COMING OF AGE IN THE BORDERLANDS

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Introduction: Adolescent Borderlands

While I was teaching a First Year Seminar on Latinos in the United States, there were three books for the course that were particularly well received by the first-year students taking the class: Tomás Rivera’s *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971), Elías Miguel Muñoz’s *Brand New Memory* (1998) and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993). The students related to the protagonists of these three books through the coming-of-age process. At the time that I selected the books, I was looking for works that could represent the experiences of the major Hispanic groups in the U.S. I was not specifically looking for coming-of-age novels. However, the topic of coming-of-age could not be avoided given the age of the protagonists, and of the readers in the class. *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* faithfully documents, through the eyes of a pre-adolescent boy, the experiences of a Mexican-American migrant worker family in the 1940-50’s. *Brand New Memory* describes the life of a modern-day Cuban-American Valley Girl in the California of the 90’s, and *When I Was Puerto Rican*, which takes place in the 50’s and 60’s, is a nostalgic look into the world of the oldest daughter of a poor Puerto Rican couple in an unstable relationship that eventually leads to separation and a move to a new life in New York City. These three works are very effective in illustrating how political, economic and social factors, within the historical framework represented, had an impact on the life of people who belong to different Latino groups in the United States. There are many differences between the three protagonists: the nameless protagonist in Rivera’s work (whom we will call Marcos, as he is called in the film version of the book), Gina in *Brand New Memory*, and Negi in *When I Was Puerto Rican*. However, there are also common threads in the lives of these teenagers. How their crossings from childhood to adulthood intersect with these differences and common threads is the focus of this paper.

When an individual child crosses the boundary between childhood and adulthood, he or she does so, not only in an individual sense, but also as a member of a collective identity. Ralph
Grajeda, commenting on ...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, says it in other words: “...the focus of Rivera’s work is not on the forging of the individual subjective identity; it is informed by a concern for social and collective identity” (Grajeda 84). All three of these protagonists feel separate, painfully isolated, and yet, in the process of recovering the pieces of their identity, they also discover their links to the collective identity they so desperately need to become whole human beings. These links take different forms and manifest themselves at different times in their lives. All three must find a way to cross the bridge to adult consciousness by individually re-assessing their relationship to a world of adults that is split between their family’s roots and the U.S. social setting. Thus, their adolescence can be seen as a borderland state, encompassing multiple crossings.

*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, by Gloria Anzaldúa, revolutionized the concept of borders. In her preface, Anzaldúa explains that when she is speaking about borders she is encompassing much more than the merely physical border between Texas and Mexico. She adds psychological, sexual, and spiritual dimensions to the broader, and humanly embodied, concept of borderlands:

> It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape... However, there have been compensations for this *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being “worked” on. I have the sense that certain “faculties” - not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored - and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened (19).

The border is her. This implies an ever-shifting hybrid identity, which she masterfully captures in her poetry. The following poem is an example of her concept of “fronteras”:

> “Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders”

> Because, I, a mestiza,
> continually walk out of one culture
> and into another,
> because I am in all cultures at the same time,
> *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*
> *me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio*
> *Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan*
> *simultáneamente* (99)

She describes here the mental and emotional toll that is taken by the constant clash of “voices” (100). The poem also illustrates, through the use of English and Spanish, the coming together of these two worlds through a double linguistic expression. However, what is lost through
psychological conflict and insecurity is somewhat compensated by an enhanced sense of ambiguity and tolerance in the face of this unmarked territory called the borderlands, as well as the development of what she calls “la facultad,” a deepened capacity for intuitive grasping of realities that lie beneath the surface of what is rationally perceived through the intellect.

Sonia Saldívar-Hull, in her introductory remarks, speaks of the “topography of displacement,” seeing Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*... as a book that presents the history of a Southwest created from an unnatural border, destabilizing the life of the population on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican national borders. Anzaldúa connects the personal to the historical and the political, and throughout her book demonstrates the many personal and collective consequences of this history of displacement. Her concept of “Borderlands” is helpful in conceptualizing the borderlands experiences of Marcos, Gina, and Negi. They, too, are “worked on,” experiencing this constant clash of voices and contradictions. They, too, must learn to navigate the turbulent waters of displacement. They, too, slowly develop their “facultad” under the harsh conditions of their life. However, as adolescent protagonists, they have their own particular vulnerability.

Adolescents all over the world are border-crossers, unwilling transgressors into uncharted territory. They are outsiders looking into the mysteries of the adult world, insiders of a childhood world that can no longer hold them within its boundaries. They tread carefully between the two worlds, their growing consciousness demanding answers, while all around them there are mysterious barriers to their natural curiosity, and to their need to put their world in order. To these three young protagonists, the common burden of transition from childhood to adulthood is marked by the added burden of multiple barriers resulting from the socio-political circumstances of their particular group: Mexican-American, Cuban-American, and Puerto Rican. Moreover, these multiple barriers deeply mark the formation of their adult identity. The intensity of the struggle in each child to put together the puzzle of the past and the present in order to get on with the future is palpable in each of the novels. As adolescents, they are a bridge between the past and the future, and they embody this temporal path. All three express a need to know about the past and about the reality that surrounds them, and we see them asking questions, trying to make sense of their world, because they cannot go forward without going backwards.

I will point to a few key common threads of comparison to explore the coming-of-age factors that both join and differentiate the experiences of these Latino adolescents. As we discover these differences and commonalities, we also discover the uniqueness of the Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican experiences within the specific social and historical settings portrayed in the novels. Moreover, we also discover how these settings are a factor in the structure and narrative style of each novel.

**Displacement and the Disruption of Memory**

“Coming of Age in the Borderlands” was chosen as a title for this paper because in each novel there is an experience of displacement that begins in a physical sense, and then widens its impact in various aspects of life. Each experience of displacement is unique, but one thing that all three experiences have in common is the disruption of memory through that displacement. All
three protagonists in these novels are engaged in a struggle to recover, or perhaps we can also say, discover, the past of a newly found adult terrain. In each case, we see how the particularities of being a Mexican-American migrant worker child, a Puerto Rican “guagua aérea” child, or a Cuban-American child of Cuban exiles, play a profound role in shaping the adolescent consciousness that paves the way for adult identity.

In Tomas Rivera’s novel we see the most extreme impact of displacement in the migrant farm worker life of Marcos’ family. Rivera masterfully conveys the fragmented life of people who are always on the move, always subjected to the dangers and the aggravations inherent to the underprivileged. They are treated as strangers everywhere they go, a factor that is aggravated by their deficiency in the English language. They seem almost perfectly set up to be exploited from all angles. As a child growing up under these conditions, Marcos is perhaps the most acutely confused of the three protagonists, the one with the least support to help him get through his adolescent transition. Esmeralda Santiago’s Negi is also from a very poor family, and also subjected to constant moves, first from Macún to Santurce, and back a few times, and then to New York. Poverty and migration are the two key factors distorting the lives of Marcos’ and Negi’s families. Poverty is the factor that propels migration, and migration brings on a new world of challenges. Here the differences between the situations of the Mexican and Puerto Rican families are related to the patterns of migration of each group. Migrant workers have to go where there is work, to places they don’t even know exist, where nobody knows who they are. Marcos’ family follows this pattern of movement. They have to go north from Texas and go wherever there is a need for their work. Negi’s mom has relatives in New York, and makes some preliminary trips there before she decides to leave her children’s father for good and establish herself and her children in Brooklyn, first with her mother, and then on her own. The biggest difference is in the fact that the migrant life is one of continuous following of the seasonal harvests. This makes it impossible for the children to go to school on a permanent basis. Marcos is left behind by his family, because he cannot attend school and follow their migration at the same time. And for this reason he is left alone to be traumatized by the abusive and criminal acts of his temporary caretakers. We also witness the unfair and prejudiced treatment he receives in school, simply because he is Mexican and a migrant worker. Negi is also sometimes left with caretakers, but they are all family members or trusted neighbors of either one of her parents. She also is subjected to unfair treatment by a school administrator, but her situation is more stable than Marcos’, due to a mixture of a more permanent situation in each of her schools, and because she has a mother who watches closely over her. Even her father, who is so often absent from the family, seems to appear just at the right moment for her. Behind what we see as Negi’s network of support, is the fact that she lives at a point in time in which many Puerto Ricans were moving to the New York City area seeking jobs they could not find in Puerto Rico. This is the time of Operation Bootstrap, when the rapid industrialization of Puerto Rico led to mass migrations from the Puerto Rican countryside to the city, creating slums such as are portrayed in the chapter called “El Mangle.” Negi and her mom and siblings are part of the vast exodus of Puerto Ricans to New York that began in the late 40’s and continued through the 50’s and 60’s. This mass displacement of Puerto Ricans, made easy by the fact that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, and that there were, and still are, cheap flights between New York and San Juan, created the migration trend called “La Guagua Aérea,” the “Air Bus,” a
constant stream of people between Puerto Rico and the U.S. This is a very different migration from the one experienced by agricultural workers. Most of the Puerto Ricans who came stayed in the urban area around New York, although a few did join the agricultural sector as migrant workers as well. Negi’s mom settled the family in the city, living with her mother and her brother. The situation for Negi is slightly more stable, since it is her mom’s intent to lead a stable life in the city, away from the instabilities and deprivations they suffered in the island. Negi is not left with total strangers while her mother works. This does not save her from the sexual advances of her uncle Chico, however. So we see in both cases, that it is poverty that lays the ground for abuse in these children’s lives, because their parents have to be either totally absent, as in the case of Marcos, or absent a lot of the time, as was the case of Negi’s mom, who commuted long distances to her job as a seamstress in a garment factory. What we see in these two novels is the displacement experienced by two adolescents who belong to two different Latino groups, each set in its own historical migratory circumstances, and those circumstances have poverty as a common denominator. There is a similarity in the consequences for the two adolescents due to the common threads of displacement combined with poverty, and the social isolation that results from these circumstances.

In the case of Gina, the protagonist in Brand New Memory by Elías Miguel Muñoz, we see a marked contrast between her displacement and that of Marcos and Negi. Gina is an upper class American born, light skinned, Cuban-American teenager, born and raised in California. Her sense of displacement stems from her parents’ exile from Cuba, and her mother’s refusal to allow anyone in the family to speak about the past and Cuba. Gina is surrounded by material wealth, overprotected by her parents, and yet she feels very confused about her own identity. She is an only child who is pampered by her parents. Her mother Elisa is the daughter of a wealthy landowning family in Cuba, and has the bitterness of those who lost most during the Cuban Revolution. She is set on living a new life in the United States, and does not want to dwell on the past. Gina’s dad, Benito Domingo, is more open to talking about Cuba because he did not fare so badly there during the revolution. He is a successful florist who is glad to allow his wife to dictate the life of the family, and happily hides behind his “Bloom Boom” magazines. Husband and wife argue a lot, but she usually dominates the situation in the family. Gina has a stable home and school life, even a surfer boyfriend, and popularity among her classmates. But Gina is internally displaced. She does not know who she is. She begins to research information on Cuba for a school project, and is constantly asking her parents questions about her family there. This Cuban-American adolescent, on verge of becoming a “quinceañera,” is very much a historical product: Child of affluent Cubans who were welcomed in the United States as exiles. She does not carry the stigma of poverty, racism, and undesirability that is such an important negative factor for the protagonists in the other two novels. What she does experience is the consequences of exile, which is a very different type of displacement from the one experienced with migration, either as a way of life, as in the case of Marcos and his family, or as way of moving up the economic scale, as is the case of Negi’s family. However, we will see how all three characters try to recover the past in order to make sense, not only of their own individual lives, but also of the larger collective identity to which they belong.
The Recovery of Memory

The life of migrant workers is one of continuous movement and uprooting. The life of one who migrates to the U.S. to establish a permanent base for home and work will eventually grow roots in that base. And the life of an exile is one that is seeking a safe haven base, but is haunted by the events leading to exile. All three are difficult lives. These are the lives portrayed by the three novels. These tales of migration and exile are different variations of displacement, but they all speak of a separation from family, community, and original culture. All are traumatic. The recovery of memory in each case have its own particularity.

In And the Earth Did Not Devour Him..., both the protagonist and the farm workers with whom he and his family associate view the outside world through fragmented bits, not quite able to see the whole picture. They have a partial knowledge of what is going on because they are marginalized. This is part of the burden of migrant life. They are cut off from the larger society that functions and communicates in a different way from them. There are many instances in the novel in which we see that nobody can tell what really happened, or is happening, because they lack the information. Much of this lack of information is related to lack of retrospectivity, a difficulty in putting together the past due to circumstances beyond their control. We see one example of this in the vignette titled “The Portrait.” A couple, and the whole community of farm workers, are deceived by a photographer who takes their money, and what is probably the only photograph each of them has of a loved one, and leaves with no intention of honoring their agreement. Two weeks after the photographer leaves, the children find all the photos thrown in one of the tunnels leading to a dump, the faces in them already indistinguishable. This episode symbolically represents how fragile is the collective memory of the people surrounding Marcos. It is interesting to note that even though one of the men, don Mateo, actually found the photographer and made him do a portrait for him under threat of violence, the resulting portrait was a photo of don Mateo, instead of his son Chuy, who was missing in action in Korea. The ensuing dialogue between don Mateo and a neighbor is representative of how easily the photographer was able to deceive them one more time:

“...Now tell me, how do you like the way my boy looks?”
“Well, to be honest, I don’t remember too well how Chuy looked. But he was beginning to look more and more like you, isn’t that so?”
“Yes, I would say so. That’s what everybody tells me now. That Chuy is a chip off the old block and he was already looking like me. There’s the portrait. Like they say, one and the same” (139).

Rivera’s subtle irony shows both a hint of humor and sadness at the same time.

Rivera’s use of short vignettes, often with dialogues between un-named people, enhances the atmosphere of general confusion about circumstances that affect their lives. The following vignette is, again, an example of how they don’t fully grasp the circumstances:

“Comadre, do you all plan to go to Utah?”
“No, compadre. I’ll tell you, we don’t trust the man that’s contracting people to go to work in- how do you say it?”
“Utah, why comadre?”
“Because we don’t think there’s such a state. You tell me, when’ve you ever heard of that place?”
“Well, there’s so many states. And this is the first time that they’ve contracted for work in those parts.”
“Yeah, but tell me, where is it?”
“Well, we’ve never been there but I hear it’s somewhere close to Japan” (91).

They know enough to be suspicious of the man who is taking them to Utah, but they cannot access the information that will tell them where Utah is. The marginalization of migrant farm workers keeps them in a constant state of disorientation with respect to the larger society. Marcos symbolizes this disorientation, and in him we see that the key to a way out of this disorientation is stability and education. The recovery of memory in his case is extremely difficult because everyone around him is also going through the same struggle. In this novel the recovery of memory is paramount, and it is hinted at from the very beginning with the first segment called “The Lost Year.” The entire book is, in fact, a representation of Marcos’ recovery of the lost pieces of his traumatic past. In the end, his difficult process of reconstruction transforms him into a mature adolescent, able to understand the necessity of his lonely and painful process. However, as mentioned before, Marcos’ reconstruction of memory is linked to his whole community’s experience. The collectivity represented in the protagonist’s adolescent borderland is a major characteristic of this work by Rivera.

At one point in When I Was Puerto Rican, Negi says she doesn’t like people, and surprises even herself for saying this. This is the result of her negative encounters with strangers and distant relatives, with whom she has to spend long periods of time. There is a positive exception to this long negative trail of experiences when she visits her grandmother on her dad’s side, a kindly old woman who teaches her how to crochet. But she associates her stay with this grandmother with her father’s absence, and his betrayal, and so, even this pleasant visit turns into something negative in her psyche. In this respect, Negi’s experiences are somewhat parallel to Marcos’. However, her struggle for recovery of a past is quite different. Esmeralda Santiago’s novel provides the reader with ample proof of support mechanisms for Negi. From the beginning she is propped up to be the substitute for her mother whenever her mother is out of the picture. She is the oldest child of a very large family, and this responsibility in many ways frames her strong character. Once the family is in New York, she becomes her mother’s translator whenever she has to deal with the Welfare Office or any other form of transaction with the English world. Even though she was moved frequently from one school to another in Puerto Rico, she was supported by her parents and also received at least a rudimentary knowledge of English, which served her well later on when she had to attend school in New York. She is a strong-willed 8th grader who refuses to be placed back in 7th grade by her school administrator. Unlike Marcos, Negi is not disoriented to the point of confusion. Part of her longs to return to the simple life of a jíbara in Macún, and part of her wants to charge full speed ahead into the future. The memory she recovers is one that will permit her to understand both her family and her country. Unlike the unchronologically ordered fragments that plague Marcos’ consciousness throughout …And the Earth Did Not Devour Him, Santiago’s novel
traces a chronologically linear development of a child. Rivera’s work is cyclical, tying the beginning and the end into one moment under the house. In a way, the structure of the novel is a metaphor for the migrant life, with its cyclical following of the harvests, in a never-ending struggle to go forward, knowing that this life of migration does not really go forward.

Santiago’s memoir, on the other hand, is linear, but split in two halves: life in Puerto Rico and life in the U.S. This also acts as a structural metaphor for the split felt by Puerto Ricans who move to the U.S. and wind up staying there all their lives. This autobiographical work, written as a first person narrative, is imbued with nostalgia for all the good things that are lost once she leaves her island. But those good things are intertwined with her nostalgia for lost innocence. The title indicates the connection between her lost childhood and her lost life as a Puerto Rican. The fact that the title is in the past tense communicates how irreparable that loss is.

In the novel *Brand New Memory*, we see Gina as a teenager very much at ease in her own modern world of videos, computers, and malls. She is popular in school and interacts with the outside world in a normal way. But she also realizes that her world is sheltered. She wants to go beyond the limitations set by her parents. From the beginning we sense that there is something somewhat abnormal about a child who is constantly panning her parents with a video camera, catching them unawares at any moment of the day or night. She also keeps various folders in her computer with her own anecdotes about herself and her family. She direly needs to narrate her and her family’s story, to compensate for the lack of personal history. An important moment of discovery occurs when her grandmother from Cuba comes to visit. This opens her horizons in two directions: outward, to Cuba, and inward, to her own identity. Therefore, her grandmother acts as the bridge to the original culture, connecting the past to the present, and the American Gina to her Cuban roots. Her visit to Cuba allows Gina to discover for herself the parts of the puzzle that her parents will not provide her. She finally triumphs in forging a brand new memory for herself, and the title of the book makes this quite explicit.

**Bridging the Generation Gap**

Adolescence is a stage of discovery and rebellion against those elements in your life that block the development of your true self. It is a confusing state because youth can often identify those blocking elements, but cannot clearly see beyond the boundaries of its limited experience. In these three novels we see the young protagonists in this light, eyes wide open, taking in the reality around them and asking questions that challenge the adults around them. But in each novel, this generation gap is expressed differently. In Rivera’s work, we see young Marcos confused, but rebellious at the same time. In the following dialogue between him and his mother, he doesn’t understand why he and his family have to suffer so much:

“...I’m so tired of thinking about it. Why? Why you? Why Dad?
Why my uncle? Why my aunt? Why their kids? Tell me,
Mother, why? Why us burrowed in the dirt like animals with no hope for anything? You know the only hope we have is coming out here every year. And like you yourself say, only death brings rest...”
“I think that’s how it is m’hijo. Only death brings us rest.” “But why us?” “Well, they say that…” “Don’t say it. I know what you are going to tell me- that the poor go to heaven.” (109-110).

This novel shows children as victims, along with the rest of the community of migrants. However, unlike the adults who are resigned to their fate, Marcos rebels against this fate with his insistent questioning. When the father becomes dangerously ill with sunstroke, it is the children who go out to the field to work. It is important to note the different attitude of the children in the field, as opposed to the adults. The children tell each other not to go on working if the sun gets too hot. While strategizing about how they are going to tackle the hottest hours of the day in the field, they say:

“That’s where the hottest part of the day will catch us. Just drink plenty of water every little while. It don’t matter if the boss gets mad. Just don’t get sick. And if you can’t go on, tell me right away, all right? We’ll go home” (110).

This scene is in sharp contrast to a previous scene in the field, where we see the adults talking with the children:

“I’m very thirsty, Dad. Is the boss gonna be here soon?”
“I think so. You can’t wait any longer?”
“Well, I don’t know. My throat already feels real dry. Do you think he’s almost gonna be here? Should I go to the tank?”
“No, wait just a little longer. You already heard what he said” (86).

It is the children who are closer to the truth of situations, wanting to make sense out of life, and wanting their life to be sensible. In the preceding quote the children need to drink water to quench their thirst, and their thirst is presented in the dialogue as an urgent reality. The parents, though sympathetic, are coerced into submission by the boss and forced to become the intermediaries between their children’s needs and the boss’s rules. In like manner, the protagonist’s mother, who is a very devout Catholic, is an intermediary between her son’s need to know the answers to his questions and her religion’s pressure to conform to their state in life. In both cases, the children suffer the consequences of the oppressive forces lurking within the U.S. social environment and their families’ cultural context.

The generation gap in *Brand New Memory* takes place in a totally different social context. The downtrodden world of Marcos could not be more removed from the world of Gina Domingo, the affluent suburban teenager of the ‘90’s. And yet, both teenagers are caught in this generation gap, struggling to make sense of their world. *Brand New Memory* adds an interesting twist to the generation gap when it includes a third generation, represented by Estela, Gina’s paternal grandmother. In this novel, the impact of the Cuban Revolution is played out in the rifts between the generations. Gina, in the same manner as Marcos, is caught between multiple oppressive forces that do not allow her to realize her full identity. Her parents are Cuban exiles living in an enclosed community called “Pinos Verdes,” near Los Angeles, California. Her mother Elisa would not allow anyone in her family to talk about the past. This leads to numerous clashes with Gina. The narrator explains:
The adolescent contests too many of her mother’s wishes and decisions. She asks too many question, insists on unearthing the filthy worms of the past. She forces her parents to think about things they would rather forget. Is this some form of punishment, of poetic injustice?, Elisa asks herself during her arguments with Gina. “Tell me about the island,” implores the girl ad infinitum. “Will you ever go back? Will I ever get a chance to visit there?”

She should take pity on Gina, make something up if she has to. Be kind, giving, unselfish. But she can’t. “You are not to mention that place anymore!” “Why, Maman!” “Just because” “It’s unfair. I have a right to know!” “You wouldn’t understand.” “But I want to! Please, help me understand.” “Respect our wishes to forget that inferno. Respect it!” (49-50).

An interesting parallel occurs between this scene and a later one, where Gina’s mother feels left out of the easy friendship she sees between her daughter and Estela, Benito’s mother hailing directly from Cuba. Now it is Elisa who needs to know and understand what is happening:

“I don’t deserve to be treated this way, Gina.”
“Sorry”
“I need you, my darling.”
“You do?”
“Yes, I need you to help me understand.”
“Understand what?”
“What is going on between you and Estela.”
“I get a big kick out of her, that’s all.”
“I’d like to know what she’s been telling you.”
“Sorry, Maman, I can’t.”
>Please…”
“I’m not your spy!” (163)

This little dialogue confirms the narrator’s comment that even for those who left Cuba, there still remains an unbreakable tie to the island, a need to connect to the past. Elisa sees her daughter making this connection, and can’t bear to be left out, even though she sharply disapproves of Estela’s visit. Here we see, also, as in Santiago’s book, how suddenly there is a reversal of roles between mother and daughter, and as the daughter progresses, it is the mother who depends on her to bridge the gap she herself cannot bridge. In the case of Negi and her mom, we see that Negi’s ability to assimilate to the new social and linguistic terrain allows her to help her mother deal with the Welfare bureaucracy. In Gina and her mom’s case, it is a different circumstance, one of a mother who cannot make the psychological step to reconciliation with neither the past nor the present Cuba. She needs her daughter to show her how to do it. However, this is a very difficult interaction due to Elisa’s rigid attitude, and Gina refuses to give her the information she wants. This inter-generational dialogue is very much indicative of the deep divisions between the three generations of Cubans represented by Estela, Elisa, and Gina. Gina is very much the possible bridge between the two older women, but we see what a difficult
position she encounters, loving both, yet unable to bridge the gap between them. Gina truly embodies a borderland between the two Cubas: the island and the exile community in the United States.

Marcos wants to know why God allows his family to suffer so much poverty and exploitation. Gina wants to know why Cuba is a forbidden word. And Negi? She also tries to bridge the generation gap with the same energy as the other two protagonists. And, just like them, her Puerto Rican context defines the gap for her. It is very interesting to see how all three protagonists target their parents first for questioning, since they are the natural choice for any child that approaches the adult world.

Negi targets her father whenever she has questions about politics or religion. Her dad is usually more willing to answer her questions than her mom, who is usually too busy with the housework. Here is a representative exchange between Negi and her father:

“Papi, what’s an imperialist?”
He stopped the hammer in midstrike and looked at me.
“Where did you hear that word?”
“Ignacio Sepúlveda said Eekeh Aysenhouerr is an imperialist.
He said all gringos are.”
Papi looked around as if someone were hiding behind a bush and listening in. “I don’t want you repeating those words to anybody...”
“I know that Papi... I just want to know what it means. Are gringos the same as Americanos?”
“You should never call an Americano a gringo. It’s a very bad insult.”
“But why?”
“It just is.” It wasn’t like Papi not to give a real answer to my questions. “Besides, el presidente’s name is pronounced Ayk, not Eekeh.” He went back to his hammering.... “How come it’s a bad insult?”
He stopped banging the wall and looked at me. I stared back, and he put his hammer down, took off his hat, brushed his hand across his forehead, wiped it on his pants, sat on the stoop, and leaned his elbows back, stretching his legs out in front of him.
This was the response I expected. Now I would hear all about gringos and imperialists.
“Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain after Columbus landed here,” he began, like a schoolteacher.” (72)

Negi’s exchanges with her mother are of a different nature, in part because her relationship with her mother spans over a longer period than with her dad, who stays behind in Puerto Rico when her mother decides to separate from him and move to New York. While Negi is still very young and living in Puerto Rico, her mom is not very tolerant of her questions. Her frequent response to Negi’s questioning is: “Just do as I tell you and don’t talk back.” (51) However, these dynamics change when they move to New York and her mother, who does not
know any English, has to depend on Negi as a translator and as someone who is more functional than she is in the new world that surrounds them.

There is a marked difference between Negi, on the one hand, and Marcos and Gina, on the other. Marcos and Gina need to reconstruct the past to forge their individual and collective identity. Negi, rather than reconstruct the past, wants to put together a wider spectrum of reality. She asks about politics, about God, about the many activities and events that occur in her surroundings. She wants to understand the world. She doesn’t project the confusion we see in Marcos and Gina. She does, however, share with them the innocent gaze of someone who doesn’t have all the facts and wants to know. Her relationship to the past is marked by nostalgia, rather than a need to gather the pieces of a veiled and confusing past.

Framing the Coming-of-Age Experience

In all three books the literary technique serves the purpose of portraying the uniqueness of coming-of-age for that particular protagonist in her/his context of multiple factors: politics, history, class, race, gender, culture. Each novel’s style, including the structure, narrative voice, and language, acts as a framing device for that particular coming of age experience.

Rivera’s work has a cyclical structure, with vignettes representing moments of Marcos’ “Lost year”. The “Lost Year” is at the beginning of the work, and sets the tone of disorientation for the rest of the novel. It tells us: here is a child who is trying to put the pieces together. At the beginning, the reader does not understand what is meant by the lost year, but he does understand that something has happened to the protagonist during that year to the point of confusing him. Also, the narrative voice shifts from first person to 3rd person, interspersed with dialogues between people in his migrant worker community, which makes the reader follow along in a constant switching perspective, between a subjective and objective view (Testa 86). An added factor is the narrative voice of the protagonist as the one who remembers and narrates his own story during the “Lost Year,” in the 1st person, making all the other narrative voices, including the voice of his own younger self, fragments of his memory. This is a very complex and rich narrative structure, and the shifts of voices enhance the collective character of the story. The short dialogues interjected into the narrative represent memories that linger in the protagonist’s mind. These interjections present contrasting perspectives of the same situations. An example of this is when we see Marcos struggling with his conscience because he had witnessed a couple making love in the laundromat. In this excerpt there is the narrative voice of the older Marcos remembering the incident followed by an internal monologue, in the present tense, of the younger Marcos struggling with his own conscience and not knowing what to do. This is followed by the older narrator remembering how he felt towards all the adults at his communion party, followed by a dialogue between the adults at the party, who are totally unaware of Marcos’ turmoil, and are making comments about his behavior:

...I couldn’t get my mind off of what I had seen. I realized then that maybe those were the sins that we committed with our hands. But I couldn’t forget the sight of that woman and that man lying on the floor. When my friends started arriving I was going to tell them but then I thought it would be better to tell
them after communion. More and more I was feeling like I was the one who had committed a sin of the flesh.

“There’s nothing I can do now. But I can’t tell the others ‘cause they’ll sin like me. I better not go to communion. Better that I don’t go to confession. I can’t now that I know, I can’t. But what will Mom and Dad say if I don’t go to communion? And my padrino, I can’t leave him there waiting. I have to confess what I saw. I feel like going back. Maybe they’re still there on the floor. No choice, I’m gonna have to lie. What if I forget it between now and confession? Maybe I didn’t see anything? And if I hadn’t seen anything?”

I remember that when I went to confess and the priest asked for my sins, all I told him was two-hundred and of all kinds. I did not confess the sin of the flesh. On returning to the house with my godfather, everything seemed changed, like I was and yet wasn’t in the same place. Everything seemed smaller and less important. When I saw my Dad and my Mother, I imagined them on the floor. I started seeing all of the grown-ups naked and their faces even looked distorted, and I could even hear them laughing and moaning, even though they weren’t even laughing. Then I started imagining the priest and the nun on the floor, I couldn’t hardly eat any of the sweet bread or drink the chocolate. As soon as I finished, I recall running out of the house. It felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“So, what’s the matter with him? Such manners!”

“Ah, compadre, let him be. You don’t have to be concerned on my account. I have my own. These young ones, all they can think about is playing. Let him have a good time, it’s the day of his first communion.”

“Sure, compadre, I’m not saying they shouldn’t play. But they have to learn to be more courteous. They have to show more respect toward adults, their elders, and all the more for their padrino.”

“Ah, well, that’s true.”

I remember I headed toward the thicket. I picked up some rocks and threw them at the cactus. Then I broke some bottles. I climbed a tree and stayed there a long time until I got tired of thinking... (116-7)

All this narrative multiplicity transforms the narrative voice into a richly inhabited territory where we can glimpse deeply into the lives of migrant workers. At the same time, we follow the individual child’s consciousness through the interplay between his 1st person narrative voice that remembers, the 1st person present tense monologues as he lives the events of the “Lost Year,” and the 3rd person narrative that oversees the events. These narrative layers have the effect of
merging the individual and collective identities, while at the same time involving the reader very deeply into the relationship of all the voices.

There are two very significant chapters that provide a climax and a resolution. In the middle of the book is the chapter that has the same title as the book. And here is where Marcos’ rebellion peaks, only to realize that “the Earth did not swallow him.” Instead:

“He felt at peace as never before” and the next morning he woke up refreshed, “capable of doing and undoing anything that he pleased. He looked down at the earth and kicked it hard and said ‘Not yet, you can’t swallow me up yet. Someday, yes. But I’ll never know it.”(111-112).

The last chapter called “Under the house” completes the cycle, bringing us back to the beginning, but having gone through the process of piecing the fragments of the lost year together. We see Marcos alone under the house of some neighbors, peeking at the outside world, but also looking deep within himself. The neighbor kids discover him and run to tell their mother, who, upon seeing who it is, takes pity on him and his family, for all they’ve gone through. She thinks he is losing his mind. But contrary to this impression that he gives, he is really finally gathering all his pieces, ready to go out into the world which lies symbolically outside his dark hiding place. The adolescent on the threshold of adulthood has grown, not just physically, but also inwardly. As he sits under the house, he thinks:

“I would like to see all of the people together. And then, if I had great big arms, I could embrace them all. I wish I could talk to all of them again, but all of them together. But that, only in a dream. Only by being alone can you bring everybody together. That’s what I needed to do, hide, so that I could come to understand a lot of things” (151).

This is precisely what Tomás Rivera does with the reader. He gives us short vignettes that seem all disjointed, and which gradually gain cohesiveness as we gather all the information together. Rivera is masterful in the subtle way of imitating the cognitive processes of the mind through his literary technique. At the same time, he captures the process of a person’s maturation as one that finally finds its identity by gathering the fragments of memory from his life with the people that surround him: the Chicano migrant workers.

Elías Miguel Muñoz’s novel is generally a 3rd person narrative that is interspersed with an array of dialogues, letters from Cuba, and many scenes that are products of Gina’s fantasy world or computer entries. She keeps in her computer various folders, for example, a folder entitled “Cartas,” where she copies her grandmother’s letters, and another one, “You,” where she holds conversations with herself in the first person, and writes down memories of her ongoing family interactions, especially the ones with her grandmother, hoping to someday use them for scripts in her filmmaking career. This variety of narrative elements also juggles the subjective and objective view for the reader. There is the third person narrative voice, which is full of irony, the knowing voice of someone who has experienced the same child-of-Cuban-exiles syndromes as Gina. This narrator admits that he is Cuban near the end of the novel, by suddenly interjecting himself in the first person plural:
The diaspora consists of diverse types, but all types share one characteristic; and that is a tie-fragile in some cases, but detectable-to Cuba. The Island is a presence, a topic, a constant. It is a history to be rejected or exalted, a mythology to be worshipped, a culture to be embraced or ridiculed. Whatever form it takes, the Caribbean country makes its way into the here-and-now, into the private thoughts and daily routines of many of us...(213).

This less than invisible omniscient narrator makes humorous remarks at times, always showing that he knows what Gina is going through. Another important characteristic of this narrative voice is the use of the present tense, which has the effect of making the reader feel like a witness to a scene, visualizing it as it unfolds. Sometimes, the narrative voice shifts from 3rd person omniscient to Gina seeing herself act and talking to herself in 2nd person. We see an example of these narrative characteristics when she discovers her imaginary Cuban “novio” in her bedroom:

“Back to sleep, she tells herself. And as she enters the room, she senses a presence. Daddy! No. Be brave. You can handle it. You’ve been having one hell of a night, lots and lots of weird dreaming. You made up the Real McCuban ‘cause you were horny. Admit it. Be big and strong and honest and true to yourself, Gina Domingo!”

“What took you so long?” he asks, sprawled, shirtless, on her bed.

“Hey, get out of there!”

“How about some music,” he says, scrambling to his feet.

“No, it’ll wake everybody up.” She must resist him (89-90).

The dialogue with her fantasy Cuban “novio” goes on, leaving both Gina and the reader wondering if he is for real or not. We see here a very close connection between the 3rd person narrator and Gina’s voice, almost as if these two voices were constantly weaving into each other. I believe that this is done on purpose, to create a stronger identification with Gina’s mind processes.

Gina’s encounter with her grandmother provides her with the opportunity to re-claim what her parent’s refuse to give her: Cuba and her connection to her Cuban origins and family. The plot provides the mechanism by which Gina can resolve her impasse with her family. Her “abuela” Estela goes to visit her in Pinos Verdes and, after a few months, dies. Gina volunteers to take her grandmother’s ashes back to Cuba, and there she is able to reconstruct the story of her parents and also understand both sides of the Cuban rift. When she comes back from Cuba she plays back all her videos of her grandmother’s visit, and we see Gina painfully coming to her own, in much the same manner as Marcos does with the fragments of his memory, creating a “brand new memory” that is all her own, yet inclusive of the people of her life.

Compared to the Rivera and Muñoz novels, Santiago’s book is very linear, in the sense that it traces chronologically Negi’s development. The prologue, called “How to Eat a Guava,”
is narrated by a grown Negi, fully integrated into American society, shopping at the Shop &
Save. There is a lingering nostalgia for her past life as a Puerto Rican, brought on by the sight of
the guavas in the fruit section of the supermarket. The epilogue, “One of these days” is very
much a success story: the successfully assimilated Harvard graduate goes back to her high
school to visit the teacher that made it all possible, and is commended for her courage and
having come so far. If Santiago pays tribute to her family or to the Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico
and New York, it is through her portrayal throughout the book, not at the end. Structurally, the
most climactic and significant part of this book occurs in the middle, in the chapter called
“Dreams of a better life,” as Negi sits on a plane bound for a new life in New York:

“Across the aisle, Mami’s eyes were misty. She stretched her
fingers towards mine, and we held hands as the plane rose
above the clouds. Neither one of us could have known what
lay ahead. For her it began as an adventure and turned out to
have more twists and turns than she expected or knew how to
handle. For me, the person I was becoming when we left was
erased, and another one 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)

We see in this novel that the climax is precisely the point of departure from Puerto Rico to the
U.S., child to adolescent, and “jíbara” to hybrid. The structure of this book is split in half
between the two stages of her life, at the same time pointing to the source of Puerto Rican
duality.

The conscious formatting of each work, with its particular narrative structure and voice,
is uniquely tailored to the purpose of expressing life lived as a Chicano migrant worker, a Puerto
Rican migrating to the U.S., and a Cuban-American trying to make sense of a veiled past. The
stylistic framework in each work facilitates the authentic expression of these lives, and shows
proof of the literary talent of each of these authors.

These three works are excellent representations of the transformations experienced by
adolescents who have the double burden of their own personal coming of age, plus the
instability inherent in the circumstances of their families. They must ask questions and watch
carefully the world in which they live. They seek refuge within their own solitude to process the
fragments of information they can gather, working through the strange labyrinth of past and
present to come up with a brand new memory that allows them to pass the threshold into a
coherent identity of their own. But each child does this with the unique stamp of his or her
original group’s history and relationship with the United States. We have seen the marked
differences in the lives of these three adolescents, due mainly to political and economic
circumstances. We have also seen the three adolescent protagonists share certain common
threads in their transition from child to adult, as Latinos in the U.S.

These literary works are autobiographical in varying degrees, and the authors have
chosen the coming-of-age genre because by tracing one child’s development into an adult, they
also trace the collective history, as well as the on-going conflicts, of that child’s people. And
more importantly, through this process of reconstruction, something new is born, representing
the continuous renewal that is passed from generation to generation. Tomás Rivera points to this in this commentary on his protagonist:

“...he discovers that existence is, in short, a relationship between memory and constant discovery. But he goes even further...He invents himself” (qtd. in Olivares 24).

All three authors, through their protagonists, and through their writing, recreate, and create for us, the readers, a process of constant discovery.

Bibliography


