Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* bridges the categories of U.S. and Caribbean literatures in challenging ways. I use Santiago’s Bildungsroman to help make visible, in the Anglo-Caribbean at least, a previously invisible segment of American literature: “U.S. Latino/a literature.” As a domain of publishing, and an area of academic inquiry, this is now a part of the cultural mainstream in the U.S. Latino literature and a part of the curriculum in universities and secondary schools across the U.S. This is also a booming sub-specialty affiliated both with American Studies, and Latin American Studies, in universities across Europe. *When I Was Puerto Rican* can also be located within a larger category of immigrant literature. Santiago’s text begins with a remembered Puerto Rico, and ends in the United States of the author’s adulthood. Studying Santiago’s text within a trajectory of immigrant narratives familiarizes the text to a wide variety of readers who are often processing their own parallel entries into the U.S. or its cultural orbit.

Within the context of analyzing Santiago’s text as a Bildungsroman and immigrant narrative, I will also examine Santiago’s representation of *jíbaros*, a subculture that preserves traditional Spanish folkways. Their place in Puerto Rico parallels the conflicted relationship many Jamaicans have with Rastafarians. Both groups are often portrayed as embodying elements of the national soul, but are also sometimes condemned and marginalized even as they are celebrated in official discourse. Since Santiago foregrounds *jíbaro* African-ness, she works against the grain of a tendency in Puerto Rican literary history to “whiten” the *jíbaros* (Torres-Robles, 1999).

More broadly, my objective is to treat Santiago’s text as an example of “borderlands literature” that bridges Caribbean literatures and that of U.S. Latinos. This opens up common ground for dialogue. In the Caribbean my students inevitably had family members who have migrated to the U.S., Canada, or Great Britain; they find narratives about the interchange between the U.S. and the Caribbean, such as Santiago’s text, to be highly relevant to their own experience. The chapter “The American Invasion of Macún,” which recounts young Santiago’s simultaneous resistance to “Yankee imperialists,” and attraction to United States culture, is immediately comprehensible to students who have a deeply conflicted and indeed confused relationship to the United States. Locating this text in the borderlands between the U.S. and the Caribbean, then, opens an “insider outsider”
perspective on the U.S., as what Mexican poet, essayist, and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz called an “imperial democracy” (1985: 275).

Santiago’s text is one of several I study in “Texts in Flight: Borderland Literature in ‘Nuestra América’.” The title refers to Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island*. A U.S.-based Cuban, Benítez-Rojo (1996: 27) suggests that “The literature of the Caribbean can be read as a mestizo text, but also as a stream of texts in flight.” Santiago’s text is one of many instances of the movement of people and cultures between the United States and the Caribbean/Latin American world. The existence of “texts in flight” between the two Americans is normative in this domain. These texts, which I am describing as “borderland narratives,” constitute in practice a mobile transgressive bridge between these two interpenetrating worlds.

**Borderland narratives and the Bildungsroman**

The concept of borderland literature has roots in social science discourse about frontiers—defined by Lamar and Thompson (1981: 7) as a *zone of interpenetration* between two previously distinct peoples.* However, partly because of a “stigma” attached to the term frontier (the backlash against the Turner Thesis), historians have suggested alternatives such as the “contact zone,” or Richard White’s “Middle Space.”

Borderlands have come to be favored by many anthropologists over frontiers because it suggests a *series* of “contested boundaries” which “define a geopolitical space,” as Bradley Parker puts it (2006: 80). Literary critics have also found the concept useful to analyze a body of literature that transgresses binary divisions between nations, languages, and cultures.

The concept of borderland cultures, in a North American context, has most often been applied to the “contact zone” between the U.S. and Mexico. But this concept is being applied to similar processes going on in other borderlands around the world. Although borderlands are not new historically, they are one pronounced type of the contemporary transnational flows which have created the multi-centered identities so typical of the era of globalization. People whose family networks, economic flows and linguistic practices so routinely criss-cross borders are capable of “push[ing] the hegemonic monoculture far into the distant horizon,” Stacy Alaimo insists (2000: 167). Such a rhetorical gesture echoes post-colonial theory’s more utopian claims about the oppositional power of “minority discourse.” But if it is too simplistic to claim that borderland narratives “reverse the margin and center” or “displace the center with the margins,” in practical terms a boundary-crossing text like Santiago’s “deports the monolingual to the margins,” and at least participates in a rhetorical “dissolution of boundaries” (Alaimo 2000: 167, 170, 175). Clearly on the borderlands there is a thin line between the expression of ideological desire, and the representation of lived reality. “We are pushing you to the margins,” Guillermo Gómez-Peña told one interviewer. “We are making your culture exotic and unfamiliar. We are adopting a fictional center and speaking as if we were there” (Cummings 1994).

Santiago has a poetic prose style that is accessible to younger readers, but *When I Was Puerto Rican* is a Bildungsroman aimed primarily at adults, and is a crossover like *Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies*, or *Demian*. These novels of formation dramatize a transition from innocence to consciousness. Since Goethe, this transformation has
typically been mediated through a journey from the provinces to the city (Buckley 1994). In the twentieth century this genre came to be dominated by narratives which “explore[d] the fate of outsiders,” it has been argued, and is thus a favoured means of describing the entry of “marginalized” peoples to the metropole, or their partial assimilation into the cultural mainstream. Puerto Rican immigrants to the U.S. have themselves produced a substantial body of Bildungsromans (Hernandez 2001: 59), leading Ismael Muñiz (1999: 84) to claim that Puerto Rican writers are “in an exceptionally favourable position” to explore themes such as the entry into modernity, movement between languages, and the absorption into consumer culture.

Both immigrant literature and the Bildungroman often narrate a passage from country-of-origin to country-of-destination, often from the margins to the center. Santiago’s coming of age takes place during the process of being pulled into the American orbit, and the two processes cannot be separated.

“A North American Jíbara”—An incomplete acculturation

Santiago narrates the process of becoming a North American jíbara primarily through the consciousness of Negi, her childhood self. This is a bittersweet Coming to America story: the heroine succeeds, but a rage and an inner vacuum remain, rooted in the loss of her father, and of traditional Puerto Rican culture. As a variant on the American dream, When I Was Puerto Rican affirms “official” multiculturalism, which proclaims that it pays to be different: i.e., you can be “other” and yet succeed if you market your difference in a way that affirms the acculturating (post-assimilationist) capacities of the United States. Since the notion of a jíbara identity is such a central part of the narrative strategy, and of the ideological message of the book, then this text must also be read in relation to an extensive history of Puerto Rican literature that attempts to work out national identity through engaging the jíbaro as a symbol of the national soul, or in some cases, of a national shame.

The author’s introduction to the Spanish edition, Cuando era Puertorriqueña, which she herself translated, makes clear just how complex and incomplete her transculturation has been, despite surface appearances. “The life related in this book was lived in Spanish, but first written in English,” the introduction begins. But Santiago immediately reveals the degree to which her consciousness is actually located in an in-between space between the two languages.

Many times, while writing, I was surprised to hear myself talking in Spanish while my fingers typed the phrase in English. Then my tongue would get tied and I would lose the flow of what I was saying and writing, as if observing that I was translating from one language to another made me lose both of them. I wish I could say that this situation only happens when I’m writing. But the truth is that many times, while talking to friends or family, I find myself in a limbo between Spanish and English…(xv)

In the U.S., Santiago is immersed in an English-speaking world. But in moments when consciousness shifts gears, other languages come to the forefront:

But at night, when I’m at the point of falling asleep, the thoughts that fill my mind are in Spanish. The songs that whisper in my dreams are in Spanish. My
dreams are a mixture of Spanish and English that everyone understands, that expresses what I want to say, who I am, what I feel. In this night-time world, language doesn’t matter. (xv–xvi)

This Introduction illustrates just how much self-translation was involved in the self-presentation of this text. «When I write in English, I have to translate from the Spanish that guards my memories. When I talk in Spanish, I have to translate from the English that defines my present,” writes Santiago. That process resulted in an artistic success, but it came at a personal price. Writing her memoirs in English, she notes, forced her to confront just how much of her childhood experience was untranslatable: hence the book is chock-full of Spanish words and Puerto Rican folk sayings which Santiago translates in a Glossary.

Languages, like identities, are fluid. One can reconstruct an identity or language of the past, but there will be a disjuncture between that remembered or re-imagined self and voice, and the identity and language of the re-memberer. It is in this disjuncture that Santiago has discovered the un-healable wounds which in fact fire her artistic imagination:

But many times I feel the pain of having left my little island, my people, my language. And sometimes this pain shifts into rage, into resentment, because I did not choose to come to the United States. They brought me here. But this infantile rage is what nourishes my stories. It’s what makes me face an empty page and fill it with words that try to understand and explain to others what it is to live in two worlds…(xviii)

Publicly inscribing these words of self-translation, Santiago achieves a version of transculturation which includes self-acceptance:

One culture has enriched the other, and both have enriched me….. When I was a girl I wanted to be una jíbara. When I was an adolescent I wanted to be a North American. As a woman now, I am both things, a North American jíbara. I carry my banana mark with pride and dignity. (xviii)

That last line of the Introduction alludes to the epigraph with which Santiago starts Chapter One, “Jíbara.” It signals that acculturation can never be complete: “Al jíbaro nunca se le quita la mancha de plátano. A jíbaro can never wash away the stain of the plantain” (9).

Framing: jíbaro poetry and the prologue

The poem Santiago chooses to frame her narrative is “Claroscuro,” by Luis Lloréns Torres, an appropriate choice since he is considered Puerto Rico’s national poet.9

\[
\begin{align*}
    & El bohío de la loma, \\
    & Bajo sus alas de paja, \\
    & Siente el frescor mañanero \\
    & Y abre sus ojos al alba. (xiii)
\end{align*}
\]
The translation provided, while literally accurate, does not convey the rhyme scheme, the rhythm, or much of the flavor of the original: “Under its palm frond wings, the little house (bohío) on the hill senses the freshness of the morning and opens its eyes to the dawn.” Santiago’s Glossary defines bohío as a “typical dwelling of Puerto Rican jíbaros” (272). So Santiago seems to be engaging, via Lloréns Torres, in a species of primitivism. The bohío is anthropomorphized: in its capacity to open its eyes and feel the dawn, this shack can represent the jíbara, the soul of a primordial Puerto Rico, or one assumes, Santiago at the dawn of her waking consciousness. All seems to be innocence and beauty: the “milk of dawn” runs from the nostrils of a calf separated from its mother; birds and roosters leap from their nests or branches, and a swarm of multi-colored butterflies are described as

Flores huérfanas que rondon  
buscando a las madres ramas  
(orphan flowers in search of the mother branch). (xiii)

At the moment that eyes are opened to the dawn, a world in motion is revealed. Both the calf, and the butterflies, are separated from their mothers. Awakening instills movement, which seems to be linked to the absence of home or a feminine presence: a nest, a mother’s breast, the mother branch which spawns but then orphans a diversity of new lifeforms.

Before emigrating, Negi had the poems of Lloréns Torres on her walls, along with pinup photos of pop stars (208). This should caution us against overly-romantic views of the Puerto Rican past. Even at the dawn of the book, Santiago makes this defamiliarization explicit when she follows the Lloréns Torres poem with a Prologue in which the author, in her “American jíbara” present, seems to turn her back on this tropical past.

The Prologue, “How to Eat a Guava,” opens with an epigraph: “Barco que no anda, no llega a puerto/A ship that doesn’t sail, never reaches port” (3). This segues from the preceding theme of motion away from the mother branch; it heralds the movement across waters of Santiago’s family. In the Prologue, it is guavas that have moved across waters. The adult Santiago encounters them in a New York Shop & Save. A green guava inspires memories of eating guavas as a girl, written as a parody of “How To” articles. Santiago remembers the last guava she ate “the day we left Puerto Rico,” which she savoured all the way to the airport (4).

“Today,” Santiago studies a stack of seemingly symmetrical guavas, “each one perfectly round and hard,” and over-priced. “It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hopscotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I’m no longer a child.” Something has been lost in translation. “The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet” (4).

Santiago infers certain things about her relationship to the tropical world of her girlhood. Students accustomed to thinking in black-and-white about issues like assimilation, or post-colonialism, often interpret this as evidence that Santiago assimilated, and turned her back on her past. But the symbolism of the guava in New York is not as simple as it seems.
This section’s symbolism can probably only reveal itself after having read the rest of the text. After hearing the evolution of Santiago’s attitude towards U.S. culture, one can infer that, in this scene, she is suggesting something quite different from assimilation. If she can’t have the real thing, she prefers (North) American fruit. She is not willing to settle for the poor translation over the powerful smells and flavours of the original. But she can recreate the real thing in memory, through writing. That is the only place this paradise really exists, today.

Santiago is herself a purveyor of tropical fruits. By recreating a tropical paradise, she became a hot commodity in the multi-ethnic market. She knows that much has been lost in translation. Her book will be on display, in many U.S. bookshops at least, in an “ethnic” or “minority literature” section, and she will function as something like a tour guide, including a Glossary of “foreign words” for those who don’t have access to the real thing. But having had the ripe guava in its tropical context, Santiago is unwilling to settle for imports that been picked too young, thereby losing much of their flavour. She seems to suggest that it is more honest to move on to the bittersweet fruits of her adult, North American life.

Jíbara

The earliest scenes of the narrative show Negi wanting to escape from her mother’s domestic space, and the domestic chores that being with her mom entails, by “working with Papi.” Negi often finds herself occupying an in-between space, sitting at the door of her house, where she can watch and talk to her father, and hopefully be called by her father to come into his space, without however incurring the wrath of her mother. Her father is dark-skinned, and a jíbaro. Every morning on his radio, they listen to “The Day Breaker’s Club,” which played the traditional music and poetry of the jíbaros, along with a message that, in compensation for their life of hardship, “jíbaros were rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism.” At that age, Santiago recalls, “I wanted to be a jíbara more than anything else in the world” (12). But her mother discourages this desire in confusing ways that are rooted in Mami’s “upwardly mobile” attitude, and in color consciousness or racial attitudes that are visible in Negi’s own family. “Don’t be a jíbara,” Negi’s mother (Ramona, or Monín) would scold her. This conflicted attitude caused Negi to fret:

If we were not jíbaros, then why did we live like them?...Our neighbor Doña Lola was a jíbara, although Mami had warned us never to call her that. Poems and stories about the hardships and joys of the Puerto Rican jíbaro were required reading at every grade level in school. My own grandparents, whom I was to respect as well as love, were said to be jíbaros. But I couldn’t be one, nor was I to call anyone a jíbara, lest they be offended...I was puzzled by the hypocrisy of celebrating a people everyone looked down on. (12–13)
The relationship between Puerto Rico and its *jíbaros* parallels in some ways the status of Rastas in Jamaica: often celebrated as *authentically Jamaican* in music, literature, and the arts, and yet also despised and ridiculed by upwardly mobile, conservative classes. This prejudice is only partially related to color-consciousness, since *jíbaros* are often fair-skinned. But the young Negi learns that her family embodies the whole range of colors of Puerto Rican peoples, along with a rather matter-of-fact acceptance of African ancestry. Of her sister, she says Delsa “was darker than I was, nutty brown, but not as sun ripened as Papi,” while Mami’s “skin was pink” (13). We later learn that Pablo, Negi’s father, has “carob color” skin, kinky hair, and full lips, which means that in countries like the United States or Jamaica, he would be seen as “black.” But a black-white binary hardly exists in Puerto Rico (Duany 2005), as Negi learns through a discussion with her mother about her nickname.

“Why does everyone call me Negi?”

“Because when you were little you were so black, my mother said you were a *negrita*. And we all called you *Negrita*, and it got shortened to Negi.”

…”So Negi means I’m black?”

“It’s a sweet name because we love you, *Negrita*.” (13)

English-language readers may be unfamiliar with the widespread and often affectionate use of derivatives of “Negro” in Latin American cultures. This has little of the negative racial connotations that derivatives of “Negro” carry in English. This dialogue demonstrates how commonplace acknowledgement of “blackness” is in Puerto Rico, as in many mestizo Latin American cultures: Negi’s sister Delsa is darker than she, while their father is darker still, but only Negi carries a nickname indicating her African-ness.

It is primarily through her father that Negi visualizes what being a *jíbara* means. So when she says she wanted to be a *jíbara* more than anything else in the world, it also means that she wanted above all to be with her father and, by inference, with darker-skinned peoples, and others who are living repositories of traditional folk culture in Puerto Rico. For Negi, her father represents freedom, the public sphere, artistic creativity, knowledge of the (outside) world. From the beginning, that is always where Negi wants to be—being with her father also means being outside, away from domestic duties, and with the *jíbaros*. So when she later develops a career as a writer and an artist, she is really “bigging up” Papi. He has laid out a template for her. Her mother also gives her models of independence, but in becoming an American *jíbara*, she is mainly following her father’s lead.

Santiago’s representation of the *jíbaros* follows the lead of literary predecessors such as Luis Palés Matos, who reclaimed the African elements of this back-country people, who had long been whitewashed in representations by elite Puerto Rican writers. Palés Matos was in fact critical of Santiago’s favorite poet, Lloréns Torres, for perpetuating, in his romanticized portrait of the *jíbaros*, a notion that they were typically fair-skinned.¹⁰

On a misty morning when Negi and her two sisters have been sent off to the hill-top house of a neighbor, Doña Zena, while her mother gives birth to her first brother, Héctor, Negi has a reverie inspired by the Puerto Rican country-side, and by the poetry she has heard her father reciting, or being broadcast on the radio. “Mornings like this inspired
much of jíbaro poetry,” she mused, but in this particular context, the poetry became a form of ritual medicine which Negi used to fight off her fears for her mother, and for herself, because “another baby was coming to separate me further from my mother.”

I called up the few verses I’d memorized and repeated them like a prayer as I sat on Doña Zena’s steps, my eyes riveted on the slow ribbon of smoke ascending from our fogón, my feet buried in lemongrass, dew chilling my toes. (18)

In that instant, Santiago has inscribed her younger self into the historical discourse of the jíbaros. But it is Negrita, the little black girl, who is chilling her toes in the dew. And Negi is not merely celebrating jíbaro culture, but trying to use it to avoid the familial rupture which she seems to sense that the steady arrival of new babies will cause.

“The American Invasion of Macún”—Translating and Resisting Imperialism

This coming-of-age tale is deeply inflected by the increasingly intrusive present of the U.S. empire, and its missionary-like agents. But this theme is interwoven with the siren song of attraction to the U.S. This chapter takes place, historically speaking, around the arrival of Operation Bootstrap in the mid-1950s. This chapter explores, with humor and irony, the difference between translation and substitution. The American invasion is on one level an attempted translation, but in practice, it tries to substitute the American way of life for the mores of the women in Negi’s community. Here Santiago presents a version of acculturation on the linear model—assimilation. She gives us a group portrait of women who question North American preconceptions about the universality or indeed the desirability of the “dream” they are attempting to export, for the benefit of the underprivileged in their Caribbean colony. Negi is tutored by these women, whose humorous, indirect resistance contrasts with Negi’s defiant, visceral anti-Americanism.11

As “American Invasion” opens, Negi is in English class with Miss Jiménez, one of only two women in the text with an openly pro-American attitude. Parents are instructed to come to a Saturday meeting, where experts “would teach our mothers all about proper nutrition and hygiene, so that we could grow up as tall and strong as…the Americanitos in our primers” (63–4). So Negi and her classmates are to be reconstituted into the Dicks and Janes of the U.S. primers that have suddenly become required reading at her school. On Saturday, the community women crowded into the centro communal. “There were no fathers,” Santiago notes, and the older children were enlisted to keep the small children in order. So Negi, as usual, occupies a liminal position: “I sat at the door, Edna on my lap, and tried to keep one eye on my sisters and brother and another on what went on inside” (64–5).

The anti-colonial themes of this chapter (Khader 2003; Galollo 2000) on which I focus are translation and substitution, as they indicate a shift in Negi’s evolution into the future “North American jíbara.” Santiago satirizes the “experts” of nutrition and cleanliness. They have colourful charts and large suitcases full of distracting items like over-sized teeth. One of the American experts who is to advise the women on food has
red hair and thick glasses. Every detail Santiago provides indicates how completely out of place these men are. They “wore ties with their white shirts and tugged at their collars and wiped their forehead with crumpled handkerchiefs” (64). The red-head speaks in “heavily accented, hard to understand Castilian Spanish” (66). Predictably, the colourful food on the chart on his easel has little to do with the diet of the Puerto Rican women: there were broccoli and peaches and perfectly square loaves of bread. But “[t]here was no rice on the chart, no beans, no salted codfish…. There were bananas but no plantains, potatoes but no batatas,” etc. Clearly the designers of this food chart had nothing remotely like a Caribbean diet in mind.

The women in the room, irreverent to the point of disrespect, signal their scepticism by making jokes at the experts’ expense, then become more blunt:

“But, señor,” said Doña Lola from the back of the room, “none of the fruits or vegetables on your chart grow in Puerto Rico.”

“Then you must substitute our recommendations with your native foods.”

“Is an apple the same as a mango?” asked Cirila….

“Sí,” said the expert, “a mango can be substituted for an apple.”

“What about breadfruit?”

“Breadfruit…would be equivalent to potatoes” [said the San Juan expert], but it is best not to make substitutions…That would throw the whole thing off.” (66–7)

Santiago’s women provide an alternative to Gayatri Spivak’s negative response to the rhetorical question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Their uncowed burlesque and questioning of the “authorities” from both San Juan and the U.S. pokes holes in their “civilizing” pretensions. But it seems to be a dialogue of the deaf: “The subaltern can speak, but the ignorant and paternalistic colonial experts cannot hear her,” as Jamil Khader observes.12

This interchange develops a recurring “lost in translation” theme. The “father knows best” North Americans are not prepared to question their ethnocentric discourse. But the problems of substitution make a mockery of their efforts. The “whole thing” that would be “thrown off” by substitutions of local products for the U.S. model includes integrating Puerto Ricans as consumers of U.S. products. But it also includes a genuine (if again ethnocentric) concern for the appalling problems of health and sanitation suffered by Puerto Ricans during that era. One of the Americanos “who spoke good Spanish discussed intestinal parasites” (67). Negi soon discovered that she herself had the dreaded tapeworms that the expert had shown on his chart. (90% of Puerto Ricans suffered from hookworm in 1930).13

So it would be too easy to simply condemn as “imperialistic” the efforts of the experts who came to try to translate, or substitute, North American concepts of health and nutrition. It is true that “translations are never innocent,” to cite Native American critic Paula Gunn Allen: “they are invariably marked by cultural biases so ingrained as to be virtually unconscious” (Allen 2001: 2107). It is also true that it would have been much worse, having taken political control of the island, if the North Americans had done nothing.
Negi's own parents demonstrated a nuanced attitude towards the North Americans. Her mother passed out the donated toothbrushes and instructed her children to brush their teeth twice a day. But she questioned why, if the North Americans really wanted to help, “they didn’t just give us a sack of rice and a bag of beans,” which would “keep this family fed for a month,” rather than the tins of peanut butter, beets, grape jelly, and pickles. She put the donated foodstuffs on a high shelf: “so that we can eat like Americanos cuando el hambre apriete” (when hunger bites us) (68). Santiago notes that true to her word, she only took the American food down bit by bit over time, so that they only ate like Americans “when hunger cramped our bellies.”

Papi’s reaction was similarly good-humored, and a matter-of-fact expression of national pride. Negi asked him: “If we eat all that American food they give us at the centro communal, will we become Americanos?” He answered with a broad smile: “Only if you like it better than our Puerto Rican food” (74).

But Negi’s negative take on the U.S. version of health and happiness starts with the visual propaganda in the centro communal, wall-to-wall posters in which Spot, Mother and Father, the Milkman and the Policeman “smiled their way through tableau after tableau, their clean, healthy, primary-colored world flat and shadowless” (74). This impression of an insipid, artificial world is reinforced by her first experience with American breakfast food: scrambled eggs made from a powdered mix, sausage, and bread squares. Negi’s friend Juanita Marín, who is predisposed to think that anything American must be terrific, is impressed: “This is great!” But Negi forms a very different opinion about the “bright yellow blob” on her blue enamel plate. “It tasted like the cardboard covers of our primers…If these were once eggs, it had been a long time since they’d been inside a hen.” Everything else she tries is also disappointingly bland and over-processed. “The juice might have had oranges in it once, but only a faint citrus smell remained” (76). This critique of North American food from south of the border is similar to that offered by General Arroyo in Carlos Fuentes’s Old Gringo (1985: 25–6): The antiseptic nature of their food, he infers, is a symbol for how they seal themselves off from reality (Stephens 2009).

Negi learns a new iconography and a new vocabulary. Along with the “Dick and Jane” posters in the lunchroom, there is a portrait of the Puerto Rican governor, Don Luis Muños Marín, smiling alongside the U.S. President, Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower. Most of the people in Negi’s community assume that the two men are partners, but Ignacio Sepúlveda, a hothead, tells Negi that Ike is “an imperialist, like all the other gringos” (71). Afterwards Negi reasons with her father about the meaning of these new words, such as imperialism and gringo. Papi corrects her gently—starting with the pronunciation of Ike (she says “Eek-ey”). Then he goes on to expand her understanding of “imperialist,” as well as epithets like gringo or spic(k). He does not want her to merely substitute one prejudice for another. His reasoning begins with a capsule history lesson of the U.S. conquest of Puerto Rico in 1898. “They call Americanos imperialists, which means they want to change our country and our culture to be like theirs” (72–3). Negi correctly surmises that this is why she is being taught English, and declares: “I’m not going to learn English so I don’t become an American.”

“Being an American is not just a language, Negrita,” Papi responds. It is telling that the definition of imperialist in this dialogue between father and daughter centers on
language. Just as North Americans ridicule Hispanics who “don spik inglish,” as Papi explains, “*Americanos* talk funny when they speak Spanish,” Negi observes. “The ones who don’t take the trouble to learn it well,” Papi affirms. Even failing to learn a language well is “part of being an imperialist. They expect us to do things their way even in our own country” (73).

Undigested languages, and indigestible pieces of the American way of life, are the centrepiece of Santiago’s meditation on imperialism and North American do-gooders. Miss Jiménez tries to teach her students English with songs like “America the Beautiful” and “Brother John,” but “we learned all our songs phonetically, having no idea what the words meant” (77). Meanwhile, Negi is still clinging to the “mother branch,” preferring patriotic songs like Noel Estrada’s “*En mi Viejo San Juan,*” which inspires a reasoning with Papi about what it means to live one’s life forever between two cultures or nations.

For Negi, American food continues to be as indigestible as the lyrics she learns without comprehension, with often comic results. One morning the children are served “a dollop of peanut butter” in a glass that is filled with warm milk (81). Even Juanita, the budding Americanist, is suspicious of this concoction. Negi’s reaction is symbolic: “I threw up what little I’d swallowed.” When a Mrs. García reprimands her, saying that freshly-made powdered milk couldn’t possibly be sour, Negi explodes, calling the peanut butter milk “*repugnante*” and scremning: “My Mami and Papi can feed us without your disgusting *gringo* imperialist food!” (82). For four days, Negi lies sick in bed, throwing up. This may be a psychosomatic illness born of Negi’s fear of Mami’s punishment. But the symbolism of Negi’s resistance to this imperialist variant of acculturation is clear.

**Conclusión**

Although *When I Was Puerto Rican* does defamiliarize U.S. imperial culture, it never aspires to marginalize the mainstream. But Santiago does bring a previously marginalized subculture into the mainstream in a way that should challenge readers’ preconceptions about what is the linguistic or ethnic mainstream in the contemporary United States.

Seen from a Caribbean, Puerto Rican, or Nuyorican perspective, Santiago’s is a key voice in a body of writing that re-examines Puerto Rican identity—and more broadly, the relationship of Caribbean and Latin America people to the United States. The past tense of the title is intentionally provocative: by self-consciously framing her narrative as the memorializing of a *previous identity,* Santiago has helped inspire a lively debate about Puerto Rican identity in the present, in which cultural authenticity seems all but unattainable. On another level, her work is in fact “una traducción cultural que hace accesible la cultura puertorriqueña a los lectores anglosajones,” writes Antonia Domínguez Miguela (2001: 103). (It is a work of cultural translation that makes Puerto Rican culture accessible to “mainstream” U.S. readers). As such Santiago participates in a dominant feature of contemporary U.S. literature and popular culture: she exoticizes her culture of origin for consumption in a market that is disposed to pay a premium for “exotic fruits.”

In her insistence on framing her memory of *puertorriqueñidad* in the past tense, Santiago is in agreement with those who insist that the nostalgia of exiles is driven by desire for an idealized past, and that this retrospective sensibility produces representations
of the culture of origin which can never be considered “authoritative,” or “authentic.” As Cuban-American novelist Roberto Fernandez suggests, “memories of the country of origin are themselves a U.S. cultural product, and therefore always already hybrid.” Even if memories are “imported” in an “uncontaminated” fashion, the experience of living in the U.S., and especially of self-presentation, will inevitably shape the way in which those memories are transformed or framed, over time. This is clear in Santiago’s comments about how her new hybrid identity in the U.S. shapes the way in which she remembers her jíbara roots:

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. (209)

There are indications that Negi follows her father’s model, and teaching, when it comes to her attitude towards “race” or physical difference. In Puerto Rico, she identifies with the Bobby Capó song “ojos negros, piel canela” (black eyes, cinnamon skin), an affirmation of the beauty and power of her African/mestiza heritage. As a teenager Esmeralda receives a blessing from an old jíbara woman in New York: “once an old jíbara took my hands in hers and kissed them, which made me feel like the best person in the world” (251). Clearly, that feeling derives from a sense of being in her father’s place, in a cultural sense: to be affirmed by the people of her father is the best form of self-esteem possible for Santiago. She feels envious of the style and the independence of African-American girls. “I practiced walking with the peculiar little hop of the morenas, but felt as if I were limping” (230). Although she recognizes a kinship with African Americans, their culture and style cannot be substituted for her own. This is largely due to U.S. binary racial attitudes, so different from what she knew as a girl.

[I]n Puerto Rico, all the people I’d ever met were either black or had a black relative somewhere in their family. I would have thought morenos would like us, since so many of us looked like them. (225)

Her father’s heritage means that she has no choice but to live in perpetual liminality. Brooklyn Puerto Ricans, she sees, “walked the halls between the Italians and the morenos, neither one nor the other, but looking and acting like a combination of both” (230).

During this period, Esmeralda sometimes “felt disloyal for wanting to learn English” (230). But she becomes her mother’s translator, and also learns to translate herself to authorities in schools, and elsewhere. The teachings of her father about learning a language well become the key that opens the door into her new life as a North American jíbara.

It is through mastering literary English that Santiago fulfils a role scripted for her by her father and other Boricua poets: a storyteller who immortalizes jíbaro culture. In the process, Santiago has given us a “text in flight” that illustrates how people from cultural, political, and linguistic “margins” are transforming literary genres like the Bildungsroman. Or to paraphrase Gustavo Pérez-Firmat’s meditations on being “lost in translation” (2002:
Santiago shows us that sometimes the American dream is imagined in Spanglish, written in English, and translated into Spanish, but it is equally American in any idiom.20

Notes


4 Herman Hesse’s *Demian* (1919), J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Yasunari Kawabata’s *Thousand Cranes* (1956) have been grouped as both Bildungsroman and exemplars of the psychological novel in *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (2007).


6 There are two models of acculturation, a linear model (assimilation) and a two-way model. J. W. Berry suggests that “there are four possible outcomes of the acculturation process: assimilation (movement toward the dominant culture), integration (synergy of the two cultures), rejection (reaffirmation of the traditional culture), or marginalization (alienation from both cultures).” http://www.answers.com/topic/ acculturation?cat=health. Santiago’s text has elements of all four of Berry’s definitions, but is closest to integration-as-synthesis. J. W. Berry, «The Acculturation Process and Refugee Behavior.» In *Refugee Mental Health in Resettlement Countries*, eds. C. I. Williams and J. Westermeyer (New York: Hemisphere, 1986). The definition by Melville Herskovits and associates of “continuous first-hand contact” between members of different cultures, “with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups,” in fact points towards the concept of interpenetration. *Transculturation* is simply an individual instance of this process.

7 Torres-Robles, (September 1999). National soul/ national shame: This is similar to Mexico’s attitude towards indigenous peoples, and to a lesser extent, U.S. attitude towards African Americans. U.S. literary treatment of Native Americans is probably more similar, in that mixture of shame and glorious praise.

Luis Lloréns Torres (1876–1944), a modernist poet, had an idealized vision of the *jíbaro*.

On Palés Matos’ critique of Lloréns Torres for whitening the image of the *jíbaro*, see Torres-Robles, (September 1999).


As Gordon Lewis points out, “With the exception of the Protestant churches which had arrived after the American occupation, there were few groups undertaking any serious work” in areas such as public health. The Protestants, who are very visible and audible in Santiago’s narrative, were forerunners of the secular reforms attempted through Operation Bootstrap in the 1950s. Gordon Lewis, *Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2004[1963]): 101. Some of my context on Operation Bootstrap, and the reference to tapeworms, comes from the Lewis’ chapter “Operation Bootstrap: The Advent of Industrialization.” See also Roberto Santiago, ed., *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings—an Anthology* (New York: One World/Ballantine), 1995.

In a diary Luis Muñoz Marín (1898–1980) considered a vocabulary that would clarify Puerto Rico’s complex relation to the US. The first term was “nation.” Muñoz Marín believed that the word nation “should not be employed by Puerto Ricans when referring to the U. S.,” because when a Puerto Rican says “the nation” “he ought to be referring to Puerto Rico.” Many of Santiago’s characters clearly think of Puerto Rico as a nation. Soto-Crespo, (2006).

The use of the culture of food to critique the U.S. is similar in both books: people who “end up trying to sanitize everything” will “always need a screen…to protect them, or to mediate between them and ‘reality’” (Stephens 2009: 77).

The wording is Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s paraphrase (2000) of Roberto Fernández in his novel *Raining Backwards*.

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