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# Reflections from a *Puertorriqueña* Undergrad:How Anzaldúa's Borderland and Ramos Parea's *Malasangre* Relate to *Boricua* Challenges

Amaya Aguilar

Abstract: This paper presents an interdisciplinary exploration that draws upon my knowledge in Spanish, anthropology, and education, resonating with my identity as a Puerto Rican influenced by diaspora. Through an analysis of Ramos Parea's (1986) Malasangre alongside my personal academic journey, this study uncovers intriguing parallels. The objective is to spark discourse among administrators and educators regarding the distinctive challenges confronted by Puerto Rican students, who, though possessing American legality, often confront disparities in treatment. Merging insights from Spanish, anthropology, and education, this familial investigation delves into three fundamental questions: first, the resonance of *Malasangre's* themes with the experiences of my Puerto Rican family adapting to mainland U.S.; second, the application of Anzaldúa's Borderland concept to Puerto Rican college students studying on the mainland; and third, the lessons drawn from my own encounters to enrich the undergraduate path for fellow Puerto Ricans. The paper commences with a succinct survey of existing literature, delineates the chosen research methodology, and culminates in introspections that unveil pivotal insights addressing the aforementioned inquiries.

I applied for a job with my professor this fall. I would be an Adventure Counselor for the East Texas Adventurers, an outdoor education experience for middle school girls. I was completing my paperwork when I hit a roadblock. I was asked to bring documentation to Human Resources to process my hiring. In that meeting, I was told I might be unable to work because I was not a US citizen. I went to my professor, who clarified that

Puerto Ricans were citizens. According to the Office of the Law Revision Counsel of the United States House of Representatives (1952), all born after January 13, 1941, are United States citizens at birth.

The fact that my nationality was in question is one of many reasons why this research is necessary. The Puerto Rican experience on the mainland is

Amaya Aguilar is a graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University. The author may be contacted at amayaaa118@gmail.com.

complicated. Economic situations in Puerto Rico are leading many people to leave the island, including my family. However, what is the experience for college students when they are here? This paper will contribute to that research and offer an opportunity for dialogue at this campus.

This paper is an interdisciplinary study utilizing skills and knowledge I have learned in Spanish, anthropology, and education. These three areas of study resonate with me as an individual.I am a Puerto Rican who is a product of the diaspora. I am fascinated by the parallels between Ramos Parea's (1986) *Malasangre* and my own experiences as I navigate my undergraduate coursework and prepare for my life post-graduation.

This project will serve as a conversation starter for administrators and college professors as they consider the unique experience of Puerto Rican students who are legally American but often not treated in that way. This paper incorporates lessons learned in my three fields of study: Spanish, anthropology, and education. In this family study, I seek to answer three questions:

- 1. What themes from Ramos Parea's *Malasangre* reflect my family's experiences as Puerto Ricans who have relocated to the mainland United States?
- 2. How does Anzaldúa's concept of the Borderland apply to Puerto Rican college students who attend college on the mainland?
- 3. What lessons from my own experiences can be shared to improve

the undergraduate experience for Puerto Ricans like me?

It will begin with a brief literature review before moving on to a description of my methodology. Ultimately, I will also share how this reflective practice outlined key takeaways to address the research questions above.

### Literature Review

This section will be organized like my research questions, starting with a connection to my first area of study - Spanish. In this section, I will introduce and describe the major themes of *Malasangre*. I will continue by moving into a description of Borderland Theory, which relates to my second area of study - education. Finally, I will briefly describe the Puerto Rican diaspora from an anthropological perspective - my third area of study.

# Themes in Malasangre

Ramos-Perea had many messages that he wanted to portray through his play. Each scene had an event to progress the story, but as the audience, you can see that the common recurring themes involved change and family. According to Morera's article, *Malasangre's* significant themes included the dominant group's social, political, economic, and cultural" (Morera, 2018). In this case, the dominant group is the United States.

Ramos-Pera shows the audience from the beginning of the play that Mario and Luna's relationship is imperfect. Act I portrays Luna getting frustrated with

Mario due to his shaggy appearance, the world not needing people with his Liberal Arts degree, and openly sharing his thoughts on capitalism. Mario has not found an excellent job "in Puerto Rico" yet. The only ones around are the jobs that barely get you by paying the bills and living paycheck to paycheck, unlike Luna, who gets a Computer Science degree and gets offered a position in the States. Money is the solution to her problems. Unlike Mario, being able to be yourself is his version of happiness. This can be classified as an economic theme since the bases of Mario's and Luna's decisions were made because of money.

From the beginning, one of Luna's main concerns was to pay off the loan they had to get because they did not make enough to pay for what they needed. Granted, Mario did say that he would take responsibility for finding a good job to pay for the necessities so that Luna could finish school. It is different in Puerto Rico because you must find connections to submit your application. Luna states that there is nothing for no one in Puerto Rico. Relying on your connections depends on what job you can find (Pera, 1986, p. 57). This affects families like Mario and Luna because they are a young married couple cut off from their families. They can barely afford the cost of living for themselves, let alone help the new wedding couple. Mario's dad, he did not want him to get married because he thinks Mario is being submissive to Luna. This is the opposite of the machismo embedded in Puerto Rican culture. Mario was not putting his health and his goals first (De La Cancela, 2023).

Morera states that in Puerto Rico, familyowned businesses are getting pushed out by businesses from the United States, like Walmart (Morera, 2023, pg 2). Another example would be Agusto, Mario's father, and his furniture store. Big companies were offering better prices, leading his business to have poor sales. Puerto Rico is small, so there's only so much room for people, that usually ends up pushing people out of Puerto Rico into the United States. People search for opportunities somewhere else, as Luna did. Yet, this means they must leave their home behind and start a new life. A new life where the powerful dominant entity, this case USA, by valuing the manpower that fits their needs. In this case, Luna has computer engineering skills for the company she works for. With her hard work, she can gain bonuses, and work her way up to receive more money. Yet, people that do not serve what the dominant entity wants, you can get small jobs that don't value you.

Mario and Luna face a lot of struggles adapting to the new culture. In this life, you can claim you are different but do not dare to act differently because you will quickly learn this is not how you act around here. Some people like Luna do not mind changing their way because they do not have to worry about debt or owning people's favors. Like Luna, they eat, breathe, sleep, and work because this keeps them out of poverty. Yet in Mario's perspective, he sees Luna giving her life away to capitalism, becoming a new person he did not recognize.

Moving to a new place can bring conflicts between two different world views. This can be seen in Mario and Luna's relationship. Mario is unwilling to let go of a new way of living, a new way of living must come with an open mindset. Not counting that things are going to be the same. This leaves Mario unmotivated, angry, and jobless due to giving up on adapting to a new environment. Luna is over-committing herself to her job and does not have the energy to care about being able to handle the struggle that Mario has to face. Luna loses her humanity because she only has energy to fulfill the image her employer wants because then again she is part of their image. The experiences of the characters in Malasangre can be contextualized within the framework of Borderland theory, presented in the following section.

# **Borderland Theory**

The world we know today was not always divided. It was until around 1492 that settlers started to move to the east of the United States (Enochs, 2016). Just as the settlers arrived. they encountered indigenous people living on "their" land. They also encountered indigenous people living in the east. In the book Borderlands, Anzaldúa talks about how the interactions between the colonizers and the indigenous only created people not fascist a environment but created a hybrid called mestizo/a population (Guignion, 2020). What defines someone as a mestizo/a is the offspring of a Spanish colonizer and someone indigenous. Then the next generation identified as Chicano and Chicana, Mexican - American.

The Borderland theory is about Anzaldúa and people like her who exist neither here,

U.S.A., nor from their homeland. This theory talks about a complex identity that individuals can form when they exist in the in-between cultures (Nasser, 2021). Individuals must navigate through the tensions and contradictions between cultures. According to Anzaldúa, people with a complex identity find themselves in a constant battle with what they once knew and the demands and expectations of the dominant culture.

The Borderland Theory does not just apply to Mexican-Americans, it can apply to anyone with two- or more cultures they live in. Puerto Ricans can be used to explain this theory a little bit further. This allowed the Puerto Rican Diaspora to disperse from their homeland to other parts of the world, mainly the United States. Moving outside their homeland can lead to more opportunities, but they still face challenges in living in a different culture -- or having their culture exist alongside, but not actually considered, American culture.

# Boricua Experiences in the Diaspora

Before understanding the experiences of a boricua or a Puerto Rican, we have to talk about what is a diaspora. A diaspora means a large group of people moving away from their homelands and settling in new areas. The Puerto Rican Diaspora began, mainly because of economic factors. In the 1930s, the Great depression greatly affected Puerto Rican Diaspora began in waves, the first wave of migrants was in the late 1940s and 1950s of 470,000. The United States were looking for employees, due to not having enough

jobs available in Puerto Rico, people took this offer. In the 21st century, people still migrate because of not only the economic struggles still happening but also due to natural disasters (Odekirk, 2020).

All in the end, these are people, just like you and me, trying to find a place to just live. Even though Puerto Rico is owned by the United States, therefore granting the people from 1a isla del encanto citizenship, the people were not treated as such. Puerto Ricans in New York, for example, faced being called aliens" (Fahey, 2001). Most Puerto Ricans settle in New York or Florida, according to a Center of Puerto Rican Studies (Rodríguez, 2010). All the research that you can find is based in New York or in Florida. What about the rest of Puerto Ricans that live in the central or east of the United States? I am here to represent the people that are still not even viewed as legal.

# Methodology

This paper is a qualitative self-study and will be a modified version of the structured vignette analysis approach (Pitard, 2016). After speaking with my professor and knowing it was my first time working through a methodology like this, we decided to streamline it while still making sure to get the benefits of this approach. Each of the elements is described below and essentially follows the same structure: (1) I place myself in a context, (2) I share an anecdote that highlights my own experiences, (3) I unpack my emotional response to that particular anecdote, (4) I engage in

reflexivity, where I consider how my emotional response impacts my future actions, and (5) I apply these takeaways to a larger societal context.

The determination to utilize an autoethnographic approach is legitimized because this is a study for other people to understand better a Puerto Rican who is not considered American or Puerto Rican. This will be achieved by sharing my personal experiences and my grandma's and my mom's (Codon, Johns, Chester, 2018). The autoethnography helps bring an outsider's view the information through the insider's view by exploring their experiences (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995).

## Context

Context can be considered the setting, statement, or idea(Tennant, 2017). In other words, the background of the topic. This is important to shape the data. Context helps people with different cultures to understand one another in their social world. (Pitard, 2016). Context helps with the understanding and the meaning of the actions of someone by others. This is why, in the following section, each theme begins with the setting of context.

#### Anecdote

Anecdote is an "investigational technique in which informal verbal reports of incidents casually observed are accepted as useful information" (American Psychologist Association, 2023). This can be in the form of a simple short story or a single incident. Anecdotes have concrete details, and they start off close to the

central moment of the experience (Pitard, 2016). After the context is set, I share a story - or an anecdote - from my grandmother's and my mother's narratives.

# Emotional Response

The emotional response is how you react crisis that was presented psychologically and emotionally (Pitard, 2016). The three components of an emotional response are a subjective response, a physiological response, and a behavioral one. Everyone feels the same basic emotions matter their background, yet how they are produced is subjective. The subjective response can range from seeing a color to a significant life event. A psychological response is an autonomic nervous system response to the experienced emotion. Α behavioral response is an actual reaction to the emotions being experienced (UWA, 2019). After sharing the anecdote from my family, I will share the emotional response triggered by each account.

# Reflexivity

Reflexivity is questioning what you know. This examines one's beliefs, judgment, and practices during research (Hammond, 2022). This is a process, not just an attitude or a single action. Reflexivity is the constant change of what you know as reality (Pitard, 2016). I acknowledge this reality as a reflection of my narrative to connect this to my research. Everyone is constantly renegotiating, rewriting, and editing where they are in their own story! At this point in my analyses, I will

consider what my emotional response means and how that might impact my own behaviors and reactions.

# Connections to Society

People have a reason for wanting to connect to a new society, that's the context of their story. People might share their story and context by writing it or verbally expressing their experiences anecdote. The reader or listener can react emotionally, psychologically, and physically to the story. This is considered as an emotional response. The consumer can also experience change to what they thought was reality, reflexivity (Pitard, 2016). Trying to find the feeling of belongings in a group and feel closer to other people is the overall purpose. (Berkeley University, 2023). Essentially, I will take this full reflection and make general connections to the larger community. In this case, the community is Puerto Ricans of diaspora.

#### Discussion

Ultimately, a beautiful trend came up as I diving into Malasangre and was Borderland Theory. I saw that I was engaging with my family. Specifically, I spoke with my grandmother who shared her experiences for the first section - Bad Blood. Then, I was able to have a mother conversation with my resonated with the Fronteras section. Finally, my own story emerges in the (Un)American portion. Throughout all of these, I follow the methodology. I set the context, share the story, analyze my emotional response, consider reflectivity,

and relate it to the greater story.

#### **Bad Blood**

Like many other Puerto Ricans, my grandma believed the United States was the land of opportunity. There is room for everybody. Compared to Puerto Rico, it took twenty applications only to get one interview when I moved back home during the pandemic. You see more and more people selling water. avocados. newspapers, or donuts to make extra cash because there are not enough jobs for everyone. According to Brain Glassman, population in Puerto Rico decreased. In 2017, It was estimated that 3,337,000 Puerto Ricans resided on the island. In 2018, another estimate came out saying that there were now 3,195,000 residents (about the population Arkansas). People moving to the United States went up about 36.9% (Glassman, 2019).

Keeping in mind the decrease in the population in Puerto Rico, we can think about how misleading the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics can be. Looking at their Unemployment data gathered from 2013 to 2023. Unemployment went from almost 175,000 to less than 75,000 unemployed (U.S. Bureau Of Labor Statistics, 2023). This looks good for Puerto Rico because people can portray it as the United States providing more opportunities on the island. The United States is providing more opportunities for them to use our resources.

Like Luna, my grandma saw her opportunity to give her daughters a possibility for something better than

waiting by the mailbox waiting to see if the government has approved their loan. My grandma was a single mother with three girls, my mom was the youngest. Like Luna and Mario, my grandma had to ask for many loans to keep my aunts and my mom in a good school because she knew that education was the key to this endless cycle of paying debts and favors to other people.

Figure 1.

Amaya with her grandma



By listening to my grandma talk about stories when she was growing up, I started to appreciate her will to keep going because life is worth experiencing and growing from. From sharing a thin mattress pad on the floor in her mom's housemaid quarters with her brother, due to her father kicking them out because beating on my great grandma was not giving him the satisfaction anymore. As an adult, being able to build a routine with her daughters to pass out newspapers as one of her many side hustles to be able to make ends meet. From washing cars to taking government-affiliated surveys from provocative men, anything she could get her hands on to give her daughters a slightly better life than what she had.

Like my grandma, pending on side jobs that she could find, Mario, in Act One, struggles to find a job after getting fired from the government. All he could get was a journalist's job that could only pay two hundred dollars for stories (Pera, 1986, p. 38-39). The difference between him and my grandma is that she had multiple jobs to pay her bills, unlike Mario and Luna, who only had one source of income. Mario able being to find something sustainable helped make Luna's decision to take her computer engineering job in El Paso and being okay with leaving behind the land that once was her home for an opportunity it could not provide.

Luna telling Mario that Puerto Rico has nothing to offer was like my grandma trying to convince my 17-year-old mom at the time that she would be better off with my sisters. Like Mario, she didn't want to leave her island. It is where family and creating memories with her friends at the beach. Yet, my grandma did not want her to always worry if she had to pick between paying the water bill or the electricity bill. Like Luna, my grandma just wanted my mom to find a stable job with a firm payment.

My grandma's main worries were replaced by another one when my mom moved to the States and got enlisted in the military after breaking the news when she left for boot camp. I believe part of the reason my mom joined the military was partly because of impulsiveness, but also seeing all the benefits it brought. How could she pass it up? Traveling and getting you and your family is taken care of. Yet the grass is not always greener on the other side, as Luna and Mario experience that things didn't turn out how they were supposed to be. Like Luna's employer, they offered flight accommodations and other benefits to gain employment.

### Fronteras Across Water

Borderland Anzaldúa's Theory is groundbreaking framework that sheds light on the experiences of individuals who occupy multiple identities, cultures, and histories. Her theory has been used to examine the lived experiences of people who live in the margins of society, including immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals. In this section, I will explore how Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory relates to the Puerto Rican diaspora, which is a term used to describe the forced migration of Puerto Ricans from their homeland to the United States.

The ground that my mom and I stood on felt the need to get closer to her, but it would have to be without typing over the scale, or things will be unbalanced. There was a side to my mom I never wanted to see. That is when she was ashamed and angry. That is the last thing I wanted, but trying to keep this balance drew me further from her. Petty things such as laughing "too loud" in public is something about which you should feel shame. The embarrassment brought onto my mom. Others can be viewed as allowing people to walk over me, and being proud of my family's history is something we do not share. It was not until this project that I could put myself in her shoes and better understand what caused this behavior.

It is 1992 and all you hear is loud bass speakers making all the bones in your body vibrate as the beat-up Toyota Corolla drives by with the windows down. The streets with many holes, the road, and the smell of your mom or grandma cooking with tomato sauce and all the spices known to man fills your senses. Hearing laughter and joy fill the streets. This is Puerto Rico. Where my mom grew up with her two other sisters and her single mom in an apartment. My mom knew she did not live the wealthiest life, but she knew her mom and sisters were all the riches she needed. To my grandma, that was not a life my mom deserved. Her life switched around, following her sisters to America.

Her classmates oversexualized her because they did not care to understand the vibrant way that Puerto Ricans show affection. People would come up to her and tell her she is laughing too much, or pick at her for the clothes she wore. This was the first time my mom ever went to a school where no uniforms were required. Trinity High School in Texas, where her class had a little more than 600 students. alienated. She had her Hispanic friends from the English Language Learner (ELL) program to survive what was high school in America. She would find people purposely giving her the short end of the stick because she was not seen as a full human.

Figure 2.

Amaya with her mom (center) and family



In the military, she would find herself in situations where a hire-up would overwork her because they knew she was trying to prove that she was capable like anyone else.

Hearing my mom struggle to open about her past, she started to realize how much she allowed the environment to affect her. She would lose herself in a culture that would contradict the words they preach. In losing herself, it affected our relationship. I understand now that she was trying to avoid problems. Not standing up for her differences, but instead complying because she did not want to end up in a conflict. I understand now why she was controlling in the slightest things I did, but it just sucks to undo those learned behaviors. I never know if I am me or if I am just showing what I think is expected of me.

#### (Un)American

Growing up, being compliant determines your worth, at least, that was what was being portrayed to me. I cannot begin to describe the feeling I always feel when someone asks my mom, my aunts', or my grandma, "What is your (daughter/ niece/ granddaughter) like?" Usually, the first thing they say is how compliant I am what an amazing personality I have. For example, they praise my identity as a world adventurer. But, that's the first thing that comes to mind for them? This has led me to learn to show what people want to see of me - reflect what they want to see. What is really me? Learning to still be myself even when someone leaves sometimes hurts. As much as I want to share moments in life with

others, it's not worth losing myself. I wish my exterior was not so dense and people did not react before they thought to see what I see in myself.

I remember the long hours and money my mom spent to straighten my hair. My grandma worried about me catching too much sun because the pigmentation on my skin would become darker. Growing up, I never realized that these traits were being taken from me by the people I care about and love the most. Now that I am older, I realize they protected me from people who view me as exotic. As an object.

Like most college students, I had to work to survive being in school. I was a server at a local restaurant - the one fine-dining restaurant in town. I have dealt with many people telling me that I am incompetent because their burger had pickles. Customers told me they could understand my accent and picked a server that looked like them, white. Nacogdoches is a small town where the population is 77.9% white and 21.2% are Hispanic. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022) I only sometimes realized that having curly hair or a darker complexion was why people treated me differently - until I started that One day, a woman came into the job. I began to share restaurant. recommendations and specials for the day when she stopped me and rubbed her pale fingers through my hair. "I have never seen such exotic hair," she exclaimed. I flushed with embarrassment and finally understood why my mother had spent hours straightening my hair. She had been trying to protect me.

Alternating not only my personality but

also the way I dressed and talked affected me in college. Like every other "ordinary" college student, trying to make friends is essential to surviving the next four to five years in college. These are the people you may live with, study with, or even call when you feel the world crashing down on you. Wanting this, I joined a sorority because I was told it is the best way to make these connections. All it did was take my money and the girls that were supposed to be like sisters made me feel little. Showing them me as a whole, good and bad, it was not who they recruited. They recruited a version of me that always has her lashes done, loud, and so foreign that I can't comprehend American social cues.

Figure 3.

Amaya with her sorority sister



Even after changing how I dressed, the topics I could speak on, or even making me the stereo-typical Hispanic girl. What they wanted to see because being myself was not a part of their brand.

Going home is no different, either. The only slightest difference is that you will be tolerated by the community if you still have relatives on the island. You are

begging, tolerated still does not mean being seen as an equal in a place you claim is your home. In their eyes, you are from the mainland, that does not even consider you apart from them. So, where do you go? Where do you belong? Who are you? This is what Anzaldúa's Borderland theory is about, you adapt to the environment you are in because even if it is temporary you want to feel you belong, but what are you willing to sacrifice?

#### Conclusion

Through this autoethnographic study, I hope you got a glimpse of the internal struggles that the women in my family, including myself, have been facing for 23 years. Reading *Malasangre* in my Spanish classes sparked my desire to unpack my family history, and learning about Anzaldúa's Borderland theory gave me a framework from which to approach it. Our story is deeply personal... and it is a story of the Puerto Rican diaspora.

We are not from here or there. We are not considered to be enough here or there. Without acknowledging to each other, we have been altering our personalities to find common ground in this "United States of America". But this project has pushed me to consider: Who really are we? Who really am I?

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