

For Discussion

1. “In the twenty-one years I lived with my mother, we moved at least twenty times” [p. 1]. Santiago feels that this fact kept her and her family from attaching too much importance to possessions, or even to friends. What other effects did the family’s many moves have on their outlook on life, their relationships to one another and to outsiders, and, in particular, on Esmeralda’s developing character?
2. After her discussion with a neighborhood child soon after her arrival in Brooklyn, Esmeralda reflects, “Two days in New York, and I’d already become someone else” [p. 5]. What does the two girls’ conversation reveal about categories of identity? Is group identity, in a multicultural place like New York, seen to be primarily racial? National? Linguistic? Regional?
3. What different groups does Esmeralda identify herself with during the course of her narrative? How do her experiences at the Performing Arts High School change her ideas about hierarchy and group identity? How does she define herself at the memoir’s end?
4. Mami says that Esmeralda’s cousins Alma and Corazon are Americanized. “The way she pronounced the word Americanized, it sounded like a terrible thing, to be avoided at all costs, another algo to be added to the list of ‘somethings’ outside our door” [p. 12]. What does Mami mean by “Americanized,” and why does the word have such negative connotations for her? Why is she so afraid of Esmeralda’s becoming Americanized too? Isn’t it true that she also wishes for Esmeralda and her siblings to enter into American life and to succeed there?
5. Listening to Mami, says Santiago, “had taught me that men were not to be trusted” [p. 14]. The same could be said of Esmeralda’s observations of her father, and of some of the other men in her community. What mixed messages about men, women, and love does Esmeralda pick up, as a child, from her parents? How does her mother’s example affect her own early relationships with men and boys? Does it make her more passive? Wary? Fearful? Impulsive? Why does she never feel “affection” for any man outside her family until she meets Allan— although she is not in love with him— whereas she has been in love with several other men?
6. What does Esmeralda learn about “another United States—the trim, horizontal suburbs of white Americans” [pp. 26–27]—from Archie comics? How much of the imaginary picture she constructs of the white suburbs is a true one, and how much is simple fantasy? In what ways is Esmeralda’s life deeply different from those of real suburban teenagers?

7. How, according to Santiago, do race relations and racial consciousness differ between Puerto Rico and New York? Have the racial attitudes and stereotypes encountered by Esmeralda in the 1960s changed over the ensuing decades? Are things better, worse, or much the same?

8. How does Mami's trip to the welfare office [pp. 43– 44] make Mami look? Does this image that Mami presents to the welfare agent resemble the real Mami that we have come to know from the book? Does this scene, and your knowledge of Mami's character, change or affect your ideas about welfare recipients and the welfare system?

9. Mami has high expectations for her daughters: that they will remain virgins until marriage, that they will find good and responsible husbands, and that they will get married in a church. Esmeralda is not even allowed to date until the age of twenty. Yet the example Mami herself has provided is very different: eleven children by three different men, none of whom has married her. "Whenever we discussed it at home, it was agreed by the adults around the kitchen table that 'the Pill' was nothing more than a license for young women to have sex without getting married. The fact that my mother, grandmother, and almost every other female relative of ours had sex without marriage was not mentioned" [pp. 156–157]. Is Mami entirely unreasonable and exasperating on this subject? Do you have any sympathy for her and the discrepancy between her standards and her behavior?

10. Why, as an actress, does Esmeralda refuse to venture into her deeper self [p. 74]? What is she afraid of finding? Is there any part of her teenage life during which she does not feel it necessary to act a role?

11. Jaime, who acts with Esmeralda in *Babu*, is a political activist who promotes Puerto Rican culture in New York. What is it in Esmeralda's life and experiences that make her resist his perorations, and to believe that "I could be of no help to 'my' people until I helped myself" [p. 288]?

12. How can you explain the fact that Esmeralda accepts the marriage proposal of Jurgen, a man she has known only a few hours, when by her own admission she is deeply distrustful of men in general?

13. "Why him?" Esmeralda asks after losing her virginity to Ulvi. "Why not Otto or Avery Lee or Jurgen" [p. 272]? Can you answer her question? What of her special needs does Ulvi, alone among all the men she knows, meet? Why does she go along with his dominating manner, his wish to separate her from family and friends, his rules and regulations? Does Iris have a point

when she says Esmeralda's bracelet, a gift from Ulvi, reminds her of shackles? Or do you agree with Santiago's own retrospective opinion that Ulvi served as a substitute father for her?

14. "Esmeralda's observations of her own family and community have taught her that "love was something you get over. If Ulvi left, there would be another man, but there would never, ever be another Mami" [p.310]. Why, then, does she opt to leave with Ulvi? Does this move amount to an out-and-out rejection of Mami? What else is she leaving behind when she leaves her mother and family?

15. How has the lack of a father during her formative years affected Esmeralda's life, her character, and her dealings with the rest of the world? How might her life have been different if her father had been present? How might she, as a person, have developed differently?

16. The relationship between Mami and Esmeralda is a complex one: in some ways it is the classic mother-daughter story, while other elements of it are more unusual. "I felt guilty," Santiago remembers, "that so much of what little we had was spent on me. And I dreaded the price" [p. 86]. What price does Mami, in fact, try to exact? What does she expect of Esmeralda, and how far is Esmeralda willing to go to please Mami? What concessions does Esmeralda refuse to make when it comes to her own life? Do you find that the relationship between Mami and Esmeralda resembles that between Tata and Mami? In what ways is it different, and why?

Comparing *When I was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman*:

1. *Almost a Woman* could be described as in essence a search for identity, as Santiago changes from Negi, the little Puerto Rican girl she once was, to the young adult, part Puerto Rican and part American, whose persona she herself has gone far to create. In what ways are little Negi and adult Esmeralda different? What characteristics, on the contrary, does Santiago keep all her life? At the end of *Almost a Woman*, do you feel that Esmeralda has become the woman she will be, or is her character still in a state of flux?

2. The Santiagos felt that in New York, they would have a "better" life than they had in Macún. In what ways does their American life turn out, indeed, to be better? In what ways is it a less satisfactory life? Santiago, at the beginning of *Almost a Woman*, says that Mami would eventually return to Macún after ten years in New York. Do you think that was the right decision for her?

3. How might you compare the Latino experience of assimilation with those of, for example, Chinese, Jewish, Irish, or Haitian immigrants? How might the cultural barriers between these groups and mainstream America differ? What roles do race and language play in the process?
4. In what ways does the Puerto Rican extended family, as represented by the Santiagos, differ from its American counterpart? Does it provide more support, or less? Is the family more constricting? More powerful? More protective? How do the conceptions and ideals of certain roles—mother, father, daughter, son—differ between the two cultures?
5. In Brooklyn, Esmeralda finds that she wants more things, is more ambitious, than she was in Puerto Rico. Why is this? Is this feeling of wanting, of striving, a particularly American state of mind, or is it rather a characteristic of urban culture in general?

About the Author

Esmeralda Santiago is the author of two other highly acclaimed memoirs, *The Turkish Lover* (“Fascinating and inspiring, Santiago is a born storyteller” —*New York Times Book Review*) and *Almost a Woman*, which was made into a film for PBS’s Masterpiece Theatre. She has also written a novel, *América’s Dream*, and has co-edited two anthologies of Latino literature. She lives in Westchester County, New York.