

## THE OTHER IN ME: THE “IN-BETWEEN” IDENTITIES OF TWO IMMIGRANT AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

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This paper looks at how two immigrant autobiographies can be read and understood from a post-colonial perspective. Emphasis is placed on the theoretical framework of Postcolonial Studies and how the presence of a hegemonic “other” can influence the formation of identity. More specifically, I will show how the culture of the “colonizer” is internalized and how the two authors assimilate the cultural dominant before immigrating.

**Keywords:** Class, Immigration, In-between Identity, Language, Militarization, Postcolonialism, Race

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Este texto visa analisar duas autobiografias imigrantes numa perspectiva pós-colonial, com especial incidência no enquadramento teórico dos Estudos Pós-coloniais. Tenta-se mostrar o modo como a presença de um «outro» hegemónico pode influenciar a formação identitária e, neste caso específico, como a cultura do «colonizador» é interiorizada e os dois autores assimilam a cultura dominante antes de imigrarem.

**Palavras-chave:** Classe, Imigração, Por Entre Identidade, Língua, Militarização, Pós-colonialismo, Raça

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### Introduction

Postcolonialism has been used in a broad sense to include all cultures that have by some means suffered the influence of an imperial process.<sup>1</sup> This covers a wide gamut beginning with the act of colonization and ending with the current day problems and preoccupations which resulted from the violent encounter between cultures (Ashcroft, Gareth and Tiffin 2002, 2). One such problem, as discussed by Albert Memmi, is how the “colonized” identify themselves and their place in the society of “other men”. These “other men” could be either “colonials”, “colonizers” or “colonialists” but they shall be referred to here as mere “others” (1991, 10).<sup>2</sup> The main focus of this essay, therefore, will

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1 According to Ania Loomba, “the term ‘postcolonialism’ has become so heterogeneous and diffuse that it is impossible to satisfactorily describe what its study might entail” (Loomba 1998, xii). This being the case, post-colonialism here is to be used as what Ashcroft, Gareth and Tiffin (2002) have called a “reading strategy” (201).

2 The use of the term other (small o) in this discussion will not refer to the process of identification in which the “subject recognizes itself in its own image” as defined by Lacan (1996), but rather on how a particular

rely on the encounter with this “other” in two immigrant autobiographies, Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) and Francisco Cota Fagundes’s *Hard Knocks: An Azorean-American Odyssey* (2000). It will also address the ensuing complexities that led up to the creation of these authors’ identity within the narratives. Although these two writers are from two geographically divergent locations, Esmeralda being from Puerto Rico and Francisco from Terceira (in the Azores), their works demonstrate obvious similarities insofar as they revolve around notions of identity and how that identity has been shaped by an encounter with an “other”.<sup>3</sup>

The specific and complex problem of identity and identity formation in a postcolonial context will delineate the starting point of our discussion. It will look at how the foregrounding forces that create a person’s identity took shape within a national perspective, either in Puerto Rico or the Azores, with the presence of this American “other”. Furthermore, it will present how these identities changed or not with the process of immigration. However, we still need to ask if the signs are there for us to consider these two autobiographies as postcolonial: whether through the appropriation or negation of American culture; through the importance of skin color and its explicit connection to social status; or even through the manifestation of power associated with language. I shall attempt to highlight the undeniable link between the imperial project / empire – the USA and its “colonies” – and how that contact had some consequence on these authors’ identity formation before they immigrated.

### Severed Identities

Stets and Burke state in both identity theory and social identity theory that “the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (2000, 224). It is hence through the processes of self-categorization that an identity is formed. Applying these two theories to what Esmeralda and Francisco go through in the narratives, we could then say that their identity is formed through a social comparison process whereby they categorize themselves as either being similar to the “in-group” or different from “out-group members”, and where they are assigned particular roles within that relationship. However, these roles have to be negotiated and redefined when the immigrant society and social identity is frail or called into question because of the invading or subsequent constant presence of an American “other” in their lives.

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subject constructs his identity by addressing, confronting, and interacting with another speaking subject (Fuss 1994, 21).

3 Throughout this essay the conceptual formulation of identity will also be focused on what Edward Said has defined as a requirement for its construction. He asserts in his book, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*: “The construction of identity – [...] – involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us.’ Each age and society re-creates its ‘Others.’ Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions of all societies” (1995, 332).

## The Other in Me: The “In-Between” Identities of Two Immigrant Autobiographers

By looking at events or life experiences that made a specific contribution to the formation of a person’s identity, I have asked who Esmeralda and Francisco are and how they came to identify themselves. Consider these authors’ titles, Esmeralda’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) and Francisco’s *Hard Knocks: An Azorean-American Odyssey* (2000). They point to a fissure or a division as an outcome of their difficult separation from their land of origin. Esmeralda’s use of the past simple tense in the title implies that her being Puerto Rican has indeed ended, bestowing upon her a new and yet expected hybrid identity. Her poignant declaration clearly demonstrates how immigration led to the erasure of her Puerto Rican self: “For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican *jibara* who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting” (1993, 209). Francisco’s usage of the “Azorean-American” in his title also identifies, through the hyphen, a breach between two separate cultures that are, simultaneously, linked. These two titles therefore express displacement as it shows how the authors become in one way or another divided from their homeland and how they come to identify themselves through the process of immigration.

Division and displacement are some of the words used by Homi Bhabha (1994, 42-44) which describe a reading of Fanon’s *White Masks, Black Skins*. Indeed, the title of this work permits a discussion of an assured doubling which is also evident in Esmeralda and Francisco. The outer mask versus the inner skin, or if one prefers, the dualism between white master and black slave entailed with the colonial experience. This division is not limited by or in any form restricted to a simple dichotomy or bipolarization of two separate worlds, based on historical decrees of superiority or spheres of power, even if identity is tied to the stance of power and powerlessness. Rather, it is aligned with the displacement that occurs not only in a geographic sense or in a historical or socio-cultural context, but even more so in a psychological one where the problematic of identification is dealt with. Hence displacement, which is here correlated to division or hybridity, does not necessarily have to be considered only in terms of movement or travel or be a by-product of it, because for Esmeralda and Francisco it can also be defined as being caught between resistance and assimilation, or a kind of mixing before immigrating. Both protagonists can be seen as being divided between two cultures before they immigrate because they attempt to acquire a sense of belonging or a definition of the self as they cope with encountering this “other”.

So, how does an individual experience a loss or diffusion of identity before he or she begins searching for one? The first necessary condition based on the experience of psychoanalysts, and considered by Robert Carlyle Beyer is that an “individual who has lost his identity lives at a time when his values cease to correspond to the realities of his society. He suffers from the discrepancy without understanding it. He is confused and feels *alone*” (1968, 346, emphasis mine). Feeling alone is linked to the notion of abandonment felt by both Santiago and Fagundes. Esmeralda feels as though she is being abandoned by her mother and/or father several times in her childhood. Examples arise from the several trips that “Mami” takes to New York with Esmeralda’s younger brother, Raymond, to

treat his foot after a serious accident. As she recalls: “Mami was probably planning to stay in New York and leave us in Puerto Rico. Maybe she had given us away, the way people who couldn’t take care of their kids did” (Santiago 1993, 167). Francisco himself feels this sense of being abandoned from the moment he is “handed” to his godparents at the tender age of 11 months. The second paragraph of his memoir begins in the following manner:

In the eleventh month of life, I was handed to my godparents, childless neighbors of ours who offered to take care of me while my mother, amidst the dire poverty that haunted my parents until many years later, took care of my two-year old brother, whom she still breast fed, and prepared herself for the birth of a third child, born two months later. (2000, 13)

Both of these experiences relate to what Frantz Fanon has considered as being the “abandonment neurosis” which creates “anguish” and results in “aggression” and the “devaluation of self” (1967, 72-3). Although Fanon’s argument focuses on the colonial context and race, it is pertinent to refer to the anguish and the devaluation of self here in relation to the two protagonists. Most of the encounters they have, either with family members, friends, or prospective significant others, are unsuccessful because of an “inferiority complex”. This inferiority has been felt economically, as they are both from modest families who struggle to make ends meet, but it has also led to other unconscious conflicts of who they are. Not possessing a sense of belonging leads to a form of ambivalence that ultimately shapes their identity. Dealing with the act of abandonment was, for both Esmeralda and Francisco, of vital importance as they questioned and came to terms with who they were. Besides hindering on their own self-awareness and identification, which is not a mere process of mirroring but rather a complex knowing of other selves, it was also the cause for their failed love encounters.

### **Colonization through Militarization**

Our discussion thus far explored and questioned how people identify themselves with the “presence” of an “other” within their homeland before immigrating. Although we already have some inklings as to the causes of identity formation within these two immigrant autobiographies, a closer look into the histories of Puerto Rico and Terceira is in order because the experiences related by Esmeralda and Francisco, not only describe a strong hegemonic American presence which encompasses and, at certain levels partakes on all aspects of daily life, and which I believe should be seen as an imperial force, but also deal with the authors’ process of identification through that same overwhelming presence. If the American positioning in these two islands was different there can be no repudiation as to the economic, political and military importance herein.

Puerto Rico’s dual colonial history is well known, having been under Spanish rule and consequently under American authority after the Spanish-American war. Yet a particular example from Esmeralda might also be able to show how the American presence was felt and understood through the eyes of a child (and an adult). Esmeralda’s first conscious

## The Other in Me: The “In-Between” Identities of Two Immigrant Autobiographers

contact with the Americans occurs in the chapter she has titled “The American Invasion of Macún”. The so-called “invasion” occurs when Esmeralda is still quite young and the American presence is heightened under the pretext that a community center will be set up and that the people of the community will have to go there for meals.<sup>4</sup> Although the center was believed to be nothing more than a political ploy because of the coming election, it also served for Esmeralda to come to terms with the *gringos* and/ or “imperialists”. Instead of Esmeralda’s dawning puzzlement getting the best of her, she quickly gets an explanation from her father as to the reason behind America’s presence in Puerto Rico. In his words:

In 1898, *los Estados Unidos* invaded Puerto Rico, and we became their colony. A lot of Puerto Ricans don’t think that’s right. They call *Americanos* imperialists, which means they want to change our country and our culture to be like theirs. “Is that why they teach us English in school, so we can speak like them?” “Yes.” “Well, I’m not going to learn English so I don’t become American.” [...] “Being American is not just a language, Negrita, it’s a lot of other things. ... Like the food you eat... the music you listen to... the things you believe in.” [...] part of being an imperialist [is that] they expect us to do things their way, even in our country.” “That’s not fair.” (1993, 73)

Although this excerpt is of interest in relation to the importance that language plays out in all colonies, as well as the racial implication by the child’s name, *Negrita*, both of which will be examined later on, it is also explicit in the general disagreement professed by Esmeralda and her father as to the imperialist presence and the ensuing fears that “our culture” will evaporate and become “like theirs”.<sup>5</sup>

As Puerto Rico’s colonial designation and past becomes clear as well as Esmeralda’s need to negate the Americans as she becomes cognizant of “her” as opposed to “their” identity, what can be said about the Azores and Francisco? The Azores Islands were first discovered by the Portuguese in the early 1400s, which can be understood as the first wave of settlement. Nonetheless during the last century, at the end of World War II when European countries like France and Britain had still been the great colonizers, colonialism/imperialism had clearly come under the guise of a new hegemonic power, America.

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4 An example of this reads: “We were all to go to the centro comunal before school to get breakfast, provided by the Estado Libre Asociado, or Free Associated State, which was the official name for Puerto Rico in the Estados Unidos, or in English, the Jun-ited Estates of America” (1993, 64). This passage is also an indication of the coming hybrid language used in her autobiography. According to Bart Moore-Gilbert the hybridizing of language is crucial not only for the formation of subjectivity, but also in the constitution of an “ideological I” which uses such features to arrive at a coherent sense of self (2009, xxiii).

5 This is particularly important because as Maria Szadziuk writes, “North American culture transformed Negi’s life in Puerto Rico because its presence was alternately incongruous (talks on proper nutrition without taking the local food staples into account); intrusive (the emblematic powdered milk which proves indigestible for the child); alluring (clothes sent by a grandmother from New York); and indispensable (effective treatment for Negi’s little brother’s foot)” (1999, 6).

The United States did not directly “invade” the islands at that point in time as it had previously done decades before to many other countries. Nevertheless, by establishing an airbase on the island of Terceira, it can be argued that a more subtle form of “colonization” overtook its inhabitants.

Since the connection between a military base and colonialism may not be evident from the outset and in order to expand on this first question of how Puerto Rico and Terceira were “colonized” however differently and how that act affected the protagonists’ process of identification, let’s revert to an example of Francisco’s dreams and hopes which were directly associated to anything and everything American:

How excited we all were when we received notice in the mail to go to Praia and pick up a package from California! I particularly remember the pleasure I derived from smelling the clothes... I would bury my face in the clothes, close my eyes, and breathe America into my lungs! I grew up with the smell of America, the feel of America, the colors of America about me. This all contributed to my desire to go to America, one that was reinforced by my contacts with Americans on the base, the GIs at the golf course, and from an early-childhood trip during Christmas to the base. (2000, 41-2)

Cynthia Enloe (1993) would undoubtedly consider this a fine example of militarization. Militarization is the social-political process that continues to shape the lives of people in countries around the world. This is a process by which a person or a thing becomes dependent upon or controlled by the military or militaristic values and presumptions. Militarization normally begins at childhood and as she states it can shape a person’s thinking, how he or she chooses to live his or her daily life, and influences what these people aspire for their children or their society. Enloe further states that militarization “involves cultural as well as institutional, ideological, and economic transformations” (2000, 3). These transformations for all effects may be construed at an individual or personal level, where contact with a GI can lead to several forms of idealization or imagining of the military/American needs and presumptions as valuable and normal.

In this fashion the military not only becomes a visual colonial representation of authority but it is also the symbolic rendering of a certain status that a person could strive to attain. Lest some confusion persist, Francisco does not want to go into the Portuguese military and before actually immigrating he obtains military exemption thus avoiding military service and the war in Angola. The fear of being conscripted into the army re-surges as he is forced to present himself in America at the Selective Service office. However, this time he begins to see the American military service as a relief for it could resolve all of the existing uncertainties upon his future. More than a resolution it could also allow him to achieve the status that he has always sought after.<sup>6</sup> He illustrates:

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6 It is interesting to note how in this particular case Francisco makes a clear distinction between the statuses of the American colonizer as opposed to the Portuguese. The paradox is that if he were to serve in the Portuguese military he would play the role of the colonizer, whereas at this point in the narrative it seems that he identifies himself more as a colonized subject of the Americans. This is clearly juxtaposed to Esmeralda’s initial rejection of the colonizer’s presence, which is far from Francisco’s idealization. Again, I

## The Other in Me: The “In-Between” Identities of Two Immigrant Autobiographers

A thought occurred to me: could I be sent to Lajes, in Terceira? Could I be one of the Americans from the base? Play on the golf course like the Americans? Be an American in my own home town? What would Graça say if I ever went back as an American, not one of those fake Americans who were but Portuguese milkers in baggy pants who said “shoa” for “sure” and “tank you” for “thank you”, but a real American, who spoke perfect English, who wore a military uniform, who might even get to be an officer? (2000, 82-3)

Here the military offers a replay of that idealized status symbol detected by Francisco from a very early age. Moreover, it is an effective “other” that represents a sense of security also revealed as pride, worth and self-esteem. This is evidence of the presence of militarization in people’s lives which is not only believed but also accepted since militarization is capable of characterizing that which should be valued. Once more I argue that an ongoing colonialist activity has been comprised through the military expansion, administration or presence at the base in Terceira. This in turn motivates Francisco’s process of identification as the desire of the colonial subject to assume the image of the “other” emerges.<sup>7</sup>

### What’s in a Name?

Our identity is indisputably associated to the name we have or to the name we go by. For Esmeralda and Francisco it was more, however, about the nicknames they acquired or inherited that could be coupled to a racial or economic sense of inferiority. Esmeralda herself was dumbfounded when she discovered that she even had a nickname with a racial connotation, believing it instead to be her real name. She documents:

I thought I had no nickname until she [mother] told me my name wasn’t Negi but Esmeralda.  
“You’re named after your father’s sister, who is also your godmother. You know her as Titi Merín.”  
“Why does everyone call me Negi?”  
“Because when you were little you were so black, my mother said you were a *negrita*. And we all called you *Negrita*, and it got shortened to Negi.” (1993, 13)  
This dialogue continues a bit later on with:  
“So *Negi* means I’m black?”  
“It’s a sweet name because we love you, *Negrita*.” She hugged and kissed me.  
(13)

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believe that this initial difference between the two narratives is precisely linked to the concept of militarization, where Francisco can be considered a militarized subject and Esmeralda’s colonization results from a more economic/political infliction of the American authority.

7 This invariably relates to “the process of identification in the analytic of desire” as professed by Bhabha which contains three conditions: “First: to exist is to be called into being in relation to an Otherness, its look or locus. [...] Second: the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. [...] Finally, [...] the question of identification is [...] always the production of an ‘image’ of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (44-45).

Esmeralda's apparent acceptance that "we all have our official names, and then our nicknames, which are like secrets that only the people who love us use" (14), makes us conscious of the complexity between identity, a person's name and other issues of behavior.<sup>8</sup> For Esmeralda this is the commencement of a divided self that tells her that "each one of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who [...] was not" (14). Here a state of depersonalization, or colonial depersonalization, as referred to by Bhabha, is at the cause of the problematic of identification (1994, 41). At this instant, Esmeralda is being placed where she belongs, ceasing to become an individual who is known by her proper name to become a part of the collective where she is associated to the racial, ethnic or religious group that she is included in. Although the grandmother may have called her a *negrita* without any ill intent, the truth is that the physical appearance or skin that this name transmits came to shape how Esmeralda identified herself and she assumes this when writing a letter to her grandmother in New York: "I signed it Negi, which I considered to be my real name" (1993, 79).

If race and name attribution played a role in how Esmeralda identifies herself, so did the pejorative names that were used in reference to the poorer or minority classes of those from the countryside. One unconscious way that Esmeralda had of positioning herself against the American presence and the fear of becoming like "them" was through her initial self-identification as a *jibara*. This is shown when she writes, "I wanted to be a *jibara* more than anything in the world" (1993, 12). A *jibara*, by definition, is a Puerto Rican who inhabits the country side and who was "rewarded by a *life of independence* and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for its intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism" (12).<sup>9</sup> Although, these country dwellers were "mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect" (12), Esmeralda had every reason for wanting to be called one because family members, like her grandparents were said to be *jibaros*. Nonetheless, Esmeralda's mother tells her that she can't be a *jibara* because she was born in the city. More than that negation though, was the fact that the word *jibara* was looked down on by everyone and, in most cases, it was found offensive. Esmeralda feels this first hand once she is exposed to the harsh class differences demonstrative of her social status and particular accent which were remarkably apparent in the city she moves to:

In Santurce I had become what I wasn't in Macún. In Santurce a *jibara* was something no one wanted to be. I walked to and from school beside myself, watching the *jibara* girl with eyes cast down, the home-cut hair, the too large gestures and too loud voice, the feet unaccustomed to shoes. I let that girl walk home while I took in the sights of the city, the noise and colors, the music, the pungent smells of restaurants and car exhaust. (1993, 39)

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8 This goes along the lines of what Khatib has said in that "names are central to a person's identity and a person's identity seems critical to other aspects of behavior" (351).

9 Readers should also see the subversive tone used by Esmeralda as an example of her negation of anything American within her homeland. This can also be interpreted as the subaltern voice of a colonized woman being spoken through a child. Emphasis added.

## The Other in Me: The “In-Between” Identities of Two Immigrant Autobiographers

The duplicity of celebrating a people that everyone disdained serves here to intensify the inferiority felt by Esmeralda as well as the split of her identity into a more depersonalized self. Here we have to remember Stuart Hall’s designation of identity as a “constructed process rather than a given essence” (quoted in Loomba, 176). The acknowledgement that Esmeralda is different from the others in the city (as well as the Americans) is itself the structure that produces hybridity in the postcolonial discourse. However, this hybridity seems to be a characteristic of her inner as well as her outer self. Being internally split thus becomes a result of her feeling differentiated externally through class and location (her space as opposed to the “others” space) which is heightened through this example of name appropriation. This in turn reveals how repeated negations of identity affect people.<sup>10</sup>

Division between a private and a public self is also important for Francisco. He is afforded three names<sup>11</sup>: the official one (i.e. his public name, Francisco), the family one (or private nickname, Chico) and, after he has immigrated, the Americanized one, Frank. Apart from disclosing that he is displaced and has in one way lost his sense of belonging, this multiplicity of names demonstrates an internal division which is reinvented through his personal choice of name identification, resulting from his contact with the Americans back in Terceira. What Francisco wants to be called underlies the problem of identification where this demand becomes a response to various other questions of desire. For when Francisco was in California and had thought it “cool to Americanize” his name because “it was easier that way”<sup>12</sup>, he suddenly realizes and wishes at one point that “his name was still Chico” even though “it was too late to go back” (2000, 107). This can be understood as a clear example of his ensuing in-betweenness and his improbability of being able to go back. However, it clearly demonstrates as well his desire to overcome his “inferiority” status.

Francisco detested his “real” name ever since he came to America because it symbolized his ethnic (minority) origins. As Clarence Schettler has reasoned, people belonging to minority groups often learn through experience that having a foreign name can bring about certain prejudices (1942, 172). Schettler further states that in order to avoid a certain “judgement” placed upon a person because of their name that these people often

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10 Said states that “... no identity can ever exist by itself without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” (29).

11 Having three names, although complex, is better than being nameless or anonymous according to Lewis R. Gordon: “Namelessness is a mundane feature of the way in which we move through the social world” (36).

12 A viable explanation for this “it was easier that way” can be related to what has been written about two other Portuguese-American authors, Lawrence Oliver and Alfred Lewis, who also went through a name change. As José Suárez writes, “The name change by both Oliver and Lewis was in no way prompted by a desire to Americanize. It was their understanding that, in an America hostile to all that was foreign, it was foolish to call unnecessary attention to oneself in attempting to improve one’s socio-economic status” (27). Another example of how hostility to foreigners influenced name changes can be taken from Charles Reis Felix’s recent autobiography where he relates: “I was having my hair cut at Westwater’s Barber Shop on the corner of our street. Westwater was not his real name. Joe Alves was, but he had changed it to Westwater for business reasons” (31).

“decide that a new or false name is an effective mask for disguising themselves” (172). If changing your name is likened to preventing the propagation of specific prejudices, it is even more useful in demonstrating how a deeper evaluation of the self occurs. Notwithstanding, we must keep in mind that those who decide to translate their names are also changing their characters/identities. Concerning Francisco, his first name marked a cultural visibility that implied a difference. However, this difference is dependent upon who dreams or creeds it as such, meaning that Francisco is still abiding by the colonialist discourse.

### **In-between Difference and Similitude: Class and Race Revisited**

Directly tied to name difference and the question of inferiority, is also the dependence complex illustrated by Mannoni in his study about the Malagasies. As the study shows, “people are colonized because they suffer from an unresolved ‘dependence complex’ which leads them to revere their ancestors, and to transfer this reverence to their colonial masters” (quoted in Loomba 1998, 139). Memmi also believes that the colonized are completely dependent on the colonizer. In his point of view, the colonizer molds the character and dictates the conduct of the colonized (1991, ix). This dependence serves to force the colonized to impersonate the image the colonizer offers of himself. Under postcolonial theory, this mimicry emerges as a necessary condition for the continued identification of the colonized. The fact is that they attempt to imitate the colonizers and in so doing that imitation “repeatedly veers over into identification” (Fuss 1994, 25). More importantly, however, is that this dependence helps us to place our protagonists somewhere between difference and similitude since they are incapable of fully assuming the colonizers’ role and identity.

Mimesis can lead to a prescribed identification by the colonized as the “habits, clothing, food, [language and] architecture are closely copied” (Memmi 1991, 121). However, that identification can be countered by the concept of borderlands developed by Renato Rosaldo. As he affirms, in-betweenness “is one of the disturbances that erupts during border crossings” (1993, 29). We should keep in mind, nonetheless that in Francisco’s case it is a new type of in-betweenness which is somewhere trapped between assimilation and resistance. This in-betweenness can also be explained as a sort of limbo. As Rosaldo writes, “immigrants and socially mobile individuals appeared culturally invisible because they were no longer what they once were and not yet what they could become” (1993, 209). We can also understand this under Bhabha’s emphasis on “the failure of colonial discourses to produce stable and fixed identities”, suggesting “that cross-overs of various sorts of ‘hybridity’ and ‘ambivalence’ more adequately describe the dynamics of the colonial encounter” (quoted in Loomba, 105).

Another example that can contribute to this contention is that of the disturbance that occurred to Francisco once he immigrated to America when he realized that the Azorean standards of class were upheld. He states: “Although I had never had a chance to really find out before, American class barriers (compounded by ethnic and cultural ones) were proving to be as insurmountable as the old Azorean ones” (2000, 296). In comparison to

his Portuguese-American compatriots, he notes that “they enjoyed feeling superior to me, a mere greenhorn” (60). Such name calling clearly opposes the family’s private nickname for Francisco which denoted a sense of warmth and was aimed at creating a safe-haven, one that he should long for. However, the various public nicknames inherited by Francisco and his family members while in Terceira, such as “sweet potato”, were based on an economic sense of inferiority.<sup>13</sup>

What is utterly remarkable is the reality that his inferiority was also felt racially. Francisco had a “natural tawny color” (2000, 13) which seemed to symbolize his “low-born” status (37).<sup>14</sup> If, as Fanon writes, “inferiority has been felt economically” (1967, 43), and it is somehow equipped with the epidermal model, then it would be seen as “natural” that Francisco’s godmother would try to bleach him. He testifies:

To lighten my complexion, Godmother not only forced me to wear a straw hat in the summer but, every night, made me wash my face with urine, for Godmother had learned from someone that urine lightened the complexion. As far as she was concerned, *morenos* or dark-complexioned people were not well-bred or very attractive. Much to Godmother’s disappointment, the urine baths that I was forced to take for years did not help me in the least. (2000, 22)

This could lead to an array of questions as to why his godmother wanted to bleach him, such as: Did it have anything to do with Portugal’s own social situation and its unique colonial experience? Did she read or hear stories about the “savage” Africans that were being civilized by the great Portuguese Empire and did that mean that anyone of a darker complexion was uncivilized, unwanted or in some way alienated? Was that behavior an outcome of her own personal shame over the possibility that her beloved godchild/son would suffer in his social climb because of the shade of his skin?

Although we cannot forget the unique racial dynamics in Portugal resulting from the country’s own colonization period, one very plausible explanation to these questions can be taken from what has been put forward by Thomas Stephens. His study is more concerned with how “one relatively homogeneous immigrant group [the Portuguese] responds to ... language, culture, and ethnicity” (1989, 716). He is also quite clear in stating that “Azoreans in particular have been perennially derided for their low-class social standing in comparison to Continental Portuguese or Madeirans” (717). This sense of being, which was often equated to the classification of Azoreans as second-class citizens, is heightened by the racial inferences that Stephens alludes to. As he writes, “the problem is made more acute by the intervention of traditional racial factors, especially skin color or other phenotypic traits. The fact that many Azoreans and Cape Verdeans are dark-skinned, or Black by the American definition, has affected the social standing of

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13 In Francisco’s words: “My brothers and I inherited our family’s bad reputation in the village. Being poor, there was no chance that we would ever overcome that stigma” (2000, 18).

14 His “color” and ability to speak Spanish complicate the question of identity even more once he is mistaken for being a Mexican in California. He writes: “...even Mexicans often took me for one of them...” (2000, 206).

these groups within Portuguese societies, both on the European continent and elsewhere” (720). In the end, the godmother’s seemingly innocent or neutral act is in effect a social description that both “reinforced and produced ideologies that justified the imperialist project” (Rosaldo 1993, 42). In fact, it proves Fanon’s statement that “one is white above a certain financial level” (1967, 43) by highlighting the importance of achieving a higher social status or becoming just as worthy/valuable as the “colonizer” himself. In other words, it is no coincidence that racism should play such an important part in American colonialism regarding Esmeralda and Francisco because as Memmi states, “Racism sums up and symbolizes the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized” (1991, 69-70). And it must be remembered that this relationship is based on an “attempt of the colonized . . . to change his condition by changing his skin” meaning that “the first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model [the colonizer] and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him” (Memmi 1991, 120).

### **The Importance of Language**

If language is used by the West or by a colonial power to impose control or manipulate any given society in political, economic and cultural terms, then it can also be used by the “colonized” as a way of gaining respect, recognition and understanding from that world (and for himself). For Francisco learning the English language was not so much about understanding the Americans because it also meant “one of the few chances for a job . . . in the hope of working on the American air base in Terceira” (2000, 24). Perhaps equally important as getting the well-paid job at the base was the “social prestige” that such a job implied.<sup>15</sup> Mastery of the language here meant power and an entry ticket into the world of economic success, just as Fanon notes (see page 18). In this case, language possession, knowledge or education, along the lines of Fanon, intensifies the inferiority complex by creating a “retaining-wall” that is intended to keep things in their place, meaning divided between those who “belong” and those who don’t.

Language appropriation as a way of influencing identity formation, in other words, is seen as a way for the colonized to become a replica of the white man or the colonizer because he is then attempting to become the “other”. As Bhabha writes, “the colonized can only imitate” which is also clarified by the psychoanalyst Annie Reich: ‘It is imitation . . . when the child holds the newspaper *like* his father. It is identification when the child learns to read’ (Bhabha 1994, 61). If language can be viewed as the very essence of the self then it can also be viewed as a form of identity. But a problem persists because Esmeralda and Francisco have to be able to reconcile their two languages (the national and the colonizer’s) into a coherent identity. This is where the evolution of a private and public self becomes conditioned by language awareness and appropriation. As Memmi states, the school (or even private language study, as is the case for Francisco) is accountable for the creation of a certain duality because, “the teacher and school represents a

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15 This is true if we keep in mind the relationship between the concept of inferiority and the Portuguese spoken by Francisco. As Thomas Stephens writes: “The Azorean variety of Portuguese has thus suffered the stigma of inferiority, a patois of the worst sort” (717).

world which is too different from his family environment. In both cases, far from preparing the adolescent to find himself completely, school creates a permanent duality in him. The colonized is saved from illiteracy only to fall into linguistic dualism” (1991, 106). Although Francisco and Esmeralda see the possession of the English language as a tool that will allow them to climb the social ladder, it actually means having to partake in “two psychical and cultural realms”. According to Memmi these two worlds then come into conflict because they are conveyed by the “tongues” of the colonizer and the colonized (1991, 106-7). This type of linguistic ambiguity becomes the symbol and major cause for a cultural ambiguity which is directly associated to a hybrid identity.

For Esmeralda, the language aspect was a bit different and not seen so invitingly. The rules would change depending on the teachers she had in Puerto Rico. One example was Sra. Leona who “insisted on Spanish and refused to answer” when the children said “Mrs.” She believed this was a “bastardization of our language, which in Puerto Rico is Spanish” (1993, 173). Still, apart from the intricacies of language choice is the fact that education led to isolation and feelings of separateness which heightened the ever present feeling of abandonment for both protagonists. As has been already noted, at several points in their lives, they had felt abandoned by their families. One such example is when Francisco writes about being “handed” to his godparents. This feeling comes back to haunt him in the United States when given the chance to live at home he is met with “rejection” and asked not to do so (2000, 77).

Although this example could be tied to Fanon’s example of the abandonment neurosis, I believe it is more useful in connecting education and language to the concepts of difference, inferiority and hybridity. For Esmeralda “...school was also where I compared my family to others in the *barrio*” (1993, 31). And this comparison allowed for her to note her (inferior) difference. Much like Francisco, she is also in-between cultures when she immigrates as verified through her beginning to speak Spanglish, “a combination of English and Spanish in which we hopped from one language to the other depending on which word came first” (1993, 258). As she gets caught “between earth and sky, somewhere between Puerto Rico and New York” (1993, 214), she realizes that there has been a personality change that occurs with the adaptation of a new language. Such an adaptation, which includes her acceptance of the language and all of the cultural aspects that come along with it, implies that the construction of the “other” has shifted. In other words, both Esmeralda and Francisco become the other through a very arduous process when they immigrate by appropriating the language of the colonizer as their own.

## Conclusion

Although Marxist analysis would explain the economic structures and processes related to identity formation, and Race and Feminist Studies would do the same, not to mention the more recent Transnational and Migration Studies, I believe that the most fruitful tool in dealing with such questions of identity in these two autobiographies is the postcolonial. It is within this specific framework, of individuals who are “different” or at least are seen as such by an “other”, and whose connection to his/her birth place/nation is

somehow ruptured, that I have tried to look at the complex process of identity formation. Both protagonists are the result of an identity created within a national and transnational context.<sup>16</sup> For them there has been a mystification of the national boundary, turning it into an ambiguous or anonymous space that is neither private nor public, neither theirs nor the others'. If there has been a conscious preservation of elements of both cultures it is most certainly a result of the initial presence of the Americans in those two islands. However, their identity is also grounded or connected to one reality because in order to speak about identity, you need to look at the country where you are situated. It means dreaming or expressing oneself in one language or more, and writing in those same languages. It implies finding other ways of talking about people within national boundaries, who often enough do not know where to place themselves and can therefore feel isolated and alienated. It is, in other ways, the voicing of a life story that has resulted in a division, and has made one different from others.

The initial encounter has implied that tradition or culture is constantly changing, that it is not static or captive. In this fashion it should be an individual choice that permits people to deconstruct the hegemony of patriarchal, racial and sexist discourse derived from the colonial discourse. The border crossing experienced by both Esmeralda and Francisco has allowed for them to transcend differences, where people can tackle issues of identity without adhering to stereotypes and discrimination. This process perhaps entails claiming both territories as your own, or not being able to place yourself in either one, taking hold of in this case an "in-between" identity.

It seems as though both Francisco and Esmeralda are forced to walk a tightrope between their national or cultural identity and assimilation into the Anglo-American culture or society. Even though they show a great propensity towards Americanization once they immigrate, I believe that this same propensity originated and derives from the initial encounter they had with the Americans back home which is what makes these texts unique and also, up to a point, untypical. How they identify themselves and their place in the society of other (i.e. American) men and women, no longer becomes pertinent or is of relevance, since both of these writers now see themselves as being part of those other men and women. As Memmi writes, "Why should they not congratulate themselves for having come to the colony? Should they not be convinced of the excellence of the system which makes them what they are?" (47). As both autobiographies testify and take the form of a persistent description of ambition, triumph and personal achievement, i.e. the American immigrant success story, it becomes quite evident that they now belong to that society.

In other words, what contributed to the process of identification for these two protagonists was the colonial encounter with an "other". Although today, the trend may be for immigrants "to shift their focus to the ethnic community and develop a hyphenated ethnic identity" (Klimt, 281) we must remember that their ethnic roots, influenced by an American presence, have provided the way for self-definition. And it is through these authors' testimonies that there has been an attempt at identifying oneself through writing

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16 For a discussion on the concept of transnation and its link to postcolonial theory, see Janet Wilson, et al. (2010).

## The Other in Me: The “In-Between” Identities of Two Immigrant Autobiographers

and through the presentation of a double/in-between identity that has become a part of their lives and who they are.

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