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 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 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.

These works center around the emotional struggles involved in the immigration process. Marisol and Esmeralda find themselves torn between the comforting familiarity of their native island culture and the alluring ubiquity of mainland culture.

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
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 accurately 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 algas 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 both in 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? From 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?

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.

Works Cited


Szadziuk, Maria. "*Culture as Transition: Becoming a Woman in Bi-Ethnic Space.*" Mosaic: *A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32.3 (September 1999): 109-29.

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