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Voices  
from the  
Gaps

# Esmeralda Santiago

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*To her, the scar is not invisible. It irritates her when people pretend it's not there. It's a reminder of who she is now, and who she was then. Correa's woman was unscarred, but America Gonzales wears the scars he left behind the way a navy lieutenant wears his stripes. They're there to remind her that she fought for her life, and that, no matter how others may interpret it, she has a right to live that life as she chooses. It is, after all, her life, and she's the one in the middle of it.*

— America's Dream

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1948
- \* Puerto Rican-American memoirist, novelist, and editor
- \* Her memoir is *When I Was Puerto Rican*

This page was researched and submitted by: Lauren Marie Casteline, Myrrh Marie Domingo, Kazuko Maekawa, and Wendy Ann Michele Sheehan on 5/2/00.

## Biography

Esmeralda Santiago was born in Puerto Rico, the eldest of eleven children raised by a single mother. When she was thirteen years old, the family moved to Brooklyn, New York. Within two years, she had learned enough English to be accepted into the prestigious Performing Arts High School. She spent eight years studying part-time at community colleges while working full-time, until she was accepted as a transfer student to Harvard University with a full scholarship and received her Master's degree from Sarah Lawrence College. Upon graduating magna cum laude in 1976, she and Frank Cantor, her husband, founded Cantomedia, a film and production company that has won numerous awards for excellence in documentary filmmaking. She has done extensive work for victims of domestic violence, including helping found a Youth Service Center and a shelter for battered women in Massachusetts.



# Esmeralda Santiago

## Biography continued

Her first book, a memoir of her childhood entitled *When I Was Puerto Rican* appeared in 1993 to great critical acclaim. She soon followed this memoir with the novel *America's Dream*. Her most recent novel is entitled *Almost a Woman*. Aside from her achievements as a writer, Esmeralda Santiago is also an editor. Her work as an editor may be seen in *Las Christmas: Favorite Latino Authors Share Their Holiday Memories*. Currently, Santiago lives in Westchester County, New York, with her husband and two children.

Santiago's memoir of her Puerto Rican childhood culminates in her move to New York, where she gained an education, but lost the sense of belonging, within a family and within a culture, once so strong in her childhood. Santiago gives the point of view of the child in the earlier sections of the memoir. "Santiago's autobiographical account cinematically recaptures her past and her island culture. What is particularly appealing about Santiago's story is the insight it offers to readers unaware of the double bind Puerto Rican Americans find themselves in: the identity in conflict. Is [she] black or white? Is she rural or urban? Even more importantly, is she Puerto Rican or is she American? [One] can only be grateful that Esmeralda Santiago has chosen to explore her culture and share what she has found" (*The Los Angeles Times Book Review*). Santiago communicates the textures of life (how to eat a guava, the ceremony for ushering a dead baby's soul to heaven) in Puerto Rico most vividly, while at the same time dealing concretely with family relationships and conflicts. Her journey to a new country, like that of many Puerto Ricans touched on in her book, captures the experience of many American immigrant groups.

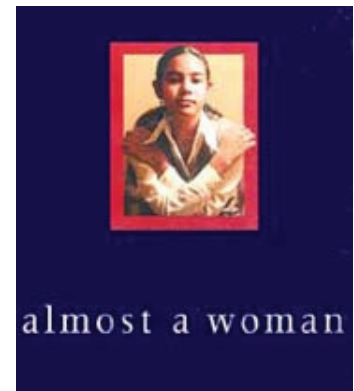
Santiago refers to her memoir, "When I began writing [*When I Was Puerto Rican*], I had no idea it would result in a dialogue about cultural identity. But as I've traveled around the country talking about it, people tell me that, while the culture I'm describing may not be the same as the one they grew up in, the feelings and experiences are familiar, and some of the events could have been taken from their own lives. It has been particularly poignant to speak to immigrants who have returned to their countries, only to discover how much they have changed by immersion in North American culture. They accept and understand the irony of the past tense in the title, the feeling that, while at one time they could not identify themselves as anything but the nationality to which they were born, once they've lived in the U.S. their 'cultural purity' has been compromised, and they no longer fit as well in their native countries, nor do they feel one hundred percent comfortable as Americans."



# Esmeralda Santiago

## Biography continued

The merging of two cultures proves to be a challenge to many immigrants, and Santiago explores these difficulties of change in her memoir. In her words, hopes of finding a balance between the two cultures is of utmost importance. In finding the balance, merging the past with the future, perhaps Santiago will be able to understand and claim her identity. "When I returned to Puerto Rico after living in New York for seven years, I was told I was no longer Puerto Rican because my Spanish was rusty, my gaze too direct, my personality too assertive for a Puerto Rican woman, and I refused to eat some of the traditional foods like morcilla and tripe stew. I felt as Puerto Rican as when I left the island, but to those who had never left, I was contaminated by Americanisms, and therefore, had become less than Puerto Rican. Yet, in the United States, my darkness, my accented speech, my frequent lapses into the confused silence between English and Spanish identified me as foreign, non-American. In writing the book I wanted to get back to that feeling of Puertoricanness I had before I came here. Its title reflects who I was then, and asks, who am I today?"



The novel *America's Dream* shares similar themes with *When I Was Puerto Rican*. The novel may be seen in light of cultural identification, as the main character America merges her Puerto Rican culture with that of the American culture. However, there is also another theme that permeates the novel. The relationships of mothers and daughters and the time of childhood, appear to be one of the focal points of the novel. "This coming of age memoir will reintroduce you to childhood. . . . It will speak to anyone who . . . recalls a child's bittersweet loss of innocence and to anyone who simply enjoys good writing" (*Miami Herald*). America's relationship with her mother as well as her daughter depicts the cycle of womanhood and motherhood, that exists in the Puerto Rican culture. In America's effort to overcome the limitations given to the cycle of womanhood and motherhood, she faces the challenge of not losing her bond with both her mother and her daughter. The novel explores the complexity of maintaining rather than severing the bond that exists between the two, despite distance and hardships.



# Esmeralda Santiago

## Biography continued

Another relationship explored in the novel by Santiago is the cycle of abusive relationships, which is seen through America's relationship with her boyfriend, Correa, who is the father of her daughter. Santiago, in writing this novel, illustrates the challenges of a woman in the Puerto Rican culture. The difficulty of rising from lower class society and making a future for oneself seems almost unattainable. America's dream signifies the hope in change. In dreaming of having her own home, driving her own car, and having an ideal family, America takes the reader through an emotional and psychological journey into the challenges of many Latina women.

It is Santiago's eloquence with words that capture the essence of her writing style and her search for cultural identity. Using words as her medium, Santiago paints a beautiful picture of her life. Santiago writes with such clarity and fierceness that it is impossible for any person not to see, feel and understand what she went through in her remarkable journey.

Santiago's style allows for easy reading while providing deep insights about cultural identity. Whether through personal conflicts about searching for one's identity or overcoming trials and fears that accompany such a search, Santiago captures these experiences in showing how strong will and determination can defeat even the most difficult circumstances.



# Esmeralda Santiago

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