

Facilitating Student Connections to Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* and Esmeralda Santiago's *Almost a Woman*

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Introduction

Both Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun: A Novel* (1989) and Esmeralda Santiago's *Almost a Woman* (1998) tell the story of a young Puerto Rican girl who moves to the mainland U.S. These texts represent the best in Hispanic fiction for young adult readers. *The Line of the Sun* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and *Almost a Woman* received the prestigious Alex Award from the American Library Association. Both works feature lushly written prose combined with adventurous storytelling.

At first glance it may seem that *The Line of the Sun* and *Almost a Woman* are so deeply embedded in Puerto Rican culture that they lack widespread student appeal and relevance. By leading students to forge personal connections with these books, teachers can broaden their appeal and turn them into springboards for classroom discussions of more universal issues, including the immigrant experience, the process of Americanization, and the role of mothers as guardians of family culture. Methods for facilitating personal connections are discussed below. Suggested discussion questions and essay topics are also offered in relation to each major of the themes discussed.

Windows on the Immigrant Experience

Although Ortiz Cofer's and Santiago's texts employ different genres, both authors tell strikingly similar tales. Ortiz Cofer weaves together fact and fiction, narrative and folklore, to tell the tale of her parents' and grandparents' lives in rural Puerto Rico and her own life in Paterson, New Jersey. She calls her resulting fact-fiction mixture "creative nonfiction" (Bartkevicius 58). Set in the 1940s and 1950s in the small Puerto Rican village of Salud, the first half of *The Line of the Sun* centers on the lives of Marisol's maternal uncle, and the uncle's parents and siblings. The second half of the novel begins shortly after Marisol is born, when she and her mother Ramona have moved to Paterson, New Jersey. There they live in El Building, an urban tenement populated primarily by recent Puerto Rican immigrants. As the

tale continues throughout Marisol's childhood and adolescence in Paterson, Marisol comes both to appreciate her Puerto Rican background and to learn to live in the Caucasian-dominated culture of the mainland.

Santiago's *Almost a Woman* is the second entry in the author's two-volume memoir. It begins after thirteen-year-old Esmeralda, her mother (whom she calls "Mami"), and her siblings have moved to Brooklyn from Puerto Rico. Their father has stayed on the Island, leaving Mami to raise her eight children on her own. The book is as much about

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Esmeralda's entry into womanhood over the next eight years as it is about Mami's struggle to support her family in a foreign, often hostile, culture. In the end, Esmeralda leaves her mother's house to move to Florida with a love interest, recognizing simultaneously that her deep bond to Mami is unbreakable and will endure both physical distance and time.

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Marisol is a typical adolescent, searching for her identity in an exploration complicated by her living "in a state of limbo, halfway between cultures" (Ortiz Cofer 222). Esmeralda, too, is caught between two cultures. She wants to become "Americanized," yet she dreams of returning to the Island. She learns English quickly, but she continues to think in Spanish and to translate her thoughts into English to speak.

If approached effectively, these two texts can serve as windows on the immigrant experience. It can be difficult to teach young adults who have never experienced a move from their homeland to empathize with the emotional turmoil caused by being forced to survive in a foreign culture. But

almost every teen has experienced the feeling of being in between childhood and adulthood as a condition of teenhood. For example, young adults often yearn for the autonomy that adulthood brings, yet they simultaneously long for the relative lack of responsibilities associated with childhood. They may long to have a car of their own, but they may be unprepared to take on the accompanying financial responsibilities.

This simultaneous pull toward adulthood and childhood results in young adulthood as a state of in-between. Teachers can lead their students toward empathy with Marisol's and Esmeralda's living in between cultures by presenting both the immigrant experience and the young adult experience as similar states of emotional turmoil and in-betweenness. **The following discussion questions/essay topics can help students to make this connection with the texts:**

1. To what extent are Marisol's and Esmeralda's experiences as immigrants to the U.S. uniquely theirs? To what extent are they representative of the Puerto Rican immigrant experience? To what extent are they representative of the experiences of other ethnic groups that have immigrated to the U.S.?
2. Did reading *The Line of the Sun* and *Almost a Woman* bring to mind any of your own life experiences? If so, what were they?
3. Both Marisol and Esmeralda find themselves living in between the culture of Puerto Rico and the culture of the United States. Have you ever experienced this feeling of in-betweenness? How and when?
4. As they age during the books, both characters also find themselves living in between childhood and adulthood. How do they change emotionally and intellectually as they age? Are you experiencing any similar changes?

The Americanization Process

By the end of both books, Marisol and Esmeralda have become largely "Americanized." They have learned to speak English, to dress in mainland fashions, to prefer mainland American music to Puerto Rican music, and to play the role of native in a previously unfamiliar culture. Marisol's transition into mainland culture is largely the result of necessity. As her mother fades into a melancholic state, she must step in to lead her family.

Esmeralda's transition is more the result of her desire to become Americanized. After moving to the mainland, she begins to lose her Puerto Rican identity with amazing rapidity. After only two days in Brooklyn, she can already feel the respect and humility she has been taught to hold for her mother slipping away, to be replaced with more typically mainland independence and resolve. Young Esmeralda wants to conform to her image of typical "American" girls, wearing makeup, sipping sodas in malt shops, and going on dates. Yet even though she is eager to join mainland culture, Esmeralda mourns her withdrawal from Puerto Rican culture: "I silently grieved the dissolution of the other me, the Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican girl most at home in a dusty, tropical dirt road" (Santiago 74).

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Esmeralda's eventual Americanization is that although author and narrator Santiago thought and spoke Spanish as she experienced most of the events in *Almost a Woman*, she chose to write her autobiography in English. Similarly, although Ortiz Cofer

thought out the first half of her novel in Spanish in her head, she translated it into English as she wrote because Spanish for her is purely an oral language used only to communicate with family members (Ocasio and Ganey 144).

Again the key to leading students toward empathy with the characters lies in making connections between their life experiences and the Americanization process detailed in the books. Without experiencing it, few people can comprehend the life impact of Americanization. But most teens do understand the power of peer pressure. Translating Esmeralda's longing to go on dates and to wear short skirts into responses to peer pressure can enable students to understand the incredibly strong draw toward American culture that she felt.

Another method of impressing upon students how radically the two young women change within the texts is by encouraging them to imagine themselves similarly changed in a few years. **The following discussion questions and essay topics should lead students down these two paths:**

1. Esmeralda's picture of mainland American culture is that portrayed in the Archie comic books. How accurate is this view?
2. How does Marisol view mainland American culture?
3. How would you characterize mainland American culture?
4. Why did Esmeralda want so badly to be "American?"
5. Have you ever wanted to change your image as badly as Esmeralda wanted to? How? Why did you want to change? Did you change? How?
6. Imagine that it is ten years from now, and you have just completed writing your memoirs...in Chinese (or any other language unknown to you). How would your life have to change between now and then for this to occur? What kinds of experiences would you likely undergo? What kinds of emotions would you likely experience? What aspects of your current life do you think you would miss?

Mothers as Keepers of Family Culture

Understanding the roles of Ramona and Mami is crucial to understanding these books. Leading students to build connections between these two characters and their own mothers (or, for students who do not have mothers, fathers or other guardians) can help them to understand that Ramona and Mami are not merely representatives of Puerto Rican mothers, but of mothers and other caregivers in general.

Both Ramona and Mami play strong roles in their daughters' lives, serving their daughters as preservers and protectors of Puerto Rican culture. Their resistance to mainland culture is in part due to the fact that neither mother moves to the mainland based solely on the desire to do so. Ramona moves because her husband is stationed in New Jersey. Mami moves to seek medical care for her injured son.

Living in El Building, Ramona and her women friends recreate their Island culture, and Ramona rarely strays outside the edges of her transplanted Island world. Ramona and the other El Building women prepare traditional Puerto Rican dishes, wear fashions popular on the Island, listen to Puerto Rican music, tell traditional Puerto Rican folktales, and even hold a spiritualist meeting to ask the dead for help in dealing with their problems, a traditional Puerto Rican reaction to unhappiness and fear. Ramona never leaves

Puerto Rico emotionally, despite living in New Jersey for more than two decades. She is a passive figure who perpetuates Puerto Rican culture in part by avoiding mainland culture, rarely venturing outside of El Building.

As is the case with Ramona, Mami's lack of English is a disadvantage on the mainland, and she must rely on her children to navigate the complicated U.S. government bureaucracy for her. Living in the unfamiliar world of Brooklyn, Mami fears constantly for her children's safety, terrified that algo (something) will happen to her children. That something might be crime, drugs, injury, illness, or moral downfall. Mami raises her children as if they still lived on the Island, believing that a traditional Puerto Rican upbringing can protect them from many of the algos of New York. She struggles to prevent mainland culture from enveloping her children while consciously working to perpetuate Puerto Rican culture among them.

Despite the determination of both mothers to foster Puerto Rican culture in their daughters, both young women eventually become more comfortable in mainland culture than in their native Island culture. After Marisol's family moves out of El Building into a suburban house, Ramona lapses into silence, withdrawing from society into herself. Marisol is forced to assume Ramona's role as household head. This pattern of immigrant daughters pushing their mothers into subordinate positions is common in immigrant narratives (Szadziuk 121), and it appears in both *The Line of the Sun* and *Almost a Woman*.

On the other hand, both mothers do achieve some level of success since neither daughter fully loses her ties to Puerto Rican culture. Marisol knows that she will "always carry [her] Island heritage on [her] back like a snail" (Ortiz Cofer 273). Her Puerto Rican heritage becomes "both a comfort and a burden [that] she must carry everywhere" (Bruce-Novoa 67). At the end of her story, Esmeralda finally comes to understand that if her boyfriend left her, "there would be another man, but there would never, ever be another Mami" (Santiago 310). She realizes that no matter how hard she tries, she cannot sever herself from her maternal heritage, or from the Puerto Rican culture that frames that heritage.

The role of mother as keeper of family culture is not unique to Puerto Rican culture. In many cultures and in many families, it is the mothers who work the hardest to maintain family (including cultural, ethnic and other) traditions. In other families, fathers play a similar role. Teachers can lead students to understand that in working to foster their family cultures and to protect their children from the perceived dangers of a unfamiliar culture, Ramona and Mami act not only as Puerto Ricans, but as mothers acting in the best interests of their children. **The following discussion questions and essay topics can lead students to see the similarities between Ramona's and Mami's perspectives and that of their own mothers, fathers, and other guardians:**

1. In *Almost a Woman*, Jurgen's friend Flip jokes that all women turn into their mothers. In what ways is Esmeralda like Mami? In what ways is Marisol like Ramona? How are the young women different from their mothers?
2. Do Ramona and/or Mami remind you of your own mother? Of your father? Of your guardian? If so, how?
3. In many ways, Ramona and Mami represent Puerto Rico in the eyes of their daughters. What does your own mother, father, or guardian represent to you?
4. What aspects of Puerto Rican culture did Ramona's and Esmeralda's families maintain after they moved to the mainland? What traditions does your family maintain? How are these traditions maintained within your family, and by whom and for what reasons?
5. The fathers in both books are absentee parents. How do their roles as fathers differ from each other? How are they the same? How are they the same or different from your own father's role? From your mother's role? Your guardian's role?
6. Mami feared that "algo" might happen to her children. What was "algo?" How did she try to protect her children? In what ways does your mother, father, or guardian try to protect you? Why?

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Conclusion

Of course, these two texts are also ideal vehicles for introducing Puerto Rican culture to young adult audiences. To read them is to visit Puerto Rico and selected Puerto Rican neighborhoods on the mainland. But above all, these books serve to express the universal search for identity so fundamental to adolescence. If approached properly in the classroom, both books are sure to fascinate young readers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic alike. The key to using them effectively lies in helping young adults to build connections between the texts and their own life experiences. Hopefully, both books will find places in school classrooms and library collections for many years to come.

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