DANCING IN THE BORDERLANDS:
DANCE AND DANCE METAPHORS IN ESMERALDA SANTIAGO’S
THE TURKISH LOVER

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... iv

DEDICATION ............................................................................................................................ v

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 1

RELATIONSHIPS ..................................................................................................................... 8

CLOTHING AND CONTROLLING THE BODY ....................................................................... 23

EDUCATION ............................................................................................................................. 35

LANGUAGE AND VOICE ........................................................................................................ 39

CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 46

WORKS CITED ........................................................................................................................ 50
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Esmeralda Santiago’s quest to locate her identity in her memoir, *The Turkish Lover*, and the role that classical Indian dance and Middle Eastern belly dance played in her journey. Using Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/ LaFrontera: The New Mestiza* I will examine Santiago’s borderland status as a *mestiza*, and I will demonstrate that she relies on her *mestiza* consciousness to liberate herself from her constricting relationships with her family and with Ulvi, her Turkish lover.

Furthermore, I will examine the various roles which Santiago is called upon to perform for her family, community, and Ulvi and how those roles affect her sense of self. It is my contention that Santiago’s subjectivity is further complicated by her racial identity, her views on men and sexual relationships, and her desire for a higher education. The goal of my thesis is to show that while the borderlands can be restricting Santiago finds liberation within its boundaries.
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DEDICATION

For my son, Lucas, who always believed in me, who makes me laugh when I want to cry, and who means the world to me.
Esmeralda Santiago, in her memoir *The Turkish Lover*, recounts her long-term relationship with Turkish filmmaker Ulvi Dogan. To date, there is virtually no published scholarship regarding *The Turkish Lover*; however, what Marta Vizcaya Echano says about Santiago’s narrative in *When I was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman* is applicable to *The Turkish Lover* as well: “Santiago’s identity is (re)presented throughout her memoirs and in subsequent interviews as a shifting set of heterogeneous—and sometimes contradictory—elements, some of which become more or less prominent depending on geographical, social, and cultural contexts as well as on the different stages of the author’s life” (113). The various identities that Santiago draws upon to (re)present herself stem from the multiple roles which she is called upon to perform. What is unique about Santiago’s *The Turkish Lover* is that in her relationship with Ulvi she is no longer simply contending with the cultural differences between being Puerto Rican and being American as she was in her first two memoirs *When I was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman*; she is now under the influence of a man who views the world through the eyes of a Eurocentric Turk. The gender expectations imposed on her by Ulvi are similar to her family’s expectations; they want her to be a *nena puerrtoriqueña decente*\(^1\), he wants her to be a “good girl.” Furthermore, her geographical experience has broadened considerably in her moves to Fort Lauderdale, Lubbock, Texas, Syracuse, and Cambridge. Her subjectivity is no longer confined to her experiences in New York City.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, describes a metaphor for consciousness that encourages women like Santiago to embrace their multiple heritages and influences. A borderland is a place where one culture overlaps another, where languages are

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\(^1\) In the spirit of the authors I am writing about, Esmeralda Santiago and Gloria Anzaldúa, who celebrate the rich and creative space of dwelling in two languages, the Spanish in this thesis will not be translated.
intertwined, and where cultural and social expectations collide, it “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (25). In particular, Anzaldúa is referring to the borderland that exists for Mexican-Americans in the American Southwest and the emotional struggle associated with residing in an in-between geographical location; however, her concept can be interpreted to include the space in which any two divergent cultures meet. Anzaldúa says that “la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?” (100). As a mestiza, Santiago is attempting to put her multiple subjectivities into perspective and to locate her place within her family, her culture, and the communities in which she lives. Her sense of place is complicated, not just because she is a mestiza, but also because of Ulvi’s control over her physicality. The couple meet in New York, then move to Florida for a few months. Ulvi returns her to her family in New York while he travels to Europe for a year; when he gets back he convinces her to move to Lubbock, Texas, and then to Syracuse so that he can go to school. She finally ventures out on her own and moves to Cambridge, Massachusetts to attend Harvard.

When Santiago meets Ulvi Dogan she is already in the borderlands as a native Puerto Rican living in New York City. For eight years she has danced in between two cultures: that of Puerto Rico and America. She comes to terms with her borderland status by exploring it through her relationships with family, lovers, education, and most importantly, dance. Santiago’s (re)construction of herself in her third memoir has a unique perspective; it is further enriched by the influences of her Turkish boyfriend because he, too, is living in his own borderlands.
Santiago’s narrator has Omar, Ulvi’s friend in Lubbock, explain Ulvi’s complicated sense of place: “No matter how long he lives elsewhere, he will always be a Turk. It is more complicated for them. They think they are Europeans, but most of their country is across the Bosporus, in Asia. It is like being schizophrenic” (230). Ulvi is a European Turkish man, residing in New York City, who speaks Turkish, and is involved with a Puerto Rican woman. And when the edges of Ulvi’s world collide with Santiago’s, the two begin a long slow tango of multiple identities in motion.

When Santiago enters into her relationship with Ulvi, she begins to perform a metaphorical dance with him, because the borderland they construct together “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Borderlands 25). What is unnatural about her relationship with Ulvi is that, with him, there are nothing but boundaries. Just as she is “almost a woman” and just as she has progressed to being almost out from under her mother’s protective grasp, she situates herself in an even more constricting arrangement with Ulvi. The two lovers share a strong sexual chemistry, and the hypnotic effect of the attraction makes it difficult for Santiago to resist him: “[W]hen I heard Ulvi’s voice, or felt his touch, my will evaporated. I became as pliant as a silk ribbon, transparent to his gaze, bending in the direction his fingers shaped me” (77). Her desire for him physically contributes to her inability to leave him even though she realizes early in their relationship that he may not have her best interests in mind.

Although Ulvi is from Turkey, which is situated between the Near East and Europe, he considers himself European: he favors European food, European clothing, and European languages. In addition to speaking Turkish, he also speaks English, Spanish, French, and German. His Eurocentric ideals make him feel superior to his island girlfriend. While Ulvi’s
perception of himself is that he is more European than Turkish, his attitudes towards women tend to fall more in line with Turkish cultural practices and social norms. In the 1960s and 1970s in Turkey a bride-price was still paid in some marriages; women in rural areas were married under a purely religious ceremony, depriving them of their legal rights as wives; most women who worked did so in agriculture and were not paid for their labor; “in 1968 […] in over 10 percent of families the women [ate] their meals after the men”; and “[t]he literacy rates in 1975 were 48 percent for women, compared with 75 percent for men” (Browning 109-110). Ulvi treats Santiago as if she is an ignorant, second-class citizen whom he owns rather than an intelligent, adult woman with whom he is in a relationship. He sees no need to marry her legally—or religiously for that matter—because she has already agreed to be his live-in lover, she has already relinquished control to him.

From the time Santiago meets Ulvi, he controls everything about her, from the clothes she wears, to the food she eats, to the friends with whom she associates, to the extracurricular activities in which she participates, to the roles she performs, such as typing his master’s thesis. He is able to have power over her, because he is much older and because she is already accustomed to being directed by her culture and family. This pattern of behavior is evident from the beginning of their relationship; she is afraid of Ulvi, because he exerts parental control over her, yet she cannot separate herself from his grip: “I was trapped in his embrace, worried that if I moved I’d wake him. I lay in his arms until his even breathing lulled me into a sleep from which I would not wake for seven years” (44). It is not ultimately a sleep that she is lulled into, but more accurately a metaphorical dance, one in which he is the dance teacher, the choreography guru, the master manipulator.
His insistence that she imitate him is, in itself, a dance class as her every move is choreographed by his desires, and her every move must imitate him. Ulvi’s perception of Santiago is that she is “not well informed” (132), so he insists that she mirror the manner and pace of his eating habits, wear the European style clothing he selects for her, and surrender her will to his. What he desires is a child whom he can raise not a woman with whom he can have an equitable relationship; he needs to dominate and control her completely. She must obey him; she is not allowed to have her own friends; she is not allowed to answer the phone “in case it is business” (31). He fears that he will lose control over her if she answers the phone because she will gain knowledge of his private affairs and begin to question him. Since her inquisitiveness annoys him, she simply acquiesces, because she fears that he will leave her if she presses him about his private business. Her fear that he will leave her is exacerbated by the fact that “he had convinced [her] that no one would ever love [her] like he did” (267). Their relationship is lopsided, unbalanced, and unstable. They leave each other repeatedly: he travels to Europe and the Middle East on business; she runs home to her family in Brooklyn or to Harvard to go to school when she’s had her fill of his controlling nature. They fight, leave one another, come together again, make up, fight, and repeat the cycle over and over.

The blueprint for a tumultuous relationship was drawn up for her by her parents: “That was the pattern; bitter arguments followed by separations during which Papi wooed Mami back” (5). Repeating her parents pattern of behavior with Ulvi is what Albert Bandura refers to as “modeling,” a process by which individuals learn through observing the actions of others: "Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how
new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (22). Like the relational dance her parents performed with one another in their in and out, up and down romance, Ulvi and Chiquita interact in the same way. He woos her back time and again, and each time she returns his embrace is stronger. He leads her, guides her across the dance floor of the life they attempt to create together. His hand guides her at the small of her back in this relational dance and he leads her not only further away from her family but also further away from her selves.

The concept of dance and dance metaphors materialize in Santiago’s narrative in several different ways. First and foremost, she is a professionally trained dancer. Her experience at the High School of Performing Arts, which she explores more fully in her earlier memoirs, and her independent exploration of classical Indian dance and Middle Eastern belly dance help to shape her identity and help to form her way of thinking. She cannot tell her story without discussing, in concrete terms, the importance of dance in her life. Secondly, she performs relational dances not only with Ulvi but with her family and friends as well. Her Puerto Rican upbringing dictates, through her mother and grandmother, that she is always to set a good example for her younger siblings. She performs for her family so that she (at least outwardly) adheres to the cultural norms of what a good Puerto Rican girl should be. Finally, by writing about her process of creating her choreopoem performance at Harvard, she brings together several art forms: dancing, storytelling, and writing. Cixous says that writing is “[a]n act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (1457). By writing about her self and by sharing her
experiences through the choreopoem, Santiago reclaims her body, “which has been more than confiscated from her” (1457).

The synergy created by the production turns into a transformative experience for her, providing a platform in which her self-development leads her to autonomy. Anzaldúa explains that various forms of art were woven into the everyday existence of her people and that “the shaman [...] did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined” (88).

Where this concept is most poignantly obvious in *The Turkish Lover* is when Santiago prepares for and performs a choreopoem for her final thesis her senior year at Harvard. Using the “Song of Songs” from the *Hebrew Scriptures* as her spoken text, she choreographs a dance drawing upon her training in Middle Eastern belly dance and classical Indian dance. In her preparation and performance she does not split the “artistic from the functional”; the two come together in a marriage where Santiago is able to make sense of, and come to terms with, several aspects of her identity. Through the choreopoem, Esmeralda is able to sort out her feelings regarding her race; her family calls her Negi—short for *Negrita*—because her skin coloring is dark compared to the rest of the family. She is also able to make sense of her long-term involvement with Ulvi, and of her relationships with her family, her parents, parental figures, and community. The older Santiago is narrating her life retrospectively, and in describing herself at a younger age she is creating a new subjectivity.

This thesis will focus on how dance was not only an art form and a mode of self expression for Santiago, but how dance metaphors are interwoven into her storytelling and into her writing giving it a fresh perspective on relationships. She is the product of a Puerto Rican upbringing coupled with an American and Turkish influence; she is a *mestiza*; she is living in the
borderlands. The memoir becomes the stage on which she performs her narrative and constructs her multiple subjectivities textually. By blending Spanish, English, and Spanglish and by drawing from her vast influences culturally, geographically and linguistically, as Anzaludua does, *The Turkish Lover* itself becomes a hybrid, a literary and cultural borderlands where Santiago is free to explore and celebrate her *mestiza* consciousness and multiple subjectivities.

**RELATIONSHIPS**

In *The Turkish Lover*, Santiago highlights relationships that are depicted from the relationships formed between dance partners. Sometimes the relationships glide smoothly across the floor in a rhythmic fashion, enduring hours of hard work and practice, aches, and pains. Sometimes they are out of step, one partner dancing off beat, unable to hear the music in the other’s head. While Santiago’s focus in her memoir is on Ulvi, she does give insight into how she feels regarding her relationships with other men. Before Santiago met Ulvi, she had dated “Avery Lee, a Texan […] who said he could only be with [her] if [she] was his mistress because marrying a ‘Spanish girl’ would ruin his political future” (105). While she reveals that she loved him, she realizes that he despised her because of her race. She was briefly engaged to Jürgen, an Austrian con-artist who stole cars and planes, who was in the United States illegally, and in whom the FBI was interested, because he had escaped from jail. Santiago discusses her relationship with him in depth in *Almost A Woman*, but in *The Turkish Lover* she reflects back on his marriage proposal three hours after they met: “[His] entreaties that he loved me and wanted to spend the rest of his life with me had sounded like a burden more than a reward” (77). Her dismissive feelings regarding Jürgen’s love are similar to her flippant attitudes regarding other men with whom she is involved.
When Ulvi and Chiquita are separated while he is in Europe, she dates men in New York, because she “was lonely not just for human contact, but also for male attention” (108). During the time she claims to be waiting for Ulvi, her need for affection leads her to have a sexual encounter with “Oscar the Brazilian […] whose last name [she] never asked,” (126) and who “had shown [her] that [she] was open to romance, if not love, were it to come along” (129). Of her one night affair with him she says: “I had no regrets, and didn’t feel any less ‘a good girl’ than on the day before Ulvi me hizo el daño” (126). Her nonchalant attitude towards her affair with him demonstrates that her loyalty to Ulvi is not as strong as she alleges elsewhere.

Her casual approach to men and sex is evident again when she is attending Harvard. Separated from Ulvi, she finds pleasure in the company of young college men: “Their bodies were in constant motion, their eyes brazen. They slumped on the orange plastic chairs of the Carpenter Center knees apart, jeans bulging […] They were as irresistible as candy, and, while they mostly left me as unnourished as a bag of M&Ms, I derived the same short-lived pleasure from our flirtations” (268). In addition to these brief encounters, she also dates “Keith, a gifted cinematographer with a sweet, quirky style” (309) who didn’t mind her “‘fucked-up relationship with that old guy’” (312). Although the two are involved with other people, their relationships are mutually troubled and they find comfort in one another’s company. Santiago observes that Keith’s relationship with his girlfriend is a metaphorical dance: “They broke up, came together, split up again in a painful dance for Keith, who seemed as unhappy with her as without her” (309). Santiago views the shifting emotional, psychological, and physical interaction between family and lovers in the same way that she views relationships between dance partners.

Santiago’s treatment of her relationships with these men and of her sexual encounters with them is in sharp contrast to what she was taught about being a decent Puerto Rican girl: “A
*nena puerrtoriqueña decente* was a virgin until she married” (8). The protagonist is not behaving like a *nena puerrtoriqueña decente*; however, she does not succumb to the shame associated with being an *americana*, either. According to her mother and other adult women in her community, “*Americanas* had too much freedom to do as they pleased, which they abused by being sexually available to any *pendejo* who looked their way” (9). The women in Santiago’s life perceive their own sexual conduct as acceptable, because although many of them are sleeping and procreating with men to whom they are not married, they are living in situations in which there is the appearance of a husband and wife union. For Santiago, as for her mother, grandmother and other prominent women in her community:

> sex has little to do with love or with committed relations or with idyllic unions but everything to do with [the women’s] bottomless longings, their insatiable cravings and fears, their feelings of helplessness, and power and powerlessness, their desires spurred on by fantasies and dreams, their struggles with race and racism and the intersections of class and hybridity, of colorism and colonialism. (Powell 192)

Santiago does not view her interaction with her lovers in a negative way; instead, she chooses to explore her sexuality through a handful of short-lived affairs and through her relationship with Ulvi, and she does so without guilt, almost as if she is holding a dance card in her hand.

The relationship between the author and Mami, and between her and Ulvi are closely related; she trades one dance partner, Mami, for another, Ulvi. Santiago, in her seven-year affair with Ulvi, recreates the same parent child-relationship that she experiences with her mother. She sees leaving New York City with Ulvi as a way out from under her mother’s controlling grasp; however, in essence she steps into a situation that becomes much more confining and restricting.
Having hidden her Turkish lover from her family for months, they are confounded by her sudden departure to Fort Lauderdale with him. Santiago at first welcomes his affections, because she feels safe with him as a child would with a parent. She is not quite ready to be completely on her own and sees running away with him as a way to escape her mother. He calls her *Chiquita*, little girl. He is seventeen years her senior, and one year older than her mother; she is unable to accept why her friends and family are concerned. She resists their notions that she sees him as “a substitute father” (112) and that he is “a man who only want[s] one thing” (76). According to Noland, Puerto Rican “machismo is highly ritualized, with identified gender roles that pressure men to fulfill social demands and expectations, including the control and domination of female partners and the quest for numerous sexual partners[, whereas] women are taught to repress their sexuality and to rely on men to be in control of the sexual relationship” (284). Mami does not want her daughter to fall into the same unbalanced sexual relationship with Ulvi that she experienced with Papi, whose infidelities not only caused deep pain, but ultimately broke up the family.

Ulvi represents an obvious replacement for Mami, because she is the primary caregiver for the family, the most influential person in Santiago’s life, and because her father, Papi, has been estranged from the family for eight years. However, Santiago’s desire for a father figure is unconsciously projected onto Ulvi, which in turn provides him with an open invitation to take on a parental role, because “young [women] are often sexually exploited by men who look and act like fathers, men who assume a guardianlike role [and] within the ideology and the myth of the family these relationships are made to seem legitimate by the men’s assumption of the role of caretaker” (Renk 63). What Santiago experiences is an Electra complex. Nancy Chodorow argues, however, that “[t]he feminine oedipus complex is not simply a transfer of affection from
mother to father and a giving up of mother[,] it is] the continued importance of a girl’s external
and internal relation to her mother, and the way her relation to her father is added to this”
(Reproduction 92-3). In essence, Ulvi becomes a replacement for both parents.

Mami’s concern for her daughter is so great that she unexpectedly shows up in Fort
Lauderdale to take her home. However, her efforts prove to be fruitless; Santiago refuses to leave
with her mother, threatening to kill herself rather than return to New York. Her mother knows
intrinsically—through experience—that women fall victim to men and that as a mestiza, “like all
women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness […] she le[ft] the familiar and safe home-
ground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.

This is her home

this thin edge of

barbwire” (Borderlands 35).

Santiago chooses to exist in an “in-between” state, a perilous state in which women are not quite
free of their mothers, not quite yet on their own, and uncertain of the rationality of their
decisions. According to Homi K. Bhabha, this in-between-ness is created at the “moment of
transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past
and present, inside and outside […]” (Locations 1332). The (re)construction of Santiago’s
identity in her narrative becomes increasingly complex as she seeks to distinguish the differences
between the multiple subjectivities imposed on her by others. Chodorow explains that “[a]
mother […] grows up without establishing adequate ego boundaries or a firm sense of self. She
tends to experience boundary confusion with her daughter, and does not provide experiences of
differentiating ego development for her daughter or encourage the breaking of her daughter’s
dependence” (Feminism 59). In other words, for Mami, there is a fine line between where she
ends and where her daughter begins; however, in order for Santiago to develop her own subjectivity she has to address her past and, in some respects, break with it. For example, Negi left New York so Chiquita could be with Ulvi; Santiago must not only attempt to put into perspective the multiple personalities of Negi and Chiquita, she must also put into perspective who she is as a daughter in relation to her mother. The space left in the wake of her move causes Santiago to feel the distance between who her mother expects her to be as Negi, who she is becoming in the form of Chiquita, and what that means when stirred together with a Turkish man. Ulvi expects her to perform as a wife, yet he will not marry her. Ironically, her mother never married, yet she bore eleven children to three different men. Make no mistake: Mami understands “shacking up” with a man; she has done it herself numerous times. What concerns her is that her daughter is moving too far away to do it; she will no longer be under the influence of her family and culture. Mother and daughter meet in this in-between place where their relational dance takes on a whole new meaning as Mami is no longer leading her daughter; Ulvi is.

The “thin edge” where Santiago is choosing to live concerns her mother because of its isolating nature. Physically, her daughter has moved—literally—across the country. While Mami left Puerto Rico with her children, she was welcomed in New York with open arms by friends and relatives. Much of the extended family lived only blocks away, and, at times, many of them lived under the same roof or in the same apartment building. Holidays were spent “eating, drinking sweet, rum laced coquito, dancing with […] sisters and brothers and the aunts, uncles and cousins who banged on the door and sang aguinaldos as they shimmied down the hall, their arms laden with food and presents” (110). Santiago grew up in a multi-generational household, connected through not only familial ties but through cultural traditions as well. Mami is
concerned that there will not be the opportunities that Sunday afternoons or special holidays provide for her daughter. Eating, drinking, and dancing with the family are a way for them to check in on, catch up with, and take care of one another. Mami does not want her daughter to make the same mistakes that she did; she wants her to have an education, a desk job, a nice husband, a stable home-life. Her well-meaning intentions fall on deaf ears; her daughter chooses to stay with her lover.

Anzaldúa would contend that while the borderlands are a dangerous place for a woman, it is typical of a _mestiza_ to go to the borderland in order to find the strength to carve out her own life. Anzaldúa explains her own experience: “To this day I’m not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, _mi tierra, mi gente_, and all that [it] stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me” (Borderlands 38). Like Anzaldúa, Santiago felt the need to find herself, and she found the strength to leave home to do it. That her mother and family are dismayed by her decision to leave New York and live with Ulvi in Florida confuses Santiago. The personality imposed upon her is to be a _nena puerrtoriqueña decente_; however, she is torn between what she knows is expected of her and what she has learned through the example of the prominent women in her life. She knows that:

decent Puerto Rican girls did not wear short skirts, did not wear pants unless they were riding a horse, did not wear makeup, did not tease their hair, did not talk to boys not their brothers, did not go anywhere unchaperoned, did not argue with their mothers, did not challenge adults even when they were wrong, did not look adults in the eyes, especially if they were men, did not disrespect their alcoholic
relatives […] A *nena puertorriqueña decente* was a virgin until she married in a church with her sisters as bridesmaids and her brothers as grooms. (8)

And yet, contradictions abound: her grandmother, Tata, lived with her boyfriend Don Julio; her mother lived with three men to whom she was not married and, ultimately, to whom she bore eleven children; her mother dyed “curled, teased and sprayed her hair”; she wore clothing that emphasized her voluptuous figure (9). The unwritten cultural rules and norms and the contradictions that accompanied them were not only a part of Santiago’s upbringing, they were instilled in her female cousins and friends as well. The girls are left to perform a metaphorical dance around what is expected of them and the example set for them.

The implication from their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts was: “do as I say, not as I do.” Anzaldúa explains it this way: “Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages: *No voy a dejar que ningun pelado desgracioado maltrate a mis hijos*. And in the next breath it would say, *La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre*. Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?” (Borderlands 40). While their mothers would not allow anyone to mistreat or disgrace their children, they also taught the girls to listen to and obey their husbands, or—as in the case of Mami and Tata—their live-in boyfriends. The concept is difficult for Santiago to comprehend; she does not know what to do: should she obey her mother, should she obey her lover, or, as a *mestiza*, should she attempt to carve out her own path independent of both? The notion that women should behave in a particular manner and without question is patriarchal in nature, and, as Anzaldúa explains, “Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (Borderlands 38). The women in Santiago’s life are merely passing along the expectations set forth by Puerto Rican patriarchal culture. The visit from her mother in Fort Lauderdale is a pre-emptive strike against her daughter
on behalf of the males in her family. As the family emissary, Mami carried a strong message to her daughter: come home now before this gets much worse (for me). The relational dance that mother and daughter perform together takes on new meaning as Santiago refuses to let her mother lead her. It is not until she returns to New York from her brief stint in Fort Lauderdale that Santiago experiences the consequences of her actions in full force.

The painful decision to stay with Ulvi and to choose him over her mother and her family is undermined when he sends her back to New York while he travels to Europe. Upon her arrival at her mother’s home she is subject to further humiliation as the family has brought out the next line of defense; the family generals, Don Julio, Don Carlos—her mother’s boyfriend—and her father, Papi, are all waiting for her in the living room, ready to have an hombre a hombre with the Turk. Ironically, she had not laid eyes on her father in eight years. “He was there to defend my honor,” says Santiago. “Too late, I wanted to say, to scream at him. Ya me hizo el daño. I was so angry and resentful, I vibrated [...T]he minute my virginity was in question, there he was, with a useless display of fatherly concern. Too late, too late, too late” (67, 70). The damage to Santiago’s reputation had been done. Her return to New York is a pivotal point in Santiago’s narrative. She had left “the source, the mother,” the familiar; yet, she is back home within months: “I was ashamed at the cowardly way in which I had left and even more ashamed at the circumstances of my return” (76).

The plot events that Santiago chooses to include in her narrative focus primarily on her personal relationships with her mother, Ulvi, a handful of lovers, dance, and education. Within the framework of these relationships, she explores her conscious awareness of being controlled. She is controlled first by the cultural and social expectations implicit for a nena puertorriqueña decente, then by her family, and finally by Ulvi. The expectations governing what it means to be
a *nena puertorriqueña decente* and the expectations established by her family are closely related: “Mami did not invent *el que dirán* or the differences between a *nena decente* and an *americana*. Her friends and relatives spouted the same rules to their daughters and we were supposed to listen humbly and without arguments. When our mothers were elsewhere, however, we tried to make sense of what they said as opposed to what they did” (9). Santiago explores how she manages to deal with what she views as a control that is rooted in gender inequality, an inequality that appears to be present whether she is contending with Puerto Rican culture or Middle Eastern culture, because both are patriarchal in nature. For example, while in New York after returning from Fort Lauderdale, Ulvi stays in a friend’s home; Chiquita is not welcome in this home, because, according to Ulvi, she is “living in sin.” It is not surprising that she encounters here yet another cultural/social contradiction rooted in gender inequity. If she is living in sin, then so is Ulvi. Why, then, is she the only one held accountable in this double standard? It is evident to her that because she is a woman the playing field is not equitable. Anzaldúa would agree: “The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman” (39).

Ironically, marriage is not an option for Ulvi, and in trying to be subservient to her lover she rebels against her family, her church, and her culture. Her actions across the board are viewed as scandalous; she is not behaving like a *nena puertorriqueña decente*. The whirlwind excitement of running away with a man had worn off; it was not at all what she had hoped it would be; he returns her to her family a *mujer mala*. She has no choice; she does what every
nena puertorriqueña decente mestiza should do when leaving her family and defying her lover: she goes back to work for the “black six-foot-tall modern-dancing transvestite” at The Grace Agency (78), secures her own room at the Longacre Hotel, purchases a copy of Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl*, and signs up for dance “classes at the International School of Dance, near Carnegie Hall” (102). Renting her own room using her own money—in spite of Ulvi’s desire for her to stay with her family—gives her a sense of financial and physical empowerment. Even though Ulvi is leaving for Europe on business and she plans to be faithful to him, she purchases Gurley’s book about sex, careers, and economic independence to see what being “a spoiled American girl […] really meant” (84). She reclaims more physical control over her body in the dance studio by returning to the study of classical Indian dance, a dance that Ulvi once told her “is ridiculous dance. Not for you” (AAW 302). For one year Santiago lives on her own in New York, patiently waiting for Ulvi, while at the same time enjoying freedom from him (and from her family). The shift in space and time and geographical location leaves Santiago in an in-between state: “I felt suspended between two worlds, one with him and one without him. I wanted desperately to see what it was like to be alone, unencumbered by family, by lover, by anything familiar except the streets outside the door” (85). What Santiago is seeking in her desire to be alone in this space is the opportunity to construct her own identity within the web of social, political, racial, and religious identities which she normally performs. Bhabha suggests that “[t]hese ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Locations 1-2.)

In less than seventy pages Santiago meets, falls in love with, gives herself sexually and emotionally to, and runs away with a mysterious Turkish man whom everyone knows is never
going to marry her. She is bombarded by behavioral expectations swathed in cultural, social, and familial inconsistencies. She defies her family, her culture, her community. She chooses her lover over her mother. In essence, she sets the stage for the rest of her testimonio, and she does so in two ways. First, she introduces the multiple borderlands which she is navigating. As a mestiza she is contending with several issues in which the cultural expectations of women are deep rooted and unwritten. The rules surrounding these expectations are not applicable to everyone; for example, while it is acceptable for Ulvi or her mother to live in sin, it is not permissible for her to do so. The policies governing feminine behavior are subject to change without notice, contradictory, and not always so clearly defined. The expectations, rules, and regulations clash in a metaphorical mosh-pit, leaving her to discern and sort out what is expected of her at any given time. She has to perform these roles: She is the oldest of eleven children and, therefore, she must set a good example for her siblings; she is a Puerto Rican woman involved with a Turkish man; she is a native Puerto Rican living in New York City, Fort Lauderdale and Lubbock, Texas; she has been raised to be a nena puertorriqueña decente and yet, she is Americanized; she is not a child, she is “almost a woman.” Furthermore, Santiago is now performing the role of what it means to be a “good girl” through Ulvi’s Turkish perspective. He does not want Chiquita “to be a spoiled American girl [which] in Ulvi-speak, meant sexually available” (63) to anyone other than himself. He does not want her challenging his authority or his need for her co-dependency. Santiago’s narrator has Omar, Chiquita and Ulvi’s friend in Lubbock, explain the Turkish masculine perspective regarding male/female relationships this way: “We are old fashioned […] We like our women to depend on us. It makes us feel more strong, more like a man” (230). The pressure to perform under so many conflicting roles is virtually unendurable. “The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and
emotional states of perplexity,” explains Anzaldúa: “Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (100). Throughout her narrative, Santiago attempts to sort through her “psychic restlessness”; she analyzes the personalities of Negi, Chiquita, and Esmeralda. She carefully (re)constructs her selves using her own images, not that of her culture, family or Ulvi.

Second, by defining these roles, Santiago sees—in hindsight—how the personalities imposed upon her have shaped her identity. Subsequently, in her (re)presentation of the roles which she is called upon to perform, she demonstrates what is at the heart of her narrative: that autobiographical performance is an everyday activity, not something just relegated to pen and paper and only in retrospect. The autobiographical performance is not confined to how Santiago acts/performes for others; it is evident textually as well in her life-long habit of journaling. Sidonie Smith says that:

Every day, in disparate venues, in response to sundry occasions, in front of precise audiences (even if an audience of one), people assemble, if only temporarily, a “life” to which they assign narrative coherence and meaning and through which they position themselves in historically specific identities.

Whatever that occasion or that audience, the autobiographical speaker becomes a performative subject. (108)

In each role Santiago metaphorically performs a dance for a particular audience, be it her family, her community, or Ulvi. In her composition notebooks filled with her “musings” she is performing for an audience of one: herself. Regardless of under whose direction she is performing, she is performing every day, and it is only in looking back on her younger selves through the construction of her narrative that Santiago can put her multiple subjectivities into a
more organized perspective that allows her self-awareness. While Chiquita may not have understood at the time exactly what she was doing and exactly what was expected of her, the more mature and more detached adult Esmeralda can see how it would have been easy for her Turkish lover to lure her away from her family, her home, herself. It doesn’t take much for Chiquita to fall for Ulvi: she does that in less than seventy pages; falling in love is fast and easy. It will, however, take more than two hundred and fifty pages and more than seven years for her to explain how she gets out of it and what she does to claim control of her life. What Santiago does to establish her own multiple identities and to relieve the controlling pressure imposed on her by Ulvi, her family, and her culture is to develop a new consciousness, a mestiza consciousness. According to Anzaldúa, “[t]he new mestiza […] has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (101).

Santiago’s relationship with Ulvi begins in 1969 and “television and radio announcers bubbled with news of Ted Kennedy’s accident on Chappaquiddick Island between reports of the progress of Apollo 11 on its lunar mission” (80). The social unrest during the 1970s, while Ulvi and Chiquita are together, was rampant; the United States was experiencing an economic recession, the energy crisis caused a shortage of gasoline, opposition to the Vietnam War raged on in the form of protests. However, because Santiago is consumed by her relationship with Ulvi, she does not participate in any social, cultural, or environmental movements. Her world revolves around Ulvi, his schooling, and his friends. The 1970s were also a time when women were fighting for equality and feminist ideals were weaving their way into politics, economics, and classrooms. Women were empowering themselves to master their own lives and seize opportunities to break away from traditional roles, to create their own identities, and to pursue a
higher education. Part of the feminist movement included a greater tolerance for women’s sexual liberation; women were encouraged to learn about their bodies, take responsibility for their sexual health and enjoyment, and explore their desires. Some women found this freedom in the form of exotic dances such as belly dancing; however, during her relationship with Ulvi Santiago, she abandons all dance forms—including traditional Puerto Rican dances—in exchange for his approval. After belly dancing in front of his Middle Eastern friends in Lubbock, Texas, Ulvi slaps Chiquita and forbids her to dance unless it is with him, treating her like a child who needs to be punished.

His contempt for Santiago’s belly dancing is rooted in his perception of the dance from his cultural standpoint. Donalee Dox points out that “[w]omen belly dancing in public in the West lacks the social stigma public dance carries in countries where costuming and performance venues have been governmentally regulated (Egypt), where dancers have been marked as prostitutes (Turkey, Iran), or where public dance has been banned for periods of time (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey)” (56). His fear that she will be perceived as a prostitute due to her public performance in front of mixed company comes to the surface when, towards the end of their relationship, he calls her “a cheap whore” (283). Ulvi’s derision of Santiago’s dancing in public is in sharp contrast to the cultural norms under which she was raised. For Puerto Ricans, music and dancing are part and parcel of holiday celebrations and community get-togethers. The cultural lenses from which Ulvi views belly dancing are influenced by his Turkish upbringing and Eurocentric ideals and cause him to see her as “cheap girl,” not a “good girl.” Ulvi is a worldly man; he is culturally aware and would not have been naïve to the notion that Western belly dance represents the kind of sexual freedom that he disdains in women, because he feels that sexual exploration is something that is acceptable only for men. Ironically, her return to
the study and practice of both classical Indian dance and Middle Eastern belly dance at Harvard paves the way for her to regain a sense of independence, to claim control over her life and, ultimately, to leave him. Andrea Deagon, who has studied belly dance since 1975 and is also an associate professor of Classical Studies at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, suggests that it is not uncommon that women in the United States are changed through the physical freedom that belly dance provides, because it allows women “to escape, for the class hour or on a wider scale, from societal bonds that restrict[s] them from power, adventure, exploration of their own sensuality, and claiming a public voice” (9). This would have been particularly true in America while Santiago was enrolled at Harvard because “[b]oth feminism and belly dance enjoyed an upsurge in the 1970s, suggesting that there is a community of interest between the two” (9). While Ulvi viewed the dance as a platform for prostitutes, Santiago, like many women in the United States, viewed it as a form of personal, artistic expression. Deagon also explains that as a teacher of belly dance in the 1970’s she regularly witnessed “women whose stiff, introverted body language show[ing] lack of confidence were suddenly opening up, shaking their hips, performing, expressing” and that she knew of “several women who danced themselves out of restrictive relationships” (9). Santiago does exactly that, though it takes her several years to finally disentangle herself from her relationship with Ulvi. Their off and on, up and down, back and forth interaction over a seven-year period of time is representative of dance moves themselves.

CLOTHING AND CONTROLLING THE BODY

Ulvi is attracted to Chiquita for several reasons; she is young, beautiful, and naïve, and he sees her as a woman-child, as someone whose mind and body he can easily control, reminding
her time and again that she is innocent and that he will teach her everything (22). His initial refusal to meet her family and spend time with them is intended to physically and emotionally isolate her from her familial ties. Even after more than five years of being together, he refuses to see her family when the two travel to Puerto Rico shortly before they breakup. It is an intentional isolation that serves no purpose other than his own selfish needs; it is a measure to keep Chiquita under control. His control over her physical location is the most obvious way in which he controls her body; however, there are other, more subtle ways he does so as well, even for the long periods of time when the two live apart.

He will tell her what is appropriate to wear, as her mother did when trying to instill in her what is appropriate for a *nena puertorriqueña decente*. His issues with her clothing surface numerous times in the text, testifying his need to control her mind and her body. Thus, clothing becomes a symbolic representation of control in Santiago’s narrative. Her mother used to control what she and her sisters wore; however, because Ulvi claims to have a background in textile engineering he will go one step farther. He will not only select her items of clothing, he will instruct her in their care and maintenance also: “Not that one, Chiquita […] it wrinkles too much,” he informs her. “That one is not good color for you […] Look how poor is made this one” (49). Regardless of what she picks up, nothing is suitable to him. Nothing is suitable for her unless he selects it and approves of it. He instructs her that a particular garment is silk and that she “‘must be careful not to spill on it.’ Of course [she] spilled” (TLL 198). As if treating her like a child who needs a bib is not enough, he also insists that, because the items he purchases for her are so expensive, they do not wear clothing while home alone: “We took our clothes off as soon as we entered the apartment, its thermostat always set to a balmy 80 degrees. Because [the apartment] was so high up and there were no buildings nearby anywhere as tall as ours, we didn’t
bother with curtains. We felt completely free with only the clouds and the distant woods and lakes to witness our nakedness” (199). He not only strips her of the decision making process in buying her clothes, he also strips her of the clothes themselves, leaving her sitting around the apartment vulnerable, as naked as a baby.

Santiago focuses on Ulvi’s obsession with her clothing throughout her entire memoir. Because he repeatedly tells her that she is “not well informed [and] cannot have opinions” (132), she begins to internalize those words. She is no longer just hearing them, she is listening intently, and she begins to believe that she is intellectually inadequate, so much so that she is incapable of dressing herself: “He bought my clothes because I never chose ‘elegant’ things,” (198) explains Santiago. Purchasing her clothing is a way for Ulvi to control what she wears and how she spends her money. Her experience in shopping for clothes consists of “rummag[ing] through the used clothing bins at the secondhand store looking for something ‘new’ to wear.” She knows that “the clothes she would have chosen […] would be too tight and too low cut” (209). By highlighting his need to control what she wears and when she wears it, and by bringing that interaction between the two lovers to the forefront of her testimonio, she is later able to use clothing again as a representation of her shedding him from her life, of stripping him of his control over her. When she arrives at Harvard she performs a liberating dance, because she begins to regain control of herself when she regains control of her clothes:

Without his constant gaze, the “elegant” style Ulvi had imposed on me soon gave way to the costumey flowing skirts and colorful fabrics I had favored in New York. Ulvi had not liked it when I wore makeup or jewelry, but I loved bright lipsticks, dangly earrings, and the intricately crafted necklaces, bracelets, and rings of Asian cultures. Most of all I liked choosing my wardrobe, deciding for
myself when I wanted to be “elegant,” when “exotic,” when “groovy.” The first few weeks in Cambridge, I spent more time gazing into the mirror than I had my entire life, trying to see myself through my own eyes, quieting the critical voice that had judged my every action over the last six years. (253)

What Santiago is learning about herself as she gazes into the mirror is that she has lost sight of who she really is as a woman without Ulvi. She is able to see that she has multiple subjectivities and personas: elegant, exotic, groovy, and she realizes that she enjoys the freedom of choosing when to perform each of these roles. She is aware that the more authentic Esmeralda had been buried under layers of European clothes chosen for her by her Turkish Lover, and the knowledge that she is now free to express herself as she deems appropriate is liberating for her and is a contributing factor in her continued growth and self-development.

Santiago uses “costumey” to describe her skirts, but the word also gives insight into what she is thinking. As she gazes into the mirror, she is remembering a time when she danced in costumes, donned stage makeup, and wore Asian jewelry while performing as Lakshmi the Swan Goddess or a Japanese lady or Cleopatra while attending the High School of Performing Arts in New York city as a drama student. The visual image she sees reminds her of who she used to be: Esmeralda, a dancer; and it reminds her of who she can become without Ulvi. Santiago is seeing herself for the first time in a long time, but she barely recognizes the woman gazing back at her. Anzaldúa explains the act of gazing in a mirror as: “Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The glance can freeze us in place, it can possess us. It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge” (64). It does not take long before the woman in the mirror repeats a pattern of behavior known to give Santiago strength and control over her subjectivity in the past: she signs up for a dance class.
Santiago’s return to the dance studio goes hand in hand with her (re)gaining control over her clothing, and—ultimately—over her own body. She returns to dance because it gives her the freedom to move about physically as she so chooses, and it provides another avenue of self-expression that she missed terribly while living with Ulvi: she is able to create dance costumes. Santiago uses a costume piece, the veil, to represent her continual quest for freedom from her culture, family, and Ulvi, and for control over her own subjectivity. The veil becomes symbolic in two ways. First, it is representative of patriarchal control over women in Puerto Rican and Middle Eastern cultures. Second, it represents Santiago’s recasting of the garment as a symbol of freedom and volition.

Santiago was raised Catholic, and her acceptance of the tenets of her religion the moment she stepped on the plane with Ulvi is strong. Catholicism was an everyday part of her life; she was taught that “la benedición was as essential to [her] well-being as a nutritious meal, and the responsibility of every adult toward every child” (72). Her mother’s home was a place where “the bleeding heart of Jesus was an appropriate decoration in a living room” (69). The first time the veil is introduced in *The Turkish Lover* is at the beginning of her testimonio when Santiago discusses the circumstances in which she runs away with Ulvi. He encourages her to speak with her mother “woman to woman [and] explain the situation”; however, Santiago knows that her mother will never approve of her decision to leave New York with the Turk. “I had failed as a *nena puertorriqueña decente*,” explains Santiago. “I had lost myself to Ulvi without benefit of *velo y cola*, the trailing veil Mami had imagined for each one of her daughters before a Catholic altar” (6). The veil, here, is representative not only of her family’s control over her, but also of the church’s as well. The visual image of the bridal veil and the concept of what it means to be a *nena puertorriqueña decente* are so closely related it is almost as if they are married to each
other. And marriage, sanctioned by the Catholic Church, is not just her mother’s wish for her, it is what her father—and God—want, also. Her mother is only passing along the patriarchal assumption that “good girls” marry in the Church as veiled, unspoiled virgins.

The veil is again introduced when Ulvi calls from Riyadh, claiming that he is meeting with princes. “Someday you will come here with me, Chiquita,” he tells her. “All the womens wear veils. It is beautiful” (117). Ulvi’s perception of the veil is complex. Veiling in the Middle East is not just a religious construct, it is a cultural, political, and social one. In some parts of the Middle East, women donned the veil as an act of resistance to colonization; in other parts, the shedding of the veil was perceived as an assimilation to Western ideologies (Dox 62). Chiquita, who is impressionable, does not understand the implications of a veiled woman in the Middle East, and at this point her relationship with Ulvi is still new, so everything seems magical. She does not realize the impact that Ulvi controlling her clothing will have on her in the future. Chiquita’s impression of the veil is drawn from pop culture: “I imagined myself dressed like the Hollywood version of Scheherazade in sequined harem pants, wrapped in jewel-colored chiffon veils, my fingers ringed with precious stones” (117). For Chiquita the thought evokes fantasy, mystery, and glamour. For Ulvi, a veiled Chiquita would represent the ultimate form of control; no longer would he have to justify why he should purchase her clothes; he would have state-sanctioned laws to back him up. Of course—in his mind—“It is beautiful.”

The adult Santiago, however, can look back and see that by the time she graduated from Harvard, her view of the veil through her experience with her family and with Ulvi has changed dramatically. Esmeralda, on graduation day, pulls Ulvi’s gift from her closet: “Wrapped in tissue was a turquoise and lilac silk scarf with a paisley design in gold embroidery. It was as light as a breath. Folded into a square inside a white box there was a black chiffon veil with tiny silver
baguettes along the edges. It was as heavy as a sigh. Both were perfumed in a spicy scent that rose from the sheer fabrics and seemed to bring ghosts into the room” (330). The veil here takes on ominous characteristics. Under the backdrop of dark demons and juxtaposed next to silk “as light as a breath” the weight of the veil feels “as heavy as a sigh.” Her description gives the sense that as she touches the fabrics she takes one deep breath in, her chest expanding under the memories, hurt and loss, and one long exhalation (of relief) out. She sees the veil through Ulvi’s eyes, eyes that are caught in the borderlands themselves. She sees a beautiful item of clothing; it has been selected with the utmost care and due diligence; it is intended to make her smile on her graduation day; it is given with love. She also sees a symbol of his desire to control her. She sees the veil through the eyes of her mother, her grandmother, her sisters and friends; she sees the hopes and dreams of her family and church for their daughters: that they all marry velo y cola. She sees disappointment in the fact that many of them never do.

However, when Esmeralda incorporates the veil into her belly dancing attire, she is essentially dancing against what appears to her to be a restrictive use of the veil. She is rejecting the notions that only good girls marry in the church with velo y cola, and that the veil be controlled by the hands of men. By incorporating the veil into her costumes and performances herself, she is resisting Puerto Rican and Middle Eastern religious/cultural/social/political/familial (insert any one or more here) practices that a woman “should be” veiled literally and metaphorically under a multitude of various constraints. By choosing to wear a veil she removes the power and control that the veil represents in the oppression of women. By choosing to put it on, she can also choose to take it off. Dox explains the contrasts among how Santiago’s family views the veil, how Ulvi views it, and how Esmeralda views it: “Popular discourse on belly dance repeats over and over again, the Western
dancer reveals the truth of her own self, not that of the Orient. Because the Western belly dancer’s veil is a stage prop, it can circumvent the complex realities of veiling as a cultural and religious practice [and the] differences between required veiling in Saudi Arabia and prohibitions on veiling in Turkey, for example—drop away in [Western] belly dancing’s overrepresentation of a generalist East” (61). What Esmeralda experiences in her dance class is an inward journey, a momentary gaze upon herself: “The class always ended with improvisations that built on what had just been taught. Those five minutes of free dancing were like meeting my real self wrapped in veils and clinking zills, moving as a woman should” (263). For Esmeralda, like many Western women studying belly dance, she is resisting imposed subjectivities; it is a personal journey, not one rooted in the subjectivity imposed upon her by history, patriarchal culture, family, or lover. She finds herself in that dance studio, ironically under a veil. As a true mestiza “she reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths” (Borderlands 104). Esmeralda reconstitutes the old symbol of the veil and (re)invents the historical complexities and implications that shroud it. She creates new meaning by using it as a symbol of freedom and self-governance, and by doing so demonstrates that she is under her own rulership.

Ulvi’s control over Santiago’s body and self-esteem tightens significantly after she belly dances in front of their Middle Eastern friends in Lubbock, Texas. Forbidden to dance unless it is with him, she feels her already small world constrict around her, and the isolation it brings almost unbearable: “The visits to the Middle Eastern households stopped, so I lost the camaraderie of women. I lived surrounded by a huge fence with a gate controlled by Ulvi that grew higher every day as its walls contracted inwards, narrowing the space in which I moved” (155). Stripping her of her decision-making abilities and of her clothing is not enough: he strips her of the one thing she loves most, dance, and of the few friends with whom she was allowed to
interact. The isolation causes Santiago to take inventory of her situation and to develop ways in which to deal with it, ways in which she can survive the loneliness, the loss of herself. Her solution is to, once again, perform. Her performances this time, though, are not based on the historically specific roles assigned to her, i.e.: nena puertorriqueña decente, daughter, sister, lover. This time, her performances are birthed through the names given to her by her family, her co-workers, and Ulvi.

The naming of the protagonist in Santiago’s memoir becomes central to her narrative because each name brings with it its own identity. Each name she is given (Negrita, Chiquita, Essie, Ez) takes on a new persona, and she performs the roles expected of her in each situation. Assuming, as Smith does, that Butler’s theory of gender performativity can be recast as performativity in general, then it is fair to assess that Negrita, Chiquita, Essie, and Ez do not exist in an absolute way; they only exist as performative subjects. They exist because Esmeralda chooses to allow them to exist. Butler’s assertion is “that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Negi and Chiquita have expressed tendencies to be submissive; Ez and Essie’s expressions are those of being hardworking, cheerful, and helpful in the workplace. Santiago’s desire to be, simply, Esmeralda is woven into her narrative, but nowhere is it more poignant than when she explains what happens to her when she leaves work at the end of the day at Crouse Memorial Hospital in Syracuse: “It was such a conscious shift from Esmeralda to Essie to Chiquita that I actually felt my body contract and diminish in stature on the walk from the hospital to our building […] It was less painful to be Chiquita for him and Essie at work, than to expose Esmeralda to the disdainful gaze of those who would judge me” (209). Being simply, Esmeralda, however, is by no means simple. The “real Esmeralda” that the narrator is attempting to uncover is merely another performative subject
created by the narrating “I” in the *testimonio*. By performing these identities she sets up a defense mechanism that is intended to protect the repressed Esmeralda from critical voices. The shift in what is expected of her as Essie and what is expected of her as Chiquita are so radically different that it no longer just affects her state of mind; her body takes on the physical characteristics of a *chiquita*, a little girl; she feels “diminished,” small. Ulvi’s repeated banter that she is a naïve little girl who needs to be taught everything is so internalized that her body reacts to the onslaught and becomes physically deformed.

As an adult, Santiago is looking back at herself through her multiple identities and attempting to fashion a narrative that gives voice and validation to all of them. She observes how she made a conscious decision to be Essie at work, Chiquita for Ulvi, and Negi for her family; however, she witnesses how she begins to lose sight of Esmeralda altogether. She internalizes her names and, feeling as though there is more than one person inside her, she experiences what W.E.B Du Bois refers to as “double consciousness”; a consciousness that implies a “two-ness” and a struggle between what it means to be "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (*The Souls of Black Folk* 5). While the term has been historically used to discuss the internal spiritual and emotional turmoil experienced by African Americans who are coping with what it means to be an “American” and what it means to be a “Negro,” it is applicable to Santiago, because she struggles with what it means to be American and Puerto Rican, and because the name given to her by her family is racialized: *Negrita*. In order to keep from being “torn asunder,” Santiago buries Esmeralda under the imposed personalities of Negi, Chiquita, Essie, and Ez; the additional subjectivities that Esmeralda represents are those of a daughter, sister, dancer, lover.
Santiago, in her attempt to locate the “real Esmeralda” is—ultimately—peeling back layers and uncovering a (re)incarnated version of an earlier self. The “real Esmeralda” she is hiding from the world no longer exists, because the wisdom she acquires with age and experience have changed her and her perspective on life dramatically. In textually (re)constructing these multiple identities, Santiago’s narration takes a sharp turn; she begins to discuss Esmeralda in the third person, as if she is talking about someone other than herself, and she does so in the past tense as if that someone has been repressed:

Esmeralda was the dark-skinned girl from the ends of rural Puerto Rico who had grown up in the ghettos of Brooklyn. She was the first child of a teenage mother who had never married the fathers of her eleven children. Esmeralda had waited alongside Mami for the welfare check on the third of the month and had eagerly rummaged through the used clothing bins at the secondhand store looking for something “new” to wear. She liked loud salsa music and bright colors. She like her big breasts and round hips, and she walked with a jiggle in her buttocks, just as her mother did, her grandmother, and sisters. The clothes she would have chosen were not elegant. They would be too tight and too low cut. (209)

In (re)creating Esmeralda in the third person, Santiago is able to demonstrate how the personalities imposed upon her had—in effect—suppressed her. She is seeing herself through the eyes of others in retrospect; and her perception—as an adult Santiago (re)creating her past—is that during that time in her life she is viewed “as the extension of Ulvi […] invisible without him” (155). Becoming invisible is what Chiquita fears most; with Ulvi she is at least identified as his girlfriend within his social circles; without him she does not know who she is anymore. Choosing to fulfill her roles as Essie and Chiquita becomes a defense mechanism for her; it is
easier to play along than to challenge expectations every step of the way and risk losing
Esmeralda altogether. The longer she performs for her co-workers and Ulvi, and the longer she is
separated from her family, the further disconnected she feels from Esmeralda: “I gave the world
a shadow me, a me who looked like me but wasn’t […]. I reserved the real Esmeralda in a quiet,
secret place no one could reach […] I kept that me so hidden, that I was invisible even to myself”
(209-10). The defense mechanism, intended to protect the real Esmeralda from her environment,
causes her to lose sight of herself.

That a more authentic self is buried deep under a pile of imposed personalities,
unreasonable expectations, and self-deprecation is a concept familiar to Anzaldúa as well:
“There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from
outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty
of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed.
At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts”
(Borderlands 38). The Esmeralda that Santiago hides does not have to take orders from outside
authorities: Chiquita and Essie do. The Esmeralda that is hidden and invisible is tired of the
external limitations on her time and space; what she is experiencing is a concept that Matthew
Arnold explores in his poem “The Buried Life”:

But often, in the world’s most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire

Into the mystery of this heart which beats

So wild, so deep in us—to know

Whence our lives come and where they go. (45-54)

Deep in her subconscious, Esmeralda is restless; she no longer wants to bury herself, and she desires a life that she creates independent of Ulvi and her family. Santiago shares Arnold’s nineteenth century Victorian perspective that there is a “buried life” waiting to be revealed; however, this concept is in sharp contrast to the Postmodern view that individuals are a compendium of many selves. Smith explains that “[p]ostmodernism choreographs the shift in theoretical terminology from the old self to something called the ‘subject,’ which unlike the self has no unified core [and she argues that] the subject is implicated in sinuous webs of intersubjectivity” (Self, Subject, Resistance 15). In essence, the “real Esmeralda” is but another performative subject. However, Santiago embraces her mestiza consciousness to provide her with the tools she needs to continue her journey and to identify her multiple selves. And when Esmeralda finally “kicks out with both feet [and] bolts” she lands smack in the middle of Harvard Square.

EDUCATION

While on a road trip with Ulvi, a wrong turn off an exit leads them into the heart of Harvard Square. Santiago immediately falls in love with the environment:

Even in summer when most of the students had returned home, the streets around Harvard Square were crowded and lively. A guitarist strummed plaintively and wailed to a few people who seemed entranced by the unintelligible words of his
song. A juggler threw three balls high in the air, bounced them off his forehead, his chin, then caught them and did a cartwheel. A lean black man dressed in blue, with dangling ribbons and bells, told an African folktale to a circle of enraptured listeners. A vigor I had not noticed on the campuses of Texas Tech and at Syracuse animated the faces of everyone we passed, and I couldn’t help feeling buoyed amidst such energy and spirit. (213)

That Santiago’s impression of Harvard is not relegated to the architectural integrity of the historical buildings or to the historical significance of the region itself shouldn’t be surprising. What she takes away from the experience is the performative nature of the atmosphere; what she zeros in on is the jester, the griot, and the musician. In other words, what she sees is what she could become; she is in a borderlands where the community “did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life [where] the religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined” (Borderlands 88). This encounter with Harvard Square and all its artistic intricacies provides an opportunity for Santiago to remember what it is like to be a performer, but it accomplishes another purpose as well. It gives her the opportunity to witness a performance. Being on the giving end of a receiving audience is one thing, but being on the receiving end of a given performance is something entirely different. It works her brain in a new way; it opens up her mind to previously forgotten possibilities; it rejuvenates her soul. “It is an instant ‘sensing’” (Borderlands 60) that creeps up out of her unconscious mind, and before she can stop herself her lips betray her. The hidden Esmeralda had kicked out with both feet and bolted; standing on the steps of the library at Harvard she gives Chiquita a symbolic kick as if to get her out of the way. “I belong here,” Esmeralda tells Ulvi. She knows it, because she can
sense it, she can feel it. The epiphany that she has found her place is a transformative moment for her.

Education is a recurring theme in *The Turkish Lover* and is demonstrative of Santiago’s metaphorical dances with relationships. This time, however, rather than the relationship being with a person, it is with an institution of higher education. The importance of learning to speak English and to pursue an education is first instilled in her by her mother: “You have to learn English, graduate from high school, and find work in offices, not factories,” Mami tells her daughters. “So many humiliations, all because I didn’t get an education” (11). An education provides women with an opportunity to become self-governing, and to regain control of her life is at the forefront of Santiago’s journey. While supervising the coding department at Crouse Irving Memorial Hospital in Syracuse, Santiago/Essie is mentored by Marie, who is “the assistant director of personnel,” and she encourages Essie to “use that brain to change [her] life” (206, 208). What Essie is unable to verbalize at the time is explained by Santiago, the narrator, as she recounts the interaction with her mentor: “What I couldn’t explain to Marie was that the smart part of my brain turned off the minute I walked into the apartment high above the hills of Syracuse” (208, 209). In spite of her insecurities regarding her intelligence (she does, after all, help Ulvi write his master’s thesis and his doctoral dissertation), she applies to and is accepted at Harvard.

Santiago’s *mestiza* consciousness leads her to think that she had few options other than becoming a *jamona*, homemaker, or whore. Anzaldúa explains that “[f]or a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming autonomous persons. A very few of us” (39).
Santiago has had a taste of that fourth choice on several occasions: by learning to speak and write English at an accelerated rate, she was able to keep herself from being held back a grade when she arrived in New York; by getting good grades she was able to apply to and be accepted into the High School of Performing Arts; by wanting more for herself career-wise she attended Manhattan Community College and Texas Tech. Each step in her educational process provided her with certain freedoms and ways to construct her identities: in her command of the English language she was able to be free of the developmental student class; in her acceptance at the High School of Performing Arts she was free to travel across town on her own, she was free of the burden of household chores, and she was free of clothing restrictions because her “costumes” were meant for school performances; by attending the community college she was on her way to (almost) being free of her family and of being (almost) financially independent (until—of course—Ulvi came along and distracted her). Because Ulvi stays in Syracuse while she moves to Cambridge, Harvard represents another freedom for Santiago: freedom from Ulvi, a physical freedom that allows her to regain control of all her faculties, to “use that brain” of hers, and to see herself as she really is on a deeper level. Anzaldúa explains:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface […] a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world. (60)

Although it has been stifled by Ulvi, Santiago is one who possesses this sensitivity; it (re)surfaces when she comes into contact with the performance artists at Harvard. That she
belongs there is an obvious conclusion to an unasked question; it is intrinsic knowledge and awareness that her stage for the performance of self could be much bigger were she not sharing it with Ulvi. She takes in the sights and sounds and is remembering what it felt like to perform professionally. Her sensitivity is heightened when she is studying, practicing, and performing dance: “I didn’t ‘feel alive’ when measuring column inches for an ad in Microbiology News. I did when […] I practiced combinations and mudras, when every muscle in my body stretched and pulsed, when I entered the trancelike concentration required to perform the intricate story-dances of Bharata Natyam” (108). Her sensitivity, or the “instant ‘sensing,’” that she experiences on her impromptu visit to Harvard provides her with the deep-seated perception that she has found her tribe. The symbols presented to her that day in the form of the jester, griot, and musician spoke to her feelings, and what they said was, “You belong here. Can you feel it?”

LANGUAGE AND VOICE

It is not until Santiago attends Harvard that she is reunited with the Puerto Rican community from which she has been estranged. While exploring Boston upon her arrival, she encounters a group of Puerto Rican teenagers on the train “playfully pushing each other, laughing, speaking in exuberant Spanglish, and waving small Puerto Rican flags” (246). Her observation of them reminds her that she “missed the camaraderie of Spanglish, its scrambled rhythms amplifying the confusion and nostalgia of a displaced nation” (246). When she emerges from the subway she finds herself in the middle of a festive atmosphere and “a parade celebrating Puerto Rican culture” (247). The environment is symbolic to Esmeralda; it feels like a homecoming: “Everyone, it seemed, had a boom box blaring salsa, merengue, and in the younger groups, funk and soul. I couldn’t stop smiling, thrilled to be jumping easily from
Spanish to English, dancing barefoot in the grass, sharing a Sunday afternoon with these total
strangers who had welcomed me so warmly and memorably to Boston” (249).

Not only is Esmeralda reunited with her Puerto Rican community while at Harvard, she is
also reunited with her first love: dance. In addition to working and going to school, she finds
time for “ballroom dancing on weekends” (255), and then signs up for belly dance and classical
Indian dance classes. Establishing a life apart from Ulvi stirs mixed emotions in Esmeralda:
“Ulvi wasn’t here to observe, evaluate, or criticize. He could no longer choose my clothes, the
decorations in my apartment, the friends I made. It both excited and scared me” (252). Her sense
of independence is further complicated by her exposure to feminist ideologies at the “Women’s
Center in Inman Square” (257). While she is capable of empowering herself while Ulvi is not
around, she reflects that maintaining that control is not easy:

Putting what I was learning into practice, was tough, however, because feminist
theory didn’t address the emotional costs of equality. On paper what needed to
change was clear, but when Ulvi came to see me in Cambridge, or when I went to
him in Larchmont, it all became murky and hard to sort out. I felt like a
hypocrite, spouting feminist theory while I continued to be Ulvi’s Chiquita. (257-8)

Santiago admits that although her perspective of the world around her had broadened
considerably through her education and exposure to feminism, she “was not willing to give him
up, not when he was paying [her] rent and was a quick escape from the stresses of school” (267).

For her senior thesis at Harvard, Santiago’s mentor suggests that she write about the
“traditional dances of Puerto Rico”, because those dances are “closer to [her] own heritage”
(298); however, Esmeralda decides to craft a choreopoem based on the “Song of Songs” and
perform it as a Middle Eastern folk dance to the spoken word. In this process, she is able to incorporate her passion for classical Indian dance and Middle Eastern belly dance, and she is able to (re)create a text that most poignantly reflects the “real Esmeralda.” As a *mestiza* Santiago is able to draw upon multiple languages when constructing the text for her choreopoem. Like many Latina writers, Santiago has the benefit of a dual lexicon to construct her narrative. Multiple languages, readily available, have advantages in that when one vocabulary fails to provide the necessary word to convey a thought, feeling, emotion, or idea, the other is close at hand. Anzuldua feels that individuals are intrinsically linked to their identity through their language: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (81). She explains that for Chicanas, speaking both English and Spanish can produce “several variants” (81) of “secret language[s]” which, in her culture, include “slang English,” “Standard Mexican Spanish,” and “Tex-Mex” (77). The “secret languages” that Anzaldúa is referring to are born out of necessity depending upon with whom she is communicating and in what geographical location the communication takes place. Santiago, however, “spoke Brooklyn English with a Puerto Rican accent” while an adolescent in New York City (AAW 67-68), and like Anzaldúa she interweaves Spanish words into her text without explanation or clarification. For example, in *The Turkish Lover*, Santiago discusses what her female relatives taught her about being “a *nena puertorriqueña decente*” (6) and refers to Ulvi as “el hombre que yo amo” (2), the man that I love. She weaves Spanish into her storytelling without always the benefit of translation. This metaphorical dance with language gives Latina writers like Anzaldúa and Santiago a unique voice; the mixing of codes produces a hybrid rich in linguistic substance. Juan Flores explains that:
[r]emembering in Puerto Rican today inherently involves a dual vision, a communication where languages bifurcate and recombine. Puerto Rican memories are mixed-code memories [and] a symbiosis between language and place, and between identity and memory, is especially salient today. Spanish, English, Spanglish, all in the plural and in lowercase, make for an abundant reservoir of expressive codes with which to relate (to) the past. (52, 57)

As a true mestiza, Santiago makes no apologies for her linguistic dance between her native and acquired languages; she embraces both and uses them interchangeably in her memoir.

Esmeralda “read every version of the “Song of Songs” [she] could find in English, Spanish, and French” (298). She creates her own “secret language” by combining several versions of the poem until she rewrites the poem in its entirety. Her process suggests a metaphorical dance between languages, one in which she is able to move fluidly and freely because of her borderland status. She does not feel compelled to pay homage to any one of the three languages from which she chooses to translate nor does she feel compelled to select any version in its entirety. The act of redacting the text for the choreopoem and the performance itself becomes a cathartic experience for Santiago: “Each version that I read had a different rhythm and use of language, but none in its entirety had the music I heard in my head. I combined the versions into one script, which meant taking verses or phrases from one translation, attaching them to another, and simplifying or enhancing some of the language” (305). That Santiago can re-create the “Song of Songs” in a linguistic “secret language” is essential to her development, because the mestiza needs “a language which [she] can connect [her] identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to [herself]” (Borderlands 77).
Santiago’s desire to represent the poem as it relates to her experience is not confined to
the meaning of the poem; the rhythm of the words become as important as the words themselves. Anzaldúa describes her writing process this way: “Picking out images from my soul’s eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hand” (93). As Esmeralda (re)constructs the poem, she fashions a text that is representative of her authentic self, because she is able to choose text that she feels is most representative of Esmeralda. According to Anzaldúa, for a *mestiza* “[h]er first step is to take inventory […] Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? […] *Pero es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*” (104). Santiago’s choreopem provides a platform from which she can explore what she has inherited from her family and culture, what skills she has acquired on her own, and what limitations have been imposed upon her by Ulvi, leading her to another kind of subjectivity. It further allows her to take inventory of the fact that while Ulvi placed considerable constraints upon her mind and body, he also contributed to the construction of her identity by acting as her protector and teacher. Santiago explains it this way: “Ulvi’s presence had felt like a giant mollusk from within whose shell I was emerging. He believed I was his creation, but I had created myself under his protection, not in his image […] I felt the philosophical distance that separated us. He sought to pretend in order to become. I sought to be and leave pretense behind” (315). This process of taking inventory allows her to put her personal experience into perspective: words become rhythms, rhythms reflect emotions, emotions produce movement. Santiago explains:
But the ‘Song of Songs’ was more than my thesis. It was how I explored and conflated my interests, skills, worries, and concerns. I researched, interpreted, wrote, designed, directed, choreographed, and performed one of the most beloved and well-known poems ever written. Each performance explored and expressed themes of race (‘I am black but comely, ye daughters of Jerusalem…look not upon be because I am black’); love, passion (‘Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one look from thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck’); loneliness, longing (‘By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not’); nostalgia, power and powerlessness (‘The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me’); and alienation from culture, family and lover. It was as close to a biography as I could come. (314)

Hélène Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” contends that “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies […] Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (1454). Cixous encourages women to write about themselves and their bodies and to place themselves into their own world, not the world constructed for them by patriarchal ideals. Santiago (re)writes her self through the act of writing her memoir. More specifically, by telling her story with her body—with dance—through the choreopoem, Santiago’s protagonist progresses to a more solid understanding of herself. By (re)writing the choreopoem she “writes back” at the identities imposed upon her, and in doing so she takes her storytelling to another level: she creates “her own movement” out of it. Writing
words on paper is not sufficient enough for Esmeralda to express her selves; she feels compelled to put her whole body into her storytelling.

By (re)creating her historical past, she is looking back at her life through the poem and is finally able to express her frustrations regarding ethnicity, desire, authority, and loss; reconstructing the poem gives her the opportunity to “unspeak” the wrongs committed against her by her family and Ulvi, and to voice and validate her victimization and experiences. According to Homi K. Bhabha, to “unspeak” has a dual purpose; it is “both to release from erasure and repression and to reconstruct, reinscribe the elements of the known” (World 450). Her choreopoem allows her to liberate her feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and subjugation regarding her race, her relationships, and her family and culture.; it gives her the opportunity to reflect upon her family’s expectations of her as a nena puertorriqueña decente, of her culture’s suppression of women, and Ulvi’s domination and control over her. Cixous says that “[i]t is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her—by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self” (1456). Through the choreopoem, Esmeralda releases the “old” Negi, the “old” Chiquita and promenades in the “new” Esmeralda who vibrates with multiple identities. By releasing her past through the choreopoem and combining it with movement, Esmeralda is able to reconceptualize a negative past by turning it into a positive present and future.

The artistic construction of the choreopoem takes on a functional meaning for Santiago: “With each line my heart expanded, my skin tingled and I was filled with immense happiness. The language was exquisite. Even the words I couldn’t understand moved me to a joy so deep
that I didn’t want to stop reading, didn’t want to return to a life where there were no Shepherds and no Daughters of Jerusalem, no mountains of myrrh or hills of frankincense, no comforting with apples” (298). Like the shaman Anzaldúa refers to in Borderlands, Santiago creates a performance that tightly knits together “the religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art” (Borderlands 88). The process of preparing for and the performance of the choreopoem are so influential for Santiago that “[a]fter the last note of the last performance, [she] was a different person” (315). The experience transforms her from the repressed Chiquita into the more authentic Esmeralda. She is no longer suppressed by her family and Ulvi; she is expressing a reincarnation of her selves. Cixous says: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (1457). Santiago’s body is no longer controlled and as a result she finds her voice and is able to perform a re-embodiment of Esmeralda, an Esmeralda who possesses a new subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

Lourdes Torres explains that “Latina autobiographers do not create a monolithic self, but rather present the construction of the self as a member of multiple oppressed groups, whose political identity can never be divorced from her conditions” (278). The “multiple oppressed groups” that have influenced Santiago’s identity are Woman, Latina, Puerto Rican, Black, and Taíno. Santiago’s racial identity is complex, which lends its own uniqueness to her narratives. Santiago is aware that, while the name Negrita was given to her by people who love her, it is less than flattering. Anzaldúa points out that “culture forms our beliefs [so] we perceive the version of reality that it communicates” and that in Latin and American cultures “the dark skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage” (44). Esmeralda
rejects these perceptions of the dark-skinned woman, choosing instead to celebrate her diversity and multiplicity through writing, storytelling, and dance: “She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of” (Borderlands 104).

In the same fashion that Santiago uses a “secret language” to construct the text for her choreopoem, she also creates a “secret body language” for the movement of it, one in which she is able to combine cultures and mix exotic forms of dance. Through the construction of her performance and by adding movement to her writing and her storytelling:

[s]he doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she’s saying, because she doesn’t deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. (Cixous 1458)

Esmeralda’s decision to perform to poetry is representative of the manner in which men and women communicate; they do so not only through their language but through their bodies as well: “In performance, from the moment I lit the flame upon my fingers until the last note of Rampi Rampi and the final clink of my zills, I was as vulnerable as an exposed heart […] Each word of the Song of Songs, each mudra, each step, each jingle of my ankle bells was a bit of Esmeralda, emerging” (314). For Esmeralda, the dance becomes just as expressive as the words, because she is able to combine classical Indian dance with Middle Eastern belly dance, creating a hybrid that she simply refers to as a “Middle Eastern folk dance” (313). She chooses to call her
performance a Middle Eastern folk dance, because her Kathak Indian dance instructor is appalled that she would combine the two dance forms and that she is dancing in public without his permission, because “it is the guru who determines when the student is ready to perform in public […] not the student” (307). By claiming the dance for herself she resists her instructor’s hegemonic attitudes; she is no longer willing to allow a man to control her body and subsequently her dance becomes a political movement as well as an artistic one.

Santiago’s relationship with Ulvi at the beginning of her testimonio is constricting and confining; she allows him to take control of her body, money, and mind. Throughout her journey, she is able to put this unbalanced relationship into a clearer perspective. In looking back on her involvement with Ulvi, Santiago is—at times—critical of her own behavior, expressing disappointment at her younger self for allowing the relationship to carry on for seven years. However, in retrospect, she can see that while Ulvi stifled her development most of the time he also provided a certain amount of protection for her. Ironically, it is through helping him with his master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation that she realizes she is capable of attaining a higher education for herself. In addition to graduating magna cum laude from Harvard in 1976 she also received a Master of Fine Arts in Fiction Writing from Sarah Lawrence College in 1992. Her interaction with Ulvi taught her that while she is susceptible to vulnerability in a relationship, she is also capable of maintaining her own autonomy.

In The Turkish Lover, Esmeralda Santiago journeys into a complex time and space where the (re)presentation of her multiple subjectivities are interwoven with her love and practice of various forms of dance. For Santiago, like many Latina writers, the boundaries governing this (re)presentation are blurred and—at times—ambiguous. What Santiago demonstrates in her testimonio is that she is a true mestiza, and that she values her borderland status, finding
liberation rather than confinement within its framework. She is able to construct a stronger, more empowered Esmeralda. Santiago, in her search for her own authentic self:

adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Desconstruct, construct. She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small “I” into the total Self. (Borderlands 104-5)


