

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

When I Was Puerto Rican

by Esmeralda Santiago

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Note to Teacher

Esmeralda Santiago, whose nickname throughout the book is “Negi.” wrote this memoir because she “...wanted to get back to that feeling of Puertoricanness...” she had before moving to the United States. It is the real-life “coming of age” story of a unique and courageous young woman. Most of the memoir is set in the poor but beautiful Puerto Rican countryside. Santiago describes what it is like to be Puerto Rican, the conflicts between her parents, and the challenges she faces as an immigrant in New York City.

There are many Spanish words in the story, but they are either translated in the text of the memoir or they are defined in the glossary. The vocabulary level is appropriate for junior high or high school level students. Some of the subject matter deals with Negi’s sexual development and her growing awareness of the complex relationships between men and women. However, these sensitive topics are handled maturely, carefully, and tastefully, without vulgarity. The sexuality is primarily from a point of view of the innocence and ignorance of childhood, but care should be used when these incidents are encountered. A few instances of strong profanity, both Spanish and English, and incidents related to personal hygiene occur in the book also.

When I Was Puerto Rican is an inspirational story of a strong, young woman, who overcomes her humble beginnings.

All references come from the Da Capo Press edition of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, copyright 1993.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss what the following may represent in the story: the guava, ironing, Marilyn Monroe.
2. recognize the following metaphors in the story: the bush without flowers as a metaphor for Negi on the threshold of adolescence; the description of the American and Puerto Rican fruit as a metaphors for Negi's search for her cultural identity.
3. discuss how the proverb at the beginning of many chapters relates to the incidents in the chapter.
4. contrast Negi's life in Puerto Rico with her life in New York City; consider the differences in housing, food, education, and family/neighborhood support.
5. understand the meanings of the following Puerto Rican words; discuss the ways they help Santiago illustrate her "Puertoricanness."
 - jíbaro
 - dignidad
 - jamonas
6. write a character sketch of Mami including her relationship with Negi, Mami's dreams for her children's futures, her decision to go to work, and Mami's decision to move to New York City.
7. discuss to what extent this story is a coming of age novel, including Negi's changing relationship with her parents, her developing romantic interests, her goals for the future, and the physical/emotional changes of adolescence.
8. comment on the roles men and women have in Puerto Rican society.
9. define vocabulary words from the story.
10. discuss the ways Negi's relationship with Papi changes after the family relocates to New York City.
11. cite incidents from the story to illustrate Negi's courage, intelligence, sensitivity, and curiosity.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What might the guava represent in this story?
2. List three good things about Negi's home in Macún. In what ways is her home different from a typical American home?
3. Why do you think Negi in her early years seems to prefer Papi to her mother?
4. Define "jíbaro." Why does Mami tell Negi not to be one?
5. In what sense is Papi a *sinvergüenza*?
6. What is the difference between *dignidad* for men, women, and children?
7. Relate the significance of the following chapter titles: *Fighting Naked*, *Someone is Coming to Take Your Lap*, and *Why Women Remain Jamona*.
8. Compare Negi's home in Macún with her home in Santurce. Consider the safety, freedom, education, and quality of life each home offers.
9. Briefly describe a typical Christmas celebration in Puerto Rico.
10. Why do you think Negi asks Papi for his definition of a sin? What does he answer?
11. In what ways is Don Berto's *velorio* (wake) similar to a typical American funeral?
12. What is Negi's definition of a soul? In what way does her definition of a soul differ from Papi's definition?
13. Briefly describe the significance in Puerto Rican society for each of the following: the first spring rain, a dead baby's eyes, eating pineapples, a large forehead, a child striking a mother.
14. Define imperialism. Why do some Puerto Ricans in this book believe America is guilty of imperialism?
15. Why does Tata's letter upset Negi?
16. List five adjectives to describe Negi's character. Cite an incident from the story supporting each adjective you select. For example, Negi is jealous when she thinks about Jenny.

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Prologue: How to Eat a Guava

VOCABULARY

frond – a palm leaf
guava – an edible fruit

“The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet.”

1. What might the guava represent to the narrator of this story? What literary term is used in the quotation above?

2. What can you infer from the above quote? What contrasts are apparent?

3. List three adjectives the narrator uses to describe how she feels when she eats a guava.

6. Why do you think Negi is glad the food served at the community center is not tasty?

7. For what reason does Mami insist that Negi rewrite Tata a thank you letter? How does Negi feel about rewriting the letter?

8. Relate an incident from this story that illustrates Negi's strength and fighting spirit.

9. Point out the ways the proverb at the beginning of the chapter relates to the incidents in the chapter. "What doesn't kill you, makes you fat."

***Casi Señorita* [Almost a Young Lady]**

VOCABULARY

- affable** – pleasant, friendly
- cilantro** – an herb used in Latin American cooking
- delirious** – wildly excited
- ecstatic** – overpowered by emotion, joy, or passion
- euphemism** – substituting a milder word or phrase for one that might be offensive or too harsh; two examples are “passed away” for “died” and “previously owned” for “used.”
- exuberance** – high spirits
- impropriety** – acting improperly
- ingenuousness** – innocence; openness
- ingratiated** – bringing oneself into another’s good favor by conscious effort
- opulent** – luxurious
- precocious** – maturity beyond what is normal for the age

1. Why is Negi unable or unwilling to join Don Joaquín’s congregation when they work themselves into a frenzy of repentance and ecstasy?

2. For what reasons does Mami object to Negi’s piano lessons? Is she proven to be right?

3. What evidence is there in this chapter that Negi is impulsive and capable of breaking the rules?
