This article notes the tension between the compelling specificity of the individual narratives which historians often use as evidence in their craft and the conviction that broad generalities constitute “legitimate” historical interpretations. Historians can profit by analyzing more closely the “artisanal” qualities of life-history narrations—those which make them aesthetically creative, and therefore singular, even as they speak to broad audiences. But in order to do so, they must take more seriously the art involved in spinning such tales. Two oral life histories, narrated by Puerto Rican women with very similar empirical life circumstances, use very different narrative strategies and form quite distinct interpretations of relationships between men and women, mothers and daughters, changing social consciousness, and the meaning of history. This article encourages historians to look at our evidence in new ways—as frequently complex creations of beauty and emotion as well as sources of empirical information.

What do we, as historians, do with the aesthetic project of many narrators, with the beauty incorporated in so many of the stories we hear? Do we, as purveyors of truth, expunge these features from our work (thus, of course, maiming the authenticity of the document), or do we recognize them as facts in their own right, to be acknowledged and used?

Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre”

This essay expresses a deep yearning. It stems from my discomfort while writing the book Imposing Decency. During the many hours I spent in Puerto Rican archives, I felt that I was hearing the whispers, demands, laughter, and screams of people long dead. However mediated by standardized language of official scribes, however muted and reshaped by legalistic jargon, courtroom rituals, and scornful dismissal by social superiors, the pain- and hope-filled fragments of people’s lives preserved in the documents beckoned to me, insisting on recounting their stories. As I wrote the book, I necessarily submerged the specificity and narrative creativity of these tales into a search for generalizable patterns. However, I could not dispel a niggling worry that in my zest for sweeping interpretations, I was neglecting other, rich historical arenas of inquiry tucked away in those individual lives. The beauty and pathos expressed therein, as well as the
broad historical patterns which they create, deserve historians’ attention. In this essay, then, I aim to inch closer to storytelling’s artful specificity and its importance to history.

To do so, I compare two life stories narrated by women whom I will call Griselda Ramírez and Aura Hernández, born and raised in the Puerto Rican community of post-World War II New York City. I met these women as participants in a broader oral history project on return migrants to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Both women are gifted storytellers, veritable artisans of the spoken word. They remind us of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller,” in which he likened storytellers to gem engravers and silversmiths. Verbal artisans, Benjamin insisted, have “access to the innermost chamber of the realm of created things.” The power of storytellers like Hernández and Ramírez lies in their articulation of experiences which are simultaneously individual and collective, their communication of deep moral and social messages, and in their shaping of narratives through the drama of rhythm and emotion, the development of rich metaphors, and the synthesis of various narrative genres. All of these elements allow master storytellers like Hernández and Ramírez to fashion “the raw material of experience, [their] own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way.”

Stories, of course, are not produced in isolation. My presence as a white North American academic, who switched fluidly with the narrators from one language to another, and my interventions as an interviewer certainly shaped the stories as well. My formal interviews with both women, which were held in their homes in the San Juan metropolitan area, were open-ended. I asked them simply to tell me the story of their lives. I tried to limit my interventions to clarifying questions about themes already broached by the narrators. However, the interviews sometimes blurred into dialogues, the narrator and I analyzing together the implications of her tale. I found myself frequently, not only clarifying meanings, but suggesting an overtly feminist interpretation of the life histories. For example, I proposed a reconstruction of Ramírez’s “jilting” story which repositioned her as an empowered agent, trying to erase her deep sense of shame and victimization. I concomitantly raised the issue of women’s community as Hernández ended her life story, wondering how she understood her relationships to the many women who currently surrounded her. If my interventions resonated with the narrators’ perceptions of their lives, they responded with enthusiasm, often expanding upon my comments with great detail. When I misunderstood, however, they dismissed or corrected me, sometimes quite forcefully. And even when the narrators enthusiastically ruminated upon my alternative framework, they consistently returned to their own central themes and symbolic meanings—for example, feminine shame and redemption for Ramírez, men as teachers and guides for Hernández.
I consequently had the most powerful effect on these tales as a reinforcer, when I tapped into an analysis shared by the narrator and me. Then, our interaction fed the storytellers’ conviction of the theme’s importance.

Both narrators moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico from New York City as young adults in the 1960s. The Puerto Rican diaspora into which they were born has deep historical roots. Puerto Ricans have emigrated to New York since well before the United States wrested colonial control of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898. This migratory path deepened once the U.S. government conferred citizenship upon Puerto Ricans in 1917. The populist Luis Muñoz Marín became governor of the island in 1948 and implemented a development plan which encouraged further emigration from the island. By 1960, more than five hundred thousand out of a total of two million people had left the island to form a Puerto Rican community in New York City. Ramírez and Hernández were part of a wave of return migrants from Puerto Rican communities in the United States who arrived on the island in increasingly large numbers through the 1970s and 1980s.

As individuals, also, Ramírez, Hernández, and their families are similar in many important ways. They were both born in the immediate post-World War II years in New York to Puerto Rican immigrant parents. Their mothers both stayed at home caring for their numerous children while their fathers worked long hours to support their families. Like many young Puerto Ricans in New York, both Ramírez and Hernández worked hard from an early age to contribute economically to the family’s survival, abandoning their education after graduating from high school. Both moved to Puerto Rico in the 1960’s as young, single adult women, and there encountered new material and social possibilities. Both women identified the move to the island and its aftermath with profound personal transformations. Once in Puerto Rico, both Ramírez and Hernández improved their class standing, obtaining steady white-collar jobs. Despite their new-found relative prosperity, Ramírez and Hernández, like many other “New Yoricans” who emigrated to the island, faced distrust and even outright rejection from many Puerto Ricans born and raised there. Both women married in Puerto Rico and, in contrast to their mothers, had only one child or two. Both of them ultimately became involved in efforts at social change in Puerto Rico.

Thus the broad contours of Ramírez and Hernández’s lives are quite similar to each other. They also shared the experiences of many children of the Puerto Rican diaspora who eventually returned to their parents’ homeland. The shape which each woman gave to her life story, however, endowed it with unique meanings. Life-history theorists have argued that people’s narration of their lives is an ongoing creative project, one which creates a “fictionalized self as a character.” Discussions of one’s personal past constantly revise the meaning of the self and one’s subjectivity in relation
to social networks, discourses, and institutions. Ramírez and Hernández’s tales both engage in such creative projects. They do not, however, completely erase contradictions in their “search for coherence.” The tensions curled in the core of their stories helps make them particularly compelling and artful.

The two narrators featured here imaginatively drew on a variety of storytelling genres and practices. Griselda Ramírez often spoke in the language and rhythm of public confessional cultures—the evangelical Protestant sermons about redemption and resurrection and the Catholic confession booth rituals of her childhood, the television talk shows which she watched with great enthusiasm, and the “twelve-step” meetings of Debtor’s Anonymous in which she participated in the 1990s. Aura Hernández invoked fairy tales and mythical folktales and used Marxist theoretical frameworks of history and social change to structure her narrative. Thus, Ramírez and Hernández’s genre-blending constituted an important element of the unique creativity of their storytelling labor.

Historians Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, along with Benjamin, confirm that “any life-story . . . is shaped not only by the reworkings of experience through memory and re-evaluation, but also always at least to some extent by art.” They call historians to “pay much more attention to the rhetorical skills of ordinary speakers.” Ramírez and Hernández’s tales demand that we recognize everyday people as artisans of the word, literally authors of their own lives. This essay constitutes my tribute to their artful work of storytelling.

Griselda’s Tale

Griselda’s exuberant story wrapped boisterous humor around the pain of recurring disappointment. The possibility of rebirth and redemption from shame, forged from a synthesis of Christian and twelve-step discourses, fueled her narrative.

Griselda’s father loomed large in her account, a figure who exercised great power over the family, was generous to a fault, and worked hard but who, in Griselda’s eyes, failed miserably in providing effective leadership to those around him. His was a strict, yet damaged patriarchy. Her father “was the law to us.” He generously offered help to scores of Puerto Ricans arriving in New York—aid which she interpreted ambivalently. “I never knew if the house was ours or not—there were always lots of people there. Anyone who came from Puerto Rico stayed—on the sofa, in the armchairs. And five kids squeezed into two bedrooms. He was a good egg, my dad.”

However, Griselda’s father’s drinking and womanizing betrayed fatal flaws, ones which would ultimately leave him permanently paralyzed,
losing both his legs in old age to diabetes amputations. Early in her first interview, Griselda told a long story about a childhood memory of her father’s affair with a married woman who lived in the same building. His blatant disregard for the honor of both Griselda’s mother and the woman’s husband foreshadowed the many disappointments to come. “He’d get sick from drinking so much. And once he retired here, he just drank all the time. And that precipitated his diabetes. Finally they had to amputate his legs.” This paralysis was deeply symbolic of what Griselda saw as her father’s lifelong ineffectualness. She resented the fact that her father never managed to better the family’s material circumstances, blaming his inability to improve their class standing on his personal failings.

But Griselda did not simply complain of her father’s weaknesses. She presented him as a complex figure, bursting with positive creative potential, although incapable of escaping the tragedy of his uncontainable desires. She often laughed out loud as she told of his sexual escapades. “You know what my father was? He was so . . . romantic! He just loved poetry. He’d say: ‘Microbe of my soul! My shredded mop! Broom of my house!’” [Spoken in very dramatic tones. Laughs uproariously, as do I.] But he’d make it look good—you know what I mean?“ Her father’s commitment to personal generosity, civic engagement, and social justice—he was a leader in many community activities and consistently voted for socialist candidates—made its mark upon her. “He was a very humane person. You know, that’s one thing he left me. I love to help others, and he left me that legacy.”

Griselda generally defined herself in opposition to her father’s unrestrained excesses, although she acknowledged his positive influences upon her. She presented herself as profoundly honorable, carefully preserving her virginity by only kissing and “sharing my breasts” with her high school boyfriend. She thus asserted her own sexual discipline and social respectability, different from both her father and the surrounding working-class Puerto Rican community where out-of-wedlock pregnancies were not uncommon. However, in Griselda’s tale, men who betrayed and shamed her continually undercut her honor, so important to her own sense of self-worth. Thus, she constantly struggled to reassert her respectability.

Perhaps the greatest shaming of all was what she named the “jilting,” an event around which much of the rest of her life story turned. After years of dating and carefully remaining a virgin, Griselda planned to marry her boyfriend after their high school graduation. Immensely proud of her impending pregnancy-free wedding, Griselda expected to cement her position as an honorable, upwardly mobile woman. Instead, she encountered a stunning betrayal.
He takes me into the kitchen and tells me, “I have something to tell you.” I said, “Is it about the wedding?” He said, “Look, the wedding is not going to be off. Don’t worry about it.” So I said, “so what’s wrong?” And he said, “I just want you to know this. That you’re going to be my wife. And for the last year and a half, I’ve been living with this woman, and she’s been giving me everything I couldn’t get from you. And now, I want you to know, that she’s going to be part of our lives.” [pause] I said, “What do you mean, part of our lives?” “Well, even though you’ll be my wife, she’s going to be the other woman”—or something like that! And I got—mira, I went like—[breath sucked in, body erect]—my head started—and we lived, thank god, we lived on the first floor. I went like this to him—like this—[she grimaces, raises her hand]. And he went right against the window, and his back broke the window! And my brothers heard me screaming [now shifts to a chuckle, her prior tone recovered] and they thought that he fell out! The way I—you know, I went blind, with the rage! [chuckles still]

And you know when that came back to me? When I saw [Princess] Diana’s story, back in 1997. . . . That was the darkest—I was only 17, going on 18, and that was—

EJF: Sure, sure.

GR: [Resigned. Slow.] I felt UGLY. SMELLY. Because the guy I was saving myself for, you know, he used it against me to justify—and then to tell me that the wedding would go on and all. And I said no [firm, quiet].

So then I had to return all the gifts. [Somber] It was like a death.”

Griselda’s suitor had proposed that she accept a long-standing Puerto Rican practice. An informal social right to extramarital relationships had long been a bedrock of Puerto Rican masculinity. Griselda’s fiancée may have considered himself quite modern for informing her of his other relationship. Or perhaps “the other woman,” faced with his impending marriage and the possible curtailment of his attentions and other resources they may have brought, had insisted that he formalize her presence in his life. In any case, Griselda placed this shattering of her dream of respectable monogamy—her symbolic escape from the degradation of working-class vulnerability—at the center of her life story. It became a focal point of shame and disappointment, amplifying exponentially the lurking knowledge of her father’s philandering, and her mother’s concomitant suffering.

Despite my methodological commitment to open-ended, noninterventionist interviews, I found myself arguing with Griselda about her interpr-
tation of the “jilting.” To me, a liberatory potential lay in this painful story from her youth. Griselda rejected the bargain her boyfriend offered her, an arrangement which her mother had not effectively resisted. Instead, she rose up in rage and, although “blind,” literally pushed the source of her shame out the window. Indeed, to me, it appeared that she had jilted him, refusing to accept the traditional terms of Puerto Rican male sexual privilege. Thus, however humiliating her fianceé’s betrayal had been, exposing her dreams of respectability and social advancement as an empty chimera, however close to emotional death Griselda may have felt, it seemed to me that this pivotal story laid the groundwork for her transformative move to Puerto Rico several years later.

Griselda told me that although she had long acknowledged the jilting and her move to personal independence in Puerto Rico as crucial turning points in her life, she had always focused on her boyfriend’s betrayal and his destruction of her honor. Her move to Puerto Rico, then, meant an escape from her victimized past, a redemption from the stain of shame and dishonor. This signified rebirth, not the fuller fruition of the earlier, however latently, empowered self which I wanted to highlight. Griselda enthusiastically pondered my interpretation, but did not substantially alter her narrative of shame and redemption in subsequent tellings of the jilting story. She had made it hers, drawing on elements of the Christian resurrection tale and television talk shows which posited the possibility of “new, fresh beginnings.” My alternative (classically feminist) liberation narrative clearly did not hold the same power for her.

As a young adult, working full-time and still living with her parents, Griselda decided to visit her extended family in Puerto Rico in 1963. Griselda was not alone in this move. As factory employment in U.S. cities dried up in the midst of a general mainland economic contraction, thousands of Puerto Ricans began to return to the island. In addition, the return migrants were drawn by the Puerto Rican postwar government’s propaganda campaign in the United States, which trumpeted the alleged success of a reformed colonial relationship between the two countries. For a short time, Puerto Rico’s “Free Associated State,” based on federal government subsidies and tax-free U.S. corporate relocations to the island, seemed to have produced an economic miracle of industrialization, wage increases for those with jobs, social service expansion, and the construction of massive new suburban housing tracts for the growing middle class along with public housing for the urban poor. Despite a high unemployment rate on the island hovering between 30 and 40 percent, Puerto Rico’s rapid changes appeared to hold great promise not only for the masses of island Puerto Ricans dreaming of a better life, but for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora whose parents had been thrown into economic exile decades before.
Once on the island, Griselda visited San Juan and “fell in love” with the island’s capital city and its beaches. She found work in San Juan as a secretary in a U.S. corporation, and moved into a boarding house for single women, run by the YWCA. There, she controlled her own income, made friendships with other single, working women, and eventually moved into her own apartment, building an independent life free from familial surveillance and demands that had been inconceivable for her in New York.

Most importantly of all, Griselda entered into a world of empowered sensuality, which for her represented the new possibilities which awaited her in Puerto Rico. Griselda frequently dated professional men. At work and on the beach she had intimate social access to people “who I barely would have seen, much less known in New York. . . . They would take you out to eat in fancy hotels!”

Griselda felt that her early experiences in Puerto Rico restored her honor, lost years before when she discovered that her fiancé had been cheating on her. In Puerto Rico, where men of all classes desired her, but where she successfully negotiated a virginal, yet sensual and independent life, Griselda literally felt redeemed. Economically and socially autonomous in San Juan for the first time in her life, Griselda rejected her island family’s accusations of loose living. She spoke joyfully about making her own sexual rules, dating many men and sleeping with none of them. Thus Ramírez was able to experience a potent sensuality but maintain her honor. In the process, she generated a great deal of confusion among her male suitors, who she claimed gossiped about whether she was “loose or lesbian.” All this, she deemed “liberating.” Her experiences in Puerto Rico had shown Griselda that she was, indeed, desirable, that she could experience pleasure, and that she could manage men’s desires successfully. Social mobility seemed within her grasp. Her past of poverty, suffering, and shame would not determine her future. “I just felt light! I felt a weight lifted off me!” she proclaimed.

These convictions solidified with her marriage in the late 1960s in San Juan to a Cuban immigrant. Griselda’s husband was one of tens of thousands of Cubans who came to Puerto Rico during the 1960s fleeing the 1959 Cuban Revolution. These Cubans preceded the largest influx of Puerto Rican return migrants, who arrived on the island during the 1970s and 1980s. Griselda’s future husband was unperturbed by the gossip about Griselda (“his manhood wasn’t threatened by any of those stories”). Willing to share domestic labor and supportive of her social and physical autonomy, this man’s presence in her life seemed yet another confirmation that history had begun anew for Griselda in Puerto Rico, that she had effectively transcended her past.

Griselda could not maintain consistently her triumphant narrative of rebirth into inexorable improvement, however, despite her husband’s ini-
tial successes with a series of small businesses, her pleasure in marital sex, and her eventual motherhood, which she found, to her surprise, “didn’t restrain me; it just added to my life.” In halting tones, Griselda told of drowning again in shame and depression in 1993. Once again, a trusted man had failed her in secret. This time, it was her husband’s economic failure and their eventual bankruptcy. “Then both of us fell . . . I was in the depths of depression. . . . It was a great humiliation. . . . All my life, since coming here, things were getting better, I was getting better—and then, it was such, such a setback.” At this point in her life story, Griselda began to mention similarities between her husband and her father whom she had presented until now as utterly dissimilar. Trusted male figures, it seemed, could converge in their capacity to disappoint.

Griselda recuperated her overarching life theme of transcending hardship by subsequently moving into a discussion of another great source of pain—her son’s diagnosis of severe autism in 1975. This “long journey” commenced decades before her bankruptcy “fall,” but, quite significantly, followed it in Griselda’s life narrative. It ultimately became a second redemption—this time through the power of maternal love, community commitment, and collective action.

After passing through a long period “of deep depression” in response to the autism diagnosis, Griselda became involved with a nascent organization advocating for “the handicapped” and their families. Griselda named this her “second life”—“because, I realized then, that I . . . had a battle to fight.” Yet again, she experienced resurrection from shameful emotional and social death to a rewarding life. After years of painful labor to improve her son’s lot, Griselda could celebrate her transformation into an expert. “The other day, I was at the eye doctor’s, and he was asking me about autism! Imagine!” Her home now served as the office of the island’s autism organization. Her small, shabby apartment bustled with activity throughout our interviews, reminiscent of her father’s opening of their home to new arrivals from Puerto Rico. Her invocation of solidarity among “all the handicapped—deaf, blind, learning disabilities—they all need to join together, even though they each have their special needs!” resonated with her father’s socialist hope for the unity of the world’s workers. Elements of her father, despite all her anger against him, thrived in her life. When chosen and not imposed, service to others could be redemptive.

Griselda’s treatment of her mother presents perhaps the most striking example of this theme. Her mother’s oppression haunted the majority of Griselda’s life story. Enclosed in a stifling domestic space, consumed by the sexual betrayal and domestic demands of her husband, Griselda’s mother embodied all that Griselda sought not to be; she represented the antithesis of agency. Indeed, Griselda defined her own growing self-realization in
contradistinction to her mother’s life. “My father was one of those men who would say ‘could you get me that glass of water?’ when it was sitting on a table right next to him. My mother spent her life serving him, serving us, just serving everybody. She never went out of the house except to shop for groceries! . . . [In my marriage] I felt so free, because my husband helped me!”

Griselda also sadly reflected on numerous occasions about the lack of sensual pleasure in her mother’s life. “My mother never felt anything sexually with my father. She told me, later in life, that she never enjoyed any of that with him, not even later. She finally told him that she didn’t want him to touch her anymore—didn’t want any more kids, and didn’t enjoy it anyway. She was only thirty-six! I feel so bad for her. That’s such a wonderful time of life for women, when you’re more mature, and you feel all those desires . . . but my mother never had that. I’m so sorry.” Her mother’s impoverished sexual experience legitimized Griselda’s claims of self-betterment; her sexual life had been indisputably different from her mother’s.

Griselda’s mother did not remain permanently trapped, however. Once Griselda had consolidated her own freedom by moving to Puerto Rico, establishing economic independence, and experimenting with a new sensuality, her mother announced that she would stay with her daughter on the island. “She had never traveled anywhere, much less alone. . . . It was the beginning of her emancipation! After that, no one could keep her from coming—she’d stay half the year! And she never stopped!” Griselda’s mother began to make and sell handicrafts during her visits to Puerto Rico. “My mother had so much talent—no one knew that she had such talent! But she had it hidden inside her!” Daughter had liberated mother, initiating yet another cycle of rebirth.

Thus despite its persistent themes of intimate male betrayal and oppression of women, Griselda’s life story remained a tale of loving possibility and rebirth. Ramírez’s optimism was not superficial or naïve, however, not a simple teleological march toward self-improvement. Rather, a great deal of her narrative’s power resided in its constant tensions between pain and disappointment on one hand, and irrepressible joy on the other. Her exuberant story was filled with contradictions, often directly juxtaposing two diametrically opposed passages. Griselda’s father was simultaneously a model “good provider” and a drunken, ineffectual womanizer. Her husband represented the model man of the future, but ultimately failed in his life’s endeavors. Even Griselda’s mother did not remain a unidimensional victim, prior to her “emancipation.” Griselda periodically referred, although briefly, to her mother’s feisty protests: “Thank God my father never hit my mother. If anything, she used to get up with him—she would take whatever
was there, and hit him with it. [chuckles]. Whatever unforgivable thing she would find out, she’d let him have it!” This life story’s primary characters all emerged as complex figures, exercising agency, struggling against painful limits, contending with deep internal flaws, and sometimes managing to gain a hard-won redemption.

Aura’s Tale

Aura’s narrative resembled a finely crafted novel, built on varied spoken rhythms, archetypal characters, and ironic plot twists. Aura reworked Marxist understandings of historical change to provide her narrative’s structure and movement; each new period of the tale was produced by a clash between shifting social or material conditions and new worldviews and was marked by powerful changes in Aura’s social and political consciousness. Aura also drew on older forms of understanding history, however, from both espiritista and Christian traditions. Her story frequently merged prophecy and history.

Aura’s tale began dramatically, in a percussive, mythopoetic style, told in the “historical present” verb tense—a style which Aura used strategically in her narrative. Such passages invariably signaled moments of epic importance; they punctuated the rest of the text which was told in a flowing style, filled with long sentences and few pauses.  

10 I have reproduced the opening passage below, translated into English and visually arranged as a poem—the way I experienced it.

Aura commenced by telling how her mother arrived in New York City as a young, single woman from a small Puerto Rican town. There, she

*Worked in a factory, like all the others.*
*Then, she meets that man, a policeman,*
*Or so they say. [bangs the table]*
*They marry. [bangs the table]*
*They have two children. [bangs the table] Two children.*
*I am the third.*
*They have two children.*
*They separate. [long pause]*
*After having the second son, she brings a sister of hers, Aura, who had a heart condition which could not be treated in Puerto Rico, and which couldn’t be treated in the U.S. either, because she ends up dying there.*
*But they take her there.*
*She is 16 years old, that Aura.*
*My mother’s little sister.*
*So, she arrives to get her treatment there and lives in the house.*
*And in the midst of it, she dies. Aura. Dies.*
Because they are giving her the treatment, but in that era, they don’t know.
She dies.
And then, the man, he goes to help his ex-wife. Ok.
She has no one.
She has two babies, and her sister has just died.
So he goes to give a hand to this woman.
He gives her a hand, he helps her with the funeral, with all the rigamarole.
And [pause]
He leaves her with a consolation prize. [smile]
EJF: [Chuckles] Which is you!
AH: Right. [She chuckles too]
And he leaves.
And only a few months later, she realizes that the consolation has cost her.
Dearly.
Alright?
And
She has me.
So that’s why they name me Aura, like the, the causer of it all.
[we both laugh quietly]
The same as the aunt.
The sister who died.

Thus Aura began the account of her life in spare, dramatic language—a birth rooted in women’s pain and truncated solidarity with each other, marked by the entanglement of emigration, grief, empathy, and permanent loss. It is unclear whether her entry into the world, the final fruit of a failed relationship and her crowning with the name of her dead aunt (“the sister who died”) confirmed hope in the midst of death, or cemented the presence of death in life. However, her life was weighed down with meaning from its inception. Her mother bestowed further mythic import upon her daughter by prophesying to another sister, who visited her from the island after the baby’s birth: “I believe that I will never return to the island again. I can’t get out of this mess. But if I do not return, this child will return for me.”

The material realities of her life contrasted painfully with its deeper meanings. Raised by a stepfather, with whom Aura’s mother had three more children, helping her parents scrounge vegetables from the packing crates her father hauled in his truck, Aura’s family lived in a Bronx basement apartment, where her mother served as the building super, taking out the trash and cleaning the building’s hallways, along with caring for her growing family. Throughout her childhood, Aura’s knowledge of Puerto Rico was minimal, since her mother refused to discuss her past. For Aura
the child, history was empty, erased, sterile. “I knew that I was from Puerto Rico, but nothing else. I knew nothing. Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing!”

Seemingly inexplicably, Aura asked to visit her family on the island as a sixth grade graduation present. Shocked at Aura’s request, her mother requested an interview with an espiritista, a woman well-versed in the mysteries of fortune telling and communicating with spirits of other worlds. The espiritista approved the trip; in the small town of Juana Díaz, staying for the summer with her uncle, Aura discovered that history was full of experiences and memories that bound her to her mother, and through her to an intricate network of others, past and present. Spirits did walk the earth, in part through Aura herself.

The residents of Juana Díaz gave Aura a place, assigned her meaning, and insisted that their past was hers as well. Elderly people confused her with the Aura who had left the town so many years ago at the age of sixteen. Neighbors and family members plied her with candy and regaled her with stories about her mother as a classmate, as a child, as a teenage town beauty. Aura hungrily consumed these sweet memories. “In New York, no one knew her! . . . Here, everyone had some link to my mother! Now she became a person. Not just my mother. My first experience of my mother as a person separate from me—but it tied me even more closely to her. . . . Because for me, that was a paradise! That question of the link! Everyone knew me! That question of a living history, it fascinated me!”

Mother, aunt, self—the lines between all these women blurred as history came alive through intimate stories told over and over again, for her yearning, youthful ears. In Aura’s story, small town Puerto Rico ushered her into a new understanding of the world and of herself by narrating her mother’s past.

Two years later, the magical Puerto Rican summer over and New York life resumed, Aura’s mother died, leaving behind six children, the youngest yet another baby girl. Aura did not discuss the circumstances of her mother’s death—only a terse comment that “the family split up.” After several years of living with her aunt, and later with her two older brothers, Aura announced suddenly that she was moving to Puerto Rico. In 1968, she arrived in Puerto Rico, intending never to return to New York. Relatively quickly, she, like Griselda, made her way to San Juan, where she worked as a secretary, shared a rented room with another young single woman, and eventually met her husband.

It was not until Aura took her first newborn infant to Juana Díaz, however, that her aunt shared the story of her mother’s words after her own birth, and declared “‘what your mother told me has come true.’ And my hair stood on end, because I had fulfilled a prophecy or something! But I was content. Como que ya cumplí con algo. Con alguien, yo cumplí.” History had come full circle. Aura had healed the rending of emigration
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and physical absence; she had made the pilgrimage and fulfilled a historic commitment to place, family, and community which her mother could—or would—not.

But history, for Aura, was not a simple circle, constantly repeating itself. It spiraled, moving in unexpected directions. Aura located this possibility of historical movement in radical shifts of consciousness, which dramatically changed her understanding of the world, and therefore the possibilities which might open to her.

The first of these watersheds was her childhood encounter with her mother’s past in Puerto Rico which began her “rooting” on the island. The second was a conversation with Errol, a politically astute, well-read African American friend of her teenaged brothers, and a leader among youth in her section of the Bronx. One hot New York summer evening in 1967, Errol challenged Aura’s assumption that Puerto Ricans were not black—for her, “moreno” o “negro” signified North Americans of African descent. Puerto Ricans were racially mixed, Errol pointed out; this meant that they were black, too! Aura—who appears phenotypically quite European—was flabbergasted by this way of interpreting race, which implied a solidarity between Puerto Ricans and African Americans, as well as an inclusion of Africanness in Puerto Rican identity. “After that discussion, I looked around me and I saw [gasping] that Puerto Ricans come in all colors! Before that, I don’t think I saw Puerto Ricans as different colors. I don’t know what I focused on. But I saw Latin . . . I saw them as different from the Americans.”

Thus, when Aura returned to Puerto Rico after her mother’s death, she came with a new understanding of race, one which affirmed the African roots of Puerto Rican biology and culture and which acknowledged that Puerto Ricans had long crossed racial boundaries in their reproductive, social, and cultural practices. This way of thinking set her apart from many both in the diaspora communities of New York and on the island. Most middle-class Puerto Ricans, including many proindependence radicals, insisted that Puerto Rico’s race relations were harmonious (in contrast to the United States) and that the island’s social divisions could be attributed solely to class difference or exploitation.

According to Aura, it also endeared her to her future husband, who she met in a radical university student group. A member of a fledgling group “working on raising racial consciousness” based at the University of Puerto Rico, her husband found Aura’s ideas about race compelling. He, in turn, introduced her to Marxism and the student movement agitating for Puerto Rico’s independence from the United States—another encounter which would “open up [her] mind” (stated in English). The late 1960s was a time of radical ferment in Puerto Rico, as in many other parts of the world. On the island, a renewed interest in Marxism fused with growing
demands for the island’s independence from the United States. Both of these political and intellectual currents were fueled by the island’s economic downturn, the United States’ drafting of Puerto Rican men into the Vietnam War, and the U.S. military’s ecologically and socially destructive “experiments” with Agent Orange and bombing techniques on the island and its outlying territories.

(Told in a rush, in English) “This Marxist discourse, it was like something from another planet! All of a sudden, I was seeing my parents in another light! And their work ethic! And the exploitation! All of a sudden, these people were like opening up my own life to me! That discourse captivated me!” Marxism offered Aura a new prism through which to understand her life; her family’s poverty and struggles in New York became sources of pride, rather than something to flee or deny. It added another layer of analytical possibility and political insight to her unorthodox understanding of race, a way to bring history to life in empowering ways.

Her discovery of Marxism did not arrive without costs, however; many of the radical university students who espoused Marxist politics rejected Aura because of her birth in the United States, her lack of formal education, and her faltering Spanish. “They saw me as an instrument of imperialism, an insult to the fatherland! And I don’t think they’d ever met an actual worker in their lives.” Only her future husband, who did not judge her pained speech in Spanish, explained new concepts to her, suggested books to read, and respected her radically different analysis of race, seemed to readily accept her.

The radical students’ rejection of Aura was not surprising. The marked influx of “Nuyoricans,” beginning in the late 1960s and accelerating through the 1970s, caused great anxiety among island-born Puerto Ricans, especially those of the middle class. The return migrants were denounced as contaminating an already embattled national character with their allegedly foreign dress, mannerisms, behaviors, and speech. Aura and other return migrants of her generation who I have interviewed bitterly remembered being suspect for all kinds of social contamination, from bringing sexual promiscuity, drug addiction, and cultural degradation to the island, to destroying the Spanish language, Puerto Rico’s last bastion of national identity. 14 Several decades later, Aura encountered yet another world-shattering consciousness shift when, after raising her children and separating from her husband, she became involved in a destructive romantic relationship. After women friends warned her that she might come to physical harm, she finally ended the relationship, but not before her sense of self was deeply shaken.

That was a terrible year, but in retrospect it was a wonderful year for opening things up. Because I didn’t understand domestic abuse, seriously. Not really. Because I had always been a very
strong, outspoken woman. And I couldn’t understand—if a woman is being abused, why doesn’t she leave?

And all of a sudden, I found—[gasp] look at me! And having that happen to me, you know—and then thinking about what had happened to me, made me *realize* all the psychological shit that goes on when there’s abuse. And it made me much more sensitive to women’s problems. Inadvertently, he gave me a whole education. And I appreciate that from him too—[laughs]—I’ve never told him that, because he’s not worth it. Because it just opened up my world.

Aura’s life story thus exposed and explicated the hidden workings of race, class, and gender, the three great categories of power so fetishized by academia. Driving history—and her narrative—forward, their discovery, wrapped in increasingly acute pain or struggle, prevented Aura’s life story from being a simple nostalgic invocation of a transparent recovery of roots. The narrative itself transformed into a symbolically rich consciousness-raising exercise for both narrator and listener. Its message encompassed much more than Aura’s individual life; it widened the scope of potential solidarities, and extended the possibility of repairing historical wrongs to all who might hear it. In the process, it became a profoundly useful, as well as compelling and beautiful account. Refusing the themes of rebirth and redemption which undergirded Griselda’s tale, Aura’s story drew on Marxist concepts of growing political consciousness and the historical transformations which emerge from sharpening social conflicts. Aura artfully wove the underlying structure of her life story, then, in part from the Marxist epistemology which had so transformed her worldview in the late 1960s. The painful rending of prior assumptions wrenched history forward, opening unforeseen paths toward the healing of old wounds (the resolution of prior contradictions), the fruition of mysterious prophecies, and new analyses of social relations. The older practices of prophecy and spirit vision fused with the eminently modern discourse of Marxism to create a tale which spoke in many tongues to many possible audiences.

The full ramifications of the theme of historic wound healing in Aura’s narrative, however, did not emerge until the final moments of our last interview. In our closing exchange, she launched into a dramatic story of sifting through her mother’s personal collection of photos while living in Puerto Rico. After explaining that her mother’s own mother had died in childbirth, leaving her children to be ignored by their father, the town’s baker, and mistreated by a jealous stepmother, Aura intoned:

I found this picture of this black man
And on the back
In French!
In French, because he was educated. He was an educated person. . . . And in French—he writes something about all the love he has for her. And I said—what the fuck is this? What the fuck is this? So I went to my aunt, and I said, “Who’s this?” And my aunt says, “Where did you get that?” and I said, “I don’t know, but it’s somebody who was in love with mami.” And she says, “ahhh—what a sad story you’re bringing to mind.” And then she told me the story. [Deep silence]
“That man was so in love with your mother, and she was so in love with that man . . . and they didn’t allow it. That’s why she left.”

This final story hinted at the unrealized possibility of a very different life for her mother: deep, romantic love with an educated man on her native island, unsullied by displacement, abandonment, grinding poverty, or numerous children—a fictional life perhaps, more imagined than actually possible, but all the more powerful because of it. Aura’s grandfather, and the very uncle with whom Aura stayed on her arrival in Puerto Rico, however, had refused to allow her mother to publically acknowledge or formalize her love for this black man. Thus in Aura’s narrative, punishing racist older men destroyed love, rent the family, and launched a pattern of emigration which eventually engulfed the majority of the family’s youth. The ripping and tearing of her mother’s movement from small-town feminine respectability into exploitation, frustration, and untimely death in the colonial metropolis, was healed by Aura’s re-establishment of the roots which had been severed. By ultimately returning to and embracing Puerto Rico, Aura managed to accomplish much of what her mother allegedly lost; she gained relative freedom from material want, intellectual growth, love—however impermanent—and long years of unburdened, joyful mothering. By excavating the past and learning the radicalizing lessons of her unfolding present, Aura wove a tale about breaking her family’s cycle of death, rupture, and abandonment; she turned history in new directions.

Aura’s life story ended, though, on a deeply ironic note as well. Her first stay in Puerto Rico and its initiation of a near-mythic healing was hosted by her mother’s older brother—one of the very men who initially had helped deepen the cycle of loss. The denial of an interracial passion drove Aura’s mother from her homeland; Aura returned as the accidental fruit of a failed union with North American whiteness, bearing a discourse of race mixture, insisting on a physically invisible, yet powerful, connection to blackness.

Both men and women were crucial in Aura’s healing of history. Biological fathers betrayed and abandoned; they were notable in their absence. But other men were Aura’s teachers, instructing her in new ways of seeing the world. They introduced her to the pains and intellectual pleasures of
modernity. From Errol, the wise racially conscious neighbor ("he was my mentor") and a beloved uncle in New York, both of whom helped her with homework, pushed her to read carefully and critically, and explained thorny intellectual issues, to her husband who "tutored me," to the scornful student radicals, Aura consistently represented significant men in her life as intellectual and political guides. She spoke fondly of how the most important ones challenged her and respected her as an intellectual, as someone capable of excellence. Interestingly enough, she even described the abusive ex partner as a teacher, who, like his predecessors in instruction, "opened up my world."

Women, on the other hand, were secret-keepers and truth-tellers, always deeply connected to history and the past, whether hiding it or revealing it. Aura never represented women as teachers, imparters of new skills or worldviews, as other narrators might have done. This role, in her story, was reserved for men. But women’s insight and storytelling powers were crucial in her life story, nonetheless. Perhaps this is most obvious in the case of Aura’s mother. She lived a life of deprivation, imposed by hateful male family members in Puerto Rico and by grinding poverty in New York. She died inexplicably, still young. However, Aura refused to represent her mother as a victim. However exploited, this mother—in contrast to Griselda’s, who lived to a ripe old age—embodied unequivocal agency. She displayed a steely resolve, launching herself alone into the harshness of life in New York, supporting three children as a single mother working in a factory, and later obtaining an apartment for her growing family by taking on the work of garbage pickup and floor cleaning.

Her mother’s rage at her exploitation served as a powerful resource as well, Aura remembered. "My mother had her own version of Marxism, you know—she had an intense pride in her labor. She was a Wor-ker. And she was extremely conscious of the fact that she was selling her labor for a wage. She was very aware that ‘They’re screwing me! With my work. And it’s not my fault!’ And she worked with dignity. My mother was very hostile. She arrived in the U.S. and—I think that my mother, in Juana Díaz, was white and beautiful, and she came to the U.S. and she was—Puerto Rican. You know."

Aura’s mother also insisted that her daughter demand respectful treatment for herself. Aura had clearly told the following anecdote numerous times, drawing on it as a resource in analyzing her relationships with men and her parenting of her own children. She named it as particularly important, and told it in English, for emphasis.

One time my brother gave me a beating and I was crying outside. My friend said, “don’t you hate him?” I said, “no—I love him
because he’s my brother.” My mother called me inside and asked me to repeat what I said. My mother told me, “that’s no reason to love anybody. You love people because they treat. You. Well. Even if I don’t treat you well, and I’m your Mother, you don’t have to love me. If I don’t treat you well, you don’t love me. That’s why you love people—because they love you and treat you well.” And I was, you know, really taken aback.

EJF: That’s really radical!

AH: throughout my life, my mother has told me some really radical fuckin’ things.

“My mother,” Aura declared, “had a chip on her shoulder. She was constantly fighting.” Even refusing to speak of the past could be an act of resistance, an insistence that her daughter look to the future, a refusal to let festering wounds haunt the next generation. Aura’s mother, unlike Griselda’s, never appeared vulnerable, despite her early death. Even through her absence—and perhaps, because of it—she persisted as a resource to be drawn upon. Griselda’s mother, in contrast, could offer her daughter nothing, even after her “emancipation;” it was Griselda who offered insight and possibility to her.¹⁵

Along with Aura’s mother, the espiritista who sensed the importance of a child’s seemingly inexplicable request to travel to an island she knew nothing about, her aunts who through their stories exposed the wounds of the past once they were ripe for healing, and the women friends who pushed her to leave a potentially abusive relationship, all were in touch with the “spirit” of things. They exposed forgotten truths. They communicated with spirits, pronounced prophecies, wove tales, and issued warnings, leaving them to be heeded or not, as the listener chose. They neither preached nor persuaded. Rather, they provided, in the words of scholar Tess Cosslett, “ancestral help.”¹⁶

Conclusion

Both stories spoke powerfully to possible solidarities beyond their authors’ individual struggles for a better life. Aura’s tale was quite explicit in this regard; true to its Marxist roots, her account’s very structure was built in part on an ever-more intense series of shifts in consciousness. Griselda’s story also pulled the listener into a meditation on a growing understanding of oppression, albeit more subtly. Griselda’s narrative was filled with critiques of patriarchal power, fueled by her own life experience, but quite markedly also by her interaction with mass media discourses about gender—in sensationalized news programming, Hollywood films, and ubiquitous daytime television talk shows aimed at women.
While Aura clearly identified particular individuals and groups who politicized and instructed her, Griselda instead referred to the diffusion of popular culture as a primary source of learning. Televised accounts of thwarted love affairs, the fetishized suffering of women celebrities such as Princess Diana, and feature films of all sorts appeared throughout Griselda’s narrative as clarifiers of her life’s meaning. All of these sources of discourse offered Griselda analytical resources which her mother could not, smothered as Griselda portrayed her in domestic drudgery. Appropriating elements of popular culture, Griselda articulated an acute awareness of men’s attempts to control women, particularly in the areas of sexuality and domestic labor. She recalled how in her early, daring years as a single woman in Puerto Rico, “men assumed that when they started dating you, you were their possession.” She remembered fearing “date rape or something, I mean we didn’t call it that back then; there wasn’t a name for it.” She regaled me with stories of incest, marital infidelity, and sexual harassment from priests, “All the things that happen now, happened then,” she mused. Now, with access to discussions about these issues through the mass media, Griselda implied, women could name these sources of pain, and attempt to escape them. Thus, in a less explicit way than Aura, Griselda constructed her story as a text about changing consciousness. Both women, then, ended up transforming their individual life stories into meditations on the possibilities for connection to a much wider universe of potential allies. Although they told their tales to me alone, they looked outward, to other possible listeners. Thus, their stories were useful as well as unique—true artisanal creations. “Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and the sages. He [sic] has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage.” Griselda herself reminded me, “It’s a beautiful thing to be useful. Not used. Useful.”

History and its uses were also central to Griselda and Aura’s stories, although the two narrators’ understanding of history diverged. Griselda saw the past as a launching pad for her unending quest for personal betterment. She hoped to escape history’s oppressive weight, but in the course of her story-telling acknowledged that it continued to shape her life. She continued to yearn for release from her past; moving to Puerto Rico represented this possibility. Aura, in contrast, understood history as a spiraling force. It required a perpetual turning back into memory, embracing elements of the past, even as it constantly moved in new directions, pushed by dramatic shifts in her understanding of the world. Aura interpreted her move to Puerto Rico as the fulfillment of a familial prophecy, a discovery of lost memories and the healing of historic wounds—the fruition of history rather than the ultimate escape from it.
Griselda Ramírez and Aura Hernández’s stories demonstrate that history can be very powerful when it serves as the meeting ground of specificity and generality, when it allows the individual to resist complete absorption into the social, when it revels in being an artisanal labor, both useful and aesthetic. They insist that we widen our search for agency and creativity in history; people do not only demonstrate agency by organizing protests, articulating political programs, or developing broad public cultural projects. Likewise, they remind us, art is not only the realm of novelists and painters. Agency and creativity also persist in small daily acts and expressions like storytelling, which produce meaning and, thus, culture, in infinitesimal, yet important ways. As these two stories show, broad historical similarities do not determine individual choices. Although the external contours of Griselda and Aura’s lives were similar in many ways, they ultimately made very different decisions, conceptualized their lives quite differently, and fashioned quite distinctively inventive narratives about them. Such artful specificity disappears when we reduce individuals to aggregate patterns.

Notes

Much gratitude to Ellen Feder and April Shelford for their insight and patient re-reading of the manuscript; many thanks to Phil Stern, Kate Haulman, and Kathy Franz as well.


2The life-story genre, too vast to fully cite here, has long attempted to address this question, although with an emphasis on the political ramifications, rather than the artistic reverberations of people’s life narrations. One of the early, now classic, texts is Sidney Mintz, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1960). One of the most well-known examples from the 1980s is Elisabeth Burgos Debray, ed., *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Argos Vergara, 1983). For one of the most recent examples, see Rosa Isolde Reuque Paillalef with Florencia Mallon, ed., *When a Flower is Reborn: The Life and Times of a Mapuche Feminist* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002).

3David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn point out that life histories “reveal a formulation of self-in-society that is more complex and subtle than a mutually exclusive opposition between an all-subsuming collectivity on the one hand, and a rampant individuality on the other.” “Introduction: Life Histories in India,” in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 19.

Griselda Ramirez, interview by Eileen J. Findlay, September 15, September 18, and October 2, 2002, Santurce, Puerto Rico. Aura Hernández, interview by Eileen J. Findlay, August 5, August 30, and December 11, 2002, Hato Rey, Puerto Rico. The strategic use of Spanish and English also formed a fascinating part of the dynamics of these interviews. Griselda, who speaks excellent Spanish but who claims English as her first language and who considers herself a New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent transplanted to the island, told the vast majority of her story in English, despite the fact that I posed questions and commented primarily in Spanish. Aura, on the other hand, who identifies very powerfully as a Puerto Rican rooted on the island, despite having visited Puerto Rico only once before the age of nineteen, spoke completely in Spanish until our final conversation. By making this shift, she signaled to me that I had finally won her full trust. Both women also switched languages to emphasize particular passages, to directly quote someone in their native tongue, or to express certain phrases which had no adequate translation. I have indicated those passages in both stories which were originally in Spanish by italics; space considerations have prevented me from providing the original Spanish.


Despite her vivid memories of sexual empowerment in Puerto Rico, Griselda accepted clear limits on her ability to dictate the terms of her sexual exchanges. Her assertion of an honorable sexuality depended on 1) her virginity and 2) her eventual marriage to a man who was uninterested in the rumors about her and who remained sexually faithful to her. Thus she did not “invent her own rules” freely. For a historical discussion of Puerto Rican honor codes, see Findlay, *Imposing Decency*, 18–52. For descriptions of San Juan professional and business classes’ sexual and marital expectations during the 1950’s, see Raymond L. Scheele, “The Prominent Families of Puerto Rico” in *The People of Puerto Rico*, 437–46, 459–62.

Alessandro Portelli has argued that passages such as these, which shift to the historical present, “enriched by a solemn rhythmic scanning and meaningful pauses,” turned Italian workers’ accounts into “an actual piece of epic poetry.” Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 4–10.

Mary Chamberlain has explored English Caribbean migrant women’s narrating of self as part of a web of women relatives in “The Global Self.”
In his challenge to Aura, Errol probably drew on the Black Power and Pan-Africanist discourses circulating in the late 1960s United States, which emphasized solidarity between all people of African descent, as well as from his own experience growing up in the United States, where any ancestor of African descent legally makes a person “black.”

According to Aura, the race-consciousness group in which her husband participated was founded and directed by a Puerto Rican woman of African descent who had been involved in the U.S. Black Power movement during her university years in the colonial metropolis.


Tess Cosslett writes of how often mothers can serve as “absent centres” in women’s narratives, unknowable and constantly sought after. She points out how this unattainability can sometimes be “helpful and empowering for the writers, leaving them free of closure and undefined, with an ‘unknowable’ subjectivity as one of their own resources.” Cosslett, “Matrilineal Narratives Revisited,” in Feminism and Autobiography, 151.

Ibid.


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