

Review:

Esmeralda Santiago. *Conquistadora*.
(Vintage, 2011)

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From 2007-2009, I designed and led an oral history project focused on gathering the stories of recent immigrants to Collin County, Texas. Students in my first-year writing courses learned interviewing techniques before gathering stories from local volunteers. We built an archive of interviews that the students then used to connect the act of preserving narrative to civic work. We discussed oral storytelling as an act of public rhetoric and how further interpreting these texts through writing reveals the lived experiences of subaltern voices. Students did not have to go far to find these voices, both within their own families and the community. Many returned from their interviews with unexpected insights. For example, nothing could have adequately prepared one of my students for a moment during an interview with a Zambian immigrant. The man asserted that what Americans don't understand is that but for the Atlantic ocean, the entire population of Zambia would be on its feet walking towards the U.S. The image of that

mass migration was a clarifying moment that focused the student's writing for the rest of the semester. What stories had this man left behind, my student wrote, that might possibly never be heard? Who could tell those stories? Through this work, students began to see their writing as civic work and preservation.

One text that could have provided my student with a model of recovering lost voices is Esmeralda Santiago's 2011 novel *Conquistadora*. Set in mid-19th century Puerto Rico, *Conquistadora* marks a significant turn in Santiago's writing career. Her previous books, *When I was Puerto Rican*, *Almost a Woman*, and the *Turkish Lover* explore immigration, identity, and abusive relationships through nonfiction memoir. *Conquistadora*, on the other hand, ventures into historical fiction.

Based on nearly a decade of research, Santiago creates a sweeping epic of life on Hacienda Los Gemelos, a mid-19th century Puerto Rican sugar plantation. The central character Ana becomes the mistress of Los Gemelos after being captivated by the journals of her conquistador ancestor. Rather than just focusing on the twists and turns that take Ana from Spain to Puerto Rico, however, Santiago develops Ana's story by weaving the lives of the plantation slaves into the narrative. Imagining their stories before their arrival at Los Gemelos and tying their fate to Ana's once there gives voice to the subaltern while also raising important questions about recovering lost voices. Through creating this portrait of a working sugar plantation in 1850s Puerto Rico, Santiago lays claim to the project of recovery as a descendent of slaves herself.

In Santiago's capable hands, Ana as conquistadora becomes the perfect vehicle for creating a complex heroine and recovering the lost voices of enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico. Ana realizes early that she craves adventure and freedom from stifling formal Spanish society. To make her wishes come true, she marries Ramon Mendoza Sanchez, who has a twin brother, Innocente. The twins stand to inherit los Gemelos, and Ana convinces them to move to Puerto Rico to be involved in the day-to-day affairs of the estate. Once there, the twins take advantage of the fact that Ana cannot easily tell them apart, so they take turns sharing her bed and her affections. Ana also

quickly discovers that she knows more about directing the business of the plantation than Ramon or Innocente. The slaves catch on to this evolving dynamic as their daily duties put them in close proximity to the three people in charge. As the relationship between Ana and the brothers intensifies, the slaves take notice and quickly begin to realize that their own fates are entwined with Ana and the twins.

While the soapy start to the novel makes it seem that the plot will follow a conventional bodice-ripper arc, Santiago subverts reader and genre expectations by developing details about the living quarters, work duties, and the histories for several of the key workers on whose lives Ana's dream of land ownership relies. Santiago doesn't shy away from the human cost of Ana's fascination. As Santiago connects the slaves' lived experiences to class hierarchies and the hidden slave trade in the islands, Puerto Rico's slavery history figures prominently in these background stories. Several of the slaves arrive at los Gemelos through kidnapping and deceit. For example, Ana's personal maid Flora is kidnapped from Africa and sold and transferred between several Caribbean islands before finally arriving in Puerto Rico. Flora, sensing discord between Ana and the brothers, becomes Ana's comforter and caretaker. But her placement between the three eventually leads to her involvement in the breakdown of Ramon and Ana's marriage. The disruption in the marriage is thus intricately connected to the disruption of Flora's life in getting to Los Gemelos.

Another key character is Siña Damita, the midwife of the plantation who delivers the slaves' babies as well as the children Ramon and Innocente father with the slaves. When Ana refuses to travel a day away to see a doctor to have her own baby, Siña Damita delivers Miguel. As midwife to so many children, Siña Damita's story intersects with many of the slaves on the plantation. It is her deep love for her own children however, that eventually leads her into terrible peril when her son commits a murder while trying to escape. His death at the hands of the slaveowners nearly leads to her own. She survives, although she becomes one of the first casualties of the cholera epidemic of 1856. The epidemic wreaks a terrible toll on the workers and families at los Gemelos, and Santiago doesn't spare readers the terrifying details of the devastation. Although not all of the slaves are as richly drawn as others, Santiago excels at suggesting

their full potential as artists, healers, and caregivers in their capacities on the plantation. These deeply felt portraits of slave existence force the reader to confront what the slaves' lives could have been if each were left to fully explore their complete human potential.

Reviews of the novel in the popular press tend to elide the richness of the slave stories and instead focus on Ana's complexity as a main character. Partly, this is because Santiago does not romanticize Ana. Although Ana shows glimpses of being sympathetic to the lives of her slaves, she never makes a full turn towards humanizing them through emancipation even though slavery has long been outlawed in Europe and nearly finished in the U.S. Reviews also tend to highlight Santiago's turn toward historical fiction as a means of creating a strong female plantation mistress. In doing so, the nearest genre example becomes Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind* (a comparison Santiago strongly resists). In an interview for the Brooklyn Public Library series "Gotham: Writers in the City," Leonard Lopate asks Santiago if the process of writing historical fiction "which is inventing things" differs from writing memoir, "which is writing about real life" (Santiago). Without hesitation, she connects both projects, since both forms of storytelling spring from the same desire to hear the stories no one tells. For Santiago, that means creating her ancestors' stories through the slaves' characters.

With *Conquistadora*, Santiago moves to reclaim historical fiction for the project of recovering lost voices. Although memoir and oral history interviews provide strong first-person possibilities for students to understand experiences outside of their own, fiction still remains one of the most generative vehicles for imagining lost and untold stories. *Conquistadora* further suggests that historical fiction may be the genre best suited for this type of recovery work. Santiago here assembles a vast and complex body of research into a coherent and understandable story. In doing so, she directly suggests that lost voices must still be imagined in order for the project of recovery to continue. By closely examining her carefully wrought narrative that caps a decade of diverse research, students could be guided through unpacking the possibilities of recovery work that historical fiction makes possible. My archive project would have greatly benefited from student engagement with *Conquistadora*. Santiago's strong

correlation of the slaves' imagined lives entwined with the history of slavery and sugar production in late 19th century Puerto Rico has resonance for projects that seek to recover stories *and* further imagine the ones that remain untold.

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