piri Thomas grew up and which he portrayed in his novel *Down These Mean Streets*, and Nilda is entirely conscious of its violent lifestyle.

In a scene in the novel, she is accompanied by two young boys, fourteen and sixteen years of age and members of the Pentecostal church at Lexington Avenue and 102nd Street, who are met on the streets by two hate-crazed policemen who proceed to club the two boys brutally as Nilda watches in horror. Resembling the brutality illustrated in other *Nuyorican* writings, this violence is rooted in a white, patriarchal power structure where men are supposed to be fighters and aggressors, and, albeit incidental to Nilda's personal life, this situation is magnified through the eyes of her innocence. Nilda asks at this point if she could be of any help and is told by one of the boys to go home since she is a woman and will be of no help to them. At this point the realization dawns on her that women should stay at

home to raise their families if they do not want to be victims of that violence.

Although the themes of violence, street gangs and drugs in this novel correlate to the writings of Puerto Rican writers of the second stage or period of Puerto Rican literature in New York, violence is not the focal point of Mohr's novel and interest. Her subject is the fiber of everyday living, the individualization of ordinary human experience, particularly those of adolescence.

Bildungsroman frequently display the child's innocent perspective and destroy the myth of childhood as a Rousseau-esque paradise of innocence, and it is not only in dealing with adults that Nilda senses alienation. She also senses it when dealing with people of other cultural backgrounds. At another summer camp she is allowed to attend, she meets another camper called Olga Rodríguez, a descendant of Spaniards, the first colonizers of Puerto Rico, who asks Nilda never to refer to herself as being Spanish. After talking briefly about where each of them lives, Olga verbalizes what she has felt since meeting Nilda: "You know Puerto Ricans ain't really Spanish. You shouldn't say that. That you are Spanish. I can't even understand you when you talk." Nilda realized the older girl was cross. "It's very hard to understand what you say" (156).

Olga tries desperately to demean Nilda as a member of what she perceives as an inferior culture. What she herself cannot realize is that her own incorrect use of English will make her seem different to the members of the culture she is trying to emulate. After exchanging a few angry words with Nilda, Olga adds: "I'm leaving. We don't bother with your kind. You give us all a bad name" (157).

Mohr portrays the character of Nilda not only at the center of the colonizing world, but also alienated by another colonial power which had enforced its authority over Puerto Ricans for over four hundred years.

Mohr constructs multiple role models of cultural identity through mother and daughter in the novel, having Nilda love the mother and at the same time reject her traditional roles. This mother/daughter dichotomy is a recurrent motif in the female *bildungsroman* and is analogous to the Freudian paradigm of the son killing the father. Lydia, Nilda's mother, a devout Catholic who also subscribes to spiritualism, is at least as important as Nilda herself. A model of accommodation to modernization, she is forced to straddle two worlds, and is exploited by both the traditional patriarchal Puerto Rican family and the outside sphere of work. At home she is absorbed by her

family apparently losing her own identity. At work, she must follow her employer's directives if she wants to keep her job as a factory worker. In Nilda's eyes she becomes the family, the Puerto Rican family. Faced with this model, the daughter must journey from the conventional space occupied by women in the Puerto Rican family to the modern space of individual development, without being absorbed in the process. Both the protagonist and the mother create an interstitial moment through the articulation of their difference. On her deathbed, Lydia advises Nilda that she should not follow her mother's footsteps. Instead, she should strive for her own self identity. The mother's realization that she herself has been absorbed into the traditional role of women in Puerto Rican society helps the main character amplify her view on the self.

"Do you have that feeling, honey? That you have something all yours... you must... like when I see you drawing sometimes, I know you have something all yours. Keep it... hold on, guard it. Never give it to nobody... not to your lover, not to your kids... it don't belong to them... and... they have no right... no right to take it. We are all born alone... and we die all alone." (277)

Nilda comes to see that her assumption of her mother's lack of selfhood stemmed from her own inability to recognize her mother's role-playing.

Structurally, Mohr transforms rupture into an opportunity for reunion and converts separation and dislocation into a preamble of greater unity. She domesticates the ruptures and separations that Puerto Ricans have collectively experienced and makes them productive. The protagonist's critique or rejection of the stereotype of self-effacement exemplified by the mother is a recurrent feature in the novel of the *bildungsroman* tradition.

Growing up necessitates the demythologizing of the father in a painful sequence of disappointments and resentments that ultimately teaches Nilda to understand and to sympathize with him as an individual destroyed by the system. A similar process transpires in the mother-daughter relationship as Nilda slowly grows to understand her mother's double constraint, that of being a Puerto Rican living in Spanish Harlem and of being a woman.

From her stepfather Emilio, an agnostic, anticlerical Spanish communist who is many years older than Nilda's mother, the central character of the novel learns how individual existence can be saved in the face of any odds, even death itself. Nilda's maturation is a journey of demystification, characterized by her progressive realization of her parents' predicament, and in a wider connotation, of the

disenfranchisement of Puerto Ricans living in New York. When analyzing Puerto Rican migration, Héctor Pérez states that “the occupational statistics for Puerto Ricans in New York City show that they largely occupied low-status, low-income occupations” (111). Nilda’s stepfather, a man who often epitomizes the apathy of the Spanish white patriarchal power, involves himself in her life, setting the rules, supporting and protecting her and her family as long as he can.

Unemployment and poverty annihilate his ability to provide for his family and consequently undermine his sense of decency and pride, in short, his manhood, since the “machista” attitude of traditional Spanish culture calls for the man to work outside the home in order to support his family.

The main character’s rejection of the role-models, exemplified in Mohr’s novel by her mother and stepfather, a basic characteristic of the *bildungsroman*, is carried out by and in the name of both parents. Paradoxically, the daughter must consequently repudiate her parents in order to pursue their advice, in order to be true to them. Therefore, in *Nilda*, rejection is an additional form of reunion, a way of recovering the parent’s legacy without depriving herself of self assertion.

All *bildungsroman* delineate the transition from innocence to enlightenment, trying to close the breach between an uninitiated protagonist and an experienced narrator. In *Nilda*, this reconciliation is even greater, as Mohr tries to close the gap among the perspectives of the principal character, her parents, and the narrator. It is as if the author wants to close not only the gap of the self, the gap of the child and adult selves, but also the chasm between two generations of Puerto Rican women (first- and second-generation immigrants) and their dissimilar collective experiences.

The impulse toward reconciliation in *Nilda* is also evident in the kind of accommodation that the daughter makes to the process of modernization. Although she must reject traditional Puerto Rican motherhood in the name of her mother, her passage to individual development is not an absorption by modernization. It is rather the creation of a separate space of freedom where Nilda is reunited with her true self, identified in the novel as the idealized Puerto Rican landscape of her mother’s stories, the source of her vocation as an artist. Relating, in a 1987 article, the Edenic vision the protagonist’s mother has of her own birthplace to her own mythic vision of an Edenic island, Mohr aptly states:

That Puerto Rico we were taught to believe in was largely based on the reminiscences of our parents and grandparents, many of whom

had come from small rural villages. They had nostalgically presented to their displaced offsprings a 'paradise' where sunshine, flowers and ownership of one's own business or plot of land brought everyone abundant food and eternal happiness. This mythical Island also boasted a population who knew no prejudice and where neither the dark color of one's skin nor one's humble birth were never seen as a cause for rejection. All of this mythology had little or nothing to do with Puerto Rico, its inhabitants and the reality of that culture. (1987, 89)

Mohr creates her protagonist's identity by examining the values she has inherited, always aware of the fact that she comes from a colonized people. Her style is cyclical, and the starting point of her novel is the familiar neighborhood where she lives with her parents. Her journey takes her to a real garden which in turn creates an internal secret garden of her own before returning to the original starting point. The novel opens with a fracturing of home represented by the departure of her brothers and follows with Nilda's grief over the loss of her own past and a resentment over her own present situation. In the end, Nilda reaches an affirmative reconciliation with her true self and her own identity. These three stages—the fracture of home, the double grief of the loss of past together with displeasure of a present situation, and a final reconciliation with her own identity—correspond to the three stages of exile proposed by Krysteva. Thus, the character of Nilda is not an isolated young girl growing up in Spanish Harlem; it is rather the representation of an entire group of migrants who have chosen to remain in exile.

Exactly twenty years after the appearance of Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda*, Esmeralda Santiago's memoirs about growing up in Puerto Rico and her family's eventual move to the city of New York were published. *When I Was Puerto Rican* begins in the early 1950s when the autobiographical protagonist, Negi, is four years old and concludes at the time when she receives a degree from Harvard University. These autobiographical beginnings are placed primarily in *barrio* Macún in the town of Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, where her family lives in a small shack on stilts built out of corrugated metal sheets, and surrounded by a circle of red dirt. This circle determines the extent of Esmeralda's world for the first years of her life. This is the extent of the family's property in the underdeveloped section of *barrio* Macún.

Like Mohr's *Nilda*, Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* describes the neighborhood where the main character spends the first years of her life and the family's configuration: Negi's mother, her father, and her younger sisters Delsa and Norma. In the first chapter, the reader is told that Negi's mother is expecting a fourth child and that the three young sisters have to move temporarily to a neighbor's house in

order to make room for the commotion of having a baby at home. This comes as a sign of the accommodation young children had to make because they were not supposed to know where babies came from and is an early cultural value the protagonist must deal with.

Life in *barrio* Macún is described vividly in the introductory chapters. In the early 1950s there was no electricity or running water there and food had to be prepared on a *fogón*, an open charcoal stove built outside the main house. Water had to be fetched and carried by walking some distance to the river. Food was scarce and most of the necessary items, such as tubers, had to be acquired from the neighboring hills.

There is a feeling of security in these introductory chapters. The narrator, Negi, knows this area to be her world and accepts it as her fate since she has no knowledge of any other place outside the perimeter of *barrio* Macún. Her neighborhood is her physical as well as formative parameter. Like Nicholasa Mohr's Edenic view of the island of Puerto Rico, Santiago's early reminiscence does not include, or take into consideration, that the color of a person's skin or humble birth were reasons enough for rejection. Eventually, her perception of the world that surrounds her expands when her mother decides to move away from the familiar surroundings with all her children.

Whenever Mami was fed up with Macún, or with Papi, she ran away to Santurce, a suburb of San Juan, which, by the early fifties, had become as much a metropolis as the capital, though with little of its cachet. It was a commercial center, with distinctly drawn neighborhoods that separated the rich from the poor. (37)

Negi learns there is a different world outside her familiar *barrio* and, in addition, discovers that her grandmother has moved to an even further and as yet unimagined world outside the insular limits of Puerto Rico. When her mother and the children arrive in Santurce, they learn that their grandmother has moved to the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York, "a place said to be as full of promise as Ponce de León's El Dorado" (37).

After moving back and forth between Santurce and Macún, Negi senses a feeling of displacement and insecurity: she never knows when her mother is going to pick up her belongings and her children and move away from the father. Even though the reader realizes that the relationship between Negi's parents is not a legal marriage, it is clear that family relations, however unconventional, are very important in the development of the protagonist's character. The narrator's psychic growth stems from and reacts to both her father and her

mother. From her father, a man who believes in God but who does not belong to any specific religious group, she learns that there is an energy or force which is responsible for creation. Nevertheless, there is tension between the daughter and the father. Negi cannot comprehend her father's constant disappearances from their home, to be far away from them for weeks at a time. However, the father figure—though he wanders and womanizes—is also a poet, something of a mystic, and a gentle, introspective character. He is the one with whom young Negi has real conversations about music, poetry, and her life.

The narrator has learned from her mother and female neighbors that men usually leave their home to spend days with women other than their wives but her affection for her father does not allow for a rejection of him. Her childhood affection for her father contrasts with the adult women's rejection of men who leave their homes-for other women. From her mother, an agnostic, she learns that what she sees with her own eyes is the only reality and that there is nothing hidden or mysterious after that. She also learns that women must take a stand whenever the situation calls for it. Monín, Negi's mother, went out to find employment when it was considered a taboo for women to work outside their home, and she moves away from her husband whenever he decides to abandon the house for days at a time. Negi's early definition of self includes a rejection of adult cultural values which dictated that a woman's place was to be at home to tend to the children, the husband, and domestic chores.

There is little tension between the mother and the daughter in the first few chapters of Santiago's memoirs, when she, as a little girl, had to follow her mother's orders as far as taking care of the smaller children, doing domestic chores, and even moving from place to place whenever the mother saw the need. Later in the novel, after their subsequent move to New York, the tension between the mother and daughter increases. The mother's importance in Santiago's memoir is based on her self-sacrifice. She leaves the familiar surroundings of Puerto Rico to start a new life with her children in New York. Santiago, while examining those years of her life, writes:

Whatever I was, Puerto Rican or not, had been orchestrated my Mami. When I was 13, she moved us from rural Puerto Rico to Brooklyn. We were to learn English, to graduate from high school, to find jobs in clean offices, not factories. We were to assimilate into American society, to put an end to the poverty she was forced to endure for lack of an education. (34)

In other words, the mother, her role-model from childhood's early years, wants her to be absorbed by the consumerist culture of the

United States as other Puerto Ricans had been before her. Her mother's objective of accommodation is to be passed on to the children as a security measure against poverty and rejection. Nevertheless, things work out differently from what the mother has planned all along. Negi's self-formulation has already begun and the mother's power over her is dwindling. Mary Anne Ferguson, when writing about the process of *bildung*, states that a woman "can, by freeing herself from the emotional necessity of role-repetition, give her the ultimate human gift, the freedom to choose her own path" (236). Therefore, Negi begins to free herself from following in her mother's path and thus guarantees her own freedom of choice.

As yet another example of the mother as a model of accommodation, although more assertive than the mother portrayed in Mohr's *Nilda*, Monín leaves her children's father behind because she discovers she has no need to have a man in the house. However, she finds a new man in New York whom she takes in as her lover. The unconventionality of this relationship contrasts sharply with the stereotypical idea of a woman not being entirely developed without being married to a man.

Santiago reconstructs the breach among the mother, the father, and the daughter into a possibility of self-evaluation. Negi's development is a pilgrimage to demystification portrayed by her growing realization of her parents' situation. In a large sense, this leads Negi to realize that she is a woman in her own right removed from her original surroundings and the models of accommodation characterized by the mother and her family. Negi's primary devotion to her father is realistic. Her father connects with her life by giving her counsel and assisting and safeguarding her as long as he is around. Growing up involves the demythologizing of the father in a sequence of resentments and disapprovals (and absences) that categorically teaches Negi to accept and to commiserate with her father as an individual.

Another important rupture which takes place during the course of Santiago's memoirs is the realization that her mother's relatives have moved to a place she thinks of as a haven away from Puerto Rico: New York. Arriving in the city, Negi immediately recognizes the new surroundings as contrary to what she has been told. "Mami was wrong. I didn't expect the streets of New York to be paved with gold, but I did expect them to be bright and cheerful, clean, lively. Instead, they were dark and forbidding, empty, hard" (218).

Resembling Mohr's *Nilda*, Santiago's Negi portrays the transition from innocence to enlightenment. This transition includes the attempt

to close the breach between the uninitiated protagonist and the experienced narrator, a common theme in *bildungsroman*. Constantly aiming at a reconciliation of perspectives, Santiago tries to close the separation among the perspectives of the principal character, her father, her mother and her family, and herself as the narrator. As in *Nilda*, Santiago's protagonist embodies the attempt to reverse not only the disconnection of the self, the gap of the child and adult selves, but also the detachment between two generations of Puerto Rican women who encountered dissimilar experiences despite the similarity in their experiences of migration. In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, the effort toward reconciliation is apparent in the sort of accommodation the daughter makes to the course of modernization. Even though Negi must repudiate conventional Puerto Rican motherhood in the character of the mother, her rite of passage to individual maturation is not an absorption by modernization. It is, more properly, the conception of a detached space of deliverance where the main character is reunited with her inner self, identified by her own determination to be the best student in her class, to join the School for the Performing Arts in New York City, and to pursue an artistic career.

The space of separate freedom from her own, being able to examine herself detached from others, also becomes a separate space from those others in her class. She realizes she is her own self and that she only needs to rely on herself for fulfillment.

The heart of her autobiographical chronicle deals with her own culture as a woman born and raised in Puerto Rico by a Puerto Rican mother who eventually becomes part of the Puerto Rican migration to the United States. In an article written for *The New York Times Magazine*, Santiago herself illustrates her position after her departure for the metropolis of New York and subsequent encounter with her own self:

I've learned to insist on my own 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 rhythms of my days. (1994, 36)

Correspondingly, the characters in her book are Puerto Ricans in New York, her own community, and her own New York City. Similar to Mohr, Santiago produces her own identity by examining the values she has inherited, all the time aware that her heritage comes from an ethnic group which has suffered uninterrupted colonialism through its history. Her sense of memory not only connects her to the members

of her family, but also makes a connection between the author, the protagonist, and history. As Susan Wells aptly states:

If we shift our focus from the fine structure of the bildungsroman to the global problems it addresses, however, the theme of memory, like those of family, state, and vocation, becomes a way of investigating the relations between individuals and history. It is a part of the genre's power. I think, that in these novels, issues of representation are so closely linked with the novel's meditation on social life. This most typical of questions, a question about relations between individuals and groups, suggests in the bildungsroman two intermediate kinds of answers: socially critical answers, in which the individual attempts to transform or transcend social relations, and utopian answers, in which social relations are beneficently arranged to foster the growth of the protagonist. (141)

Santiago's prose technique is brisk, not too subjective, and as bright as the places and the people she describes. With corresponding ingenuity and frugality, Santiago presents the house of corrugated sheet metal in rural Puerto Rico and the series of apartments the family moves into and out of in Brooklyn. In the same way, she gives a definite direction to her own developing sense of self and potentiality, her initial conflicts with English and with New York schools, employing neither self-pity nor much effort to examine why others in comparable circumstances should not rise, comparable to the third stage of Puerto Rican literature in the United States.

Like Mohr's *Nilda*, Santiago's memoir illustrates the shattering of a home represented by the father's constant absences and Negi's eventual move from Macún to Santurce and from there to New York City. This, in turn, is followed by Negi's grief over the loss of her past and a resentment over her present position. Finally, Negi reaches a positive reconciliation with her true self, corresponding to the three stages of exile.

When I Was Puerto Rican demonstrates the perceptible effects of poverty, racism, sexism, and political bureaucracy on Santiago's life and that of her family as well. Her genuine accomplishment is to have woven the particulars of places, family and social life, into an energetic portrait of her perseverance and emergence into what evidently is a unique individual.

If memoirs must find some equilibrium of identification and difference, their authors must suppose readers who demand both reassurance and challenge, familiarity and novelty. And the genre of creative nonfiction might seem especially suited to furnish both. The personal essay and memoir forms are familiar enough to have conventions, including the key one of a particular voice closely identifiable with the author, conventions which allow for a relatively

comfortable reading experience. Yet the forms are in addition, by convention, unrestrained enough to allow for an extensive range of subjects, styles, and responses to the currents of judgments and circumstances that influence that specific period.

Novels like Mohr's *Nilda* and Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, read as socially interrogative novels, ratify a double process of female *bildung*: first, the adolescent development journey, delineating the traditional anxiety—common also to male self-development fiction—between individual ideas and social reality; and second, the critical situation of the developed woman as she comes to recognize that the conventional patriarchal idea of woman is a “self-less” bondage. As Braendlin states: “Entrapped by domesticity, forced by the demands of her nurturing role to efface her desire for autonomy, the contemporary Bildungsroman heroine struggles to reassess and re-define her life and herself as an individual” (78).

In their literary productions, women, particularly marginalized women, explore roads to a self-defined identity until now restricted only to male questers and determined by their values. *Bildungsroman* by marginalized women share with their readers a confirmation of personal and social goals, values, and ideas that many male authors have abandoned because they believe life and self to be fictional, and, as Susan Kissel states, that “fiction to be an entertainment rather than the truth” (41). Recognizing the importance to female self-development of human values such as consanguine and marital love, communal sharing, and the perpetuation of cultural mores, many non-establishment women re-affirm these values in the context of marginal ethnicity, transforming the traditionally secondary and confining roles of daughters, wives, and mothers into consequential self-affirming choices. Marginalized women's reappraisals and adoptions of identities considered inferior or aberrant (what Spivak termed “subaltern”) by the dominant society are accomplishing a transvaluation of *bildung*, one manifestation of a process that can be identified as a revaluation of the self. Nicholasa Mohr and Esmeralda Santiago know that the marginalized woman is an outsider, often a social pariah, but they acclaim her as a bold seeker of a new selfhood that escapes both conformity and calculated mockery. Furthermore, Puerto Rican writers like Mohr and Santiago, writers living in the United States, understand that, due to the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, they are free to choose either to remain living in the United States or to return to their island.

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