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Since its founding in 1935 as the newsletter for the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, *South Atlantic Review* has become a premier academic quarterly publishing research in the modern languages and literatures, as well as in associated fields such as film, cultural studies, and rhetoric/composition. The journal welcomes submissions of essays, maximum length 8,000 words, that are accessible, and of broad interest, to its diverse readership across a number of disciplines. Submissions may be made electronically directly to the managing editor at the address above. *SAR* also welcomes proposals for special issues and special focus sections.

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Introduction: Judith Ortiz Cofer: Legacy of a Cuento

In Memoriam (1952-2016)

Lorraine López and Rafael Ocasio

Unos mueren para que otros hereden.

(“Some must die so that others may inherit”; Latin American popular proverb)

The museum of us contains the keys, postcards, vinyl albums, photographs, trophies, old textbooks and report cards, your mother’s rosary, your father’s army tags, your baby’s receiving blanket, and it contains clues to who you are and how you came to be; your identity shaped by the acceptance or rejection of what each object represents. Most of us have our memory closets. Sometimes these are real places that are either neatly organized or chaotic; the storage places for the ineffable are invisible to others—they are in us and locked; this is where the magical objects with which we are most intimate become memories: kept in that area of the brain reserved for symbols and miscellany—the things you go looking for at births and deaths and inexplicable events, when we must make meaning or at least find solace in what we have left. We catalogue the totems, the talismans, the souvenirs of past joy and pain to use as we need them throughout our lives. These objects and memories attach us to our former selves through time, reminding us of how we became who we are.

—Judith Ortiz Cofer, “The Aging María” 57-58

Latin American folklore is rich in death proverbs, often rhymed sayings conveying popular wisdom that inspire us to memorialize the legacy of deceased dear ones. Our opening *refrán* reminds us, forthrightly, that in death there is a lesson—one that begins with the acknowledgment of a bequest, and is perhaps the psychological antidote for that wretched feeling of loneliness after the passing of a loved one. The recalling of such a legacy is not, however, as joyous as the

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saying seems to imply, but it is nonetheless the most upbeat stage of the mourning process.

We, Lorraine López and Rafael Ocasio, editors of this special issue on the literary legacy of the late Judith Ortiz Cofer, have come together to bear witness to the richness in life and letters of a mentor, fellow Latina and Puerto Rican writer, and most dearly, a friend who made an indelible impression on our lives. Although we met Judith in different arenas—the case for all the contributors to this issue, who came to know her through the various means of personal contact or through her powerful writing—she was to both of us a great friend, a beloved role model, a gifted writer, and an inspired and inspiring teacher.

We both had a long-term relationship with Judith. For Ocasio, Judith was the first writer with whom he, as a recent graduate, had the pleasure of embarking on a professional association. She always called him Rafael, not his usual Rafa; she must have sensed that he, a Spanish professor, adopted the nickname because he disliked the sloppiness of English speakers in pronouncing the seemingly impossible diphthong in his first name. Thanks to his autographed copy of *The Line of the Sun*, Rafael knows the exact date Judith and he met. On October 7, 1989, she had come to Atlanta to read from her recently published novel at the iconic Oxford Bookstore, back then the city's intellectual center for serious book buyers. After giving a thrilling reading, mesmerizing her audience with the humor and sincere passion of a consummate storyteller—a practice Rafael came to witness many times later—Judith, like a Boricua High Priestess at Delphi, signed his copy with a foretelling of her own: “I hope this is the beginning of a long association for us.”

Their “association” began with Judith's initial requests that he read her manuscripts in process. Rafael became, as she jokingly liked to say, her fact-checker for everything pertaining to Latino or Puerto Rican cultures. He was always excited to research any subject for a book in progress. Mind you, however, Rafael was a wreck whenever she asked him to go over her manuscripts because, after all, how often does one get to preview the writing of someone twice-nominated for the Pulitzer Prize?

His conversations with Judith, often at the beautiful campus of the University of Georgia, shaped the critical angles for his own books on Reinaldo Arenas, a Marielito Cuban writer and without doubt the ultimate Queer activist from any Latin American country. Judith and Rafael frequently spoke about her handling of feminist topics by means of characters, often based on historical or contemporary common women, who develop peculiar survival strategies against traditional Latino, Puerto Rican or American macho-dominated cultures. Not

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surprisingly, they also spoke at length about the effects of imperialist socio-political practices on Latino communities and particularly upon Puerto Rico, and how these practices were historically behind the large migratory movement that brought her family to the United States in the 1950s. Judith walked Rafael through machinations for facilitating tenure and promotion, often sharing her experiences in dealing with a bureaucratic academic system that frequently sets insurmountable obstacles for people of color.

López met Judith six years after the date inscribed on Rafael's book, but she encountered her much earlier than that on the page. While reading *The Latin Deli*, Lorraine experienced a frisson, the scalp-prickling sensation of discovering herself between the covers of a book. Though, as a Chicana, she does not specifically share Judith's Puerto Rican heritage, Lorraine connected strongly to the cultural allusions, language, and imagery in the writing, details that evoke homecoming just as Café Bustelo, *jamón y queso*, and *merengues* nostalgically transport customers in "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" back to longed-for and familiar spaces. Food referenced in the poem provides an effective trope for the bond forged when Lorraine read Judith's poetry and prose. Mildly spiced Puerto Rican cuisine differs sharply from mouth-excoriating dishes that characterize Mexican meals. Still, basic ingredients like rice and beans create a pervasive link, as does the sense of community that emerges while sharing food. Though a native English speaker, Lorraine was raised by Spanish-speaking parents, so words and phrases in the idiom of her parents that appear in *The Latin Deli* likewise resonated in a same-but-different way to her. Further, Judith's invocation of liminal status triggered recognition: the vestigial feeling of being an outsider in the nation of her birth, an especially strong notion in an emerging Latina writer who must likewise establish a new homeland on the page. Such connections proved so powerful that Lorraine, living in Los Angeles at the time, applied to graduate school at the University of Georgia, hoping for the chance to work with Judith. After being accepted into the university, she soon sought out Judith, who became first her teacher, then her mentor, and finally, her cherished friend.

Like Rafael, Lorraine developed a bond with Judith comprised of professional and personal connections. Judith guided Lorraine toward publication, insisting she submit her short stories for the Miguel Mármol Prize, even when Lorraine was reluctant to enter the competition because the chances of winning seemed slim. To appease Judith, though, she sent in a manuscript and won—and her first book resulted from her mentor's persistence. Judith assumed the role of mentor with her usual rigor and drive for excellence, urging students toward opportunities and using her influence when possible to launch them

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professionally. She was a tireless advocate for those she taught, and an enduring source of pragmatic wisdom beyond the classroom. Lorraine often called on Judith over the years, long after leaving Georgia to teach at Vanderbilt University, for professional advice, to exchange personal news about children and grandchildren, and to share writing.

Indeed, as acclaimed in the personal essays in “Testimonial Accounts,” Judith Ortiz Cofer had an impact that transcended the traditional boundaries of her dual positions of successful Latina author and professor of creative writing and English literature, roles that took her toward activism that she willingly undertook through her actions and her writing. Thus, in grief, we must nonetheless reflect on bequest gifts, as we are reminded in the memorial pieces by University of Georgia President Jere Morehead and renowned Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez, who consider the bounty that came of their unique relationships with Judith. Completing this section are outpourings of love and admiration for an inspiring human being—a colleague turned close friend and confidante or an influential writer who encouraged others to explore literary aspirations of their own.

As the scholarship in “Literary Accomplishments” highlights, Judith Ortiz Cofer was a trailblazing Latina writer, a role heralded by her first Pulitzer Prize nomination in 1989 for *The Line of the Sun*, the first-ever novel published by the University of Georgia Press. Judith wrote daringly of gender inequity, racism, social-class disenfranchisement, immigration, heartbreak, grief, and mental illness: subjects that, as the contributors in this issue stress, cross multiple boundaries. Indeed, her literary oeuvre clearly indicates that she stands among the first Latino and Latina writers to deal with controversial subjects, as she analyzed colonial impositions upon Puerto Ricans as defeated American citizens or explored mainstream cultural impositions upon Latinos and Latinas, including expectations of women to conform to rigid and limiting gender roles. Soon after 9/11, Judith synthesized our national horror and disbelief in a prose poem titled “The Names of the Dead: An Essay on the Phrase” that rebuked the efficacy of “official discourse” while bringing comfort and a sense of unity to many readers (59-60). Her stories, poems, and essays tenderly and movingly explore emotionally charged and difficult circumstances in ways that recognize and honor those who have endured the struggles she inscribed, as well as relate empathically to readers who have never encountered such challenges. In her writing, as in her life, Judith tempered her chronicles of hardship with characteristic resilience and a seemingly endless store of grace and wit.

As such, we have chosen to publish “Las Muchachas,” a creative non-fiction essay that made its debut at Western Carolina University’s

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Writers' Festival on April 5, 2016, where Judith Ortiz Cofer was a distinguished guest speaker. This piece is representative of an important aspect of her Latino-inspired production. Although the essay adopts a humorous approach to key cultural referents, the writing deftly critiques obstacles gender-bound traditions impose upon young Latinas.

In remembrance of Judith we invoke the poetic power of her life and literary legacy as an inspiring "talisman," an object that held strong appeal for her, evinced by the medallion she often wore of Our Lady de la Monserrate, the beloved patron saint of her native Hormigueros. Whether the articles and essays here explore memories of a long professional or personal connection with Judith or offer an analytical view of her committed activist literature, we invite readers to encounter, or reencounter, a literary icon, one who left us far too early. Likewise, this special issue of *South Atlantic Review* is intended as a poetic incantation of the power of her life's journey and the inspiring literature she produced. Through her words and our reflection on her words and her life, may we summon the energy of her spirit and definition of her character, so that while time may blunt the sharpness of our grief, the image of who she was to each of us shall remain ineradicable.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to thank John Cofer, her partner in life for forty-five years, for his permission to publish "Las Muchachas" and for his full support of this issue, including providing photographs and mementos that belonged to Judith. To him and to Dr. Tanya Cofer, we extend our heartfelt condolences. *Los acompañamos en sus sentimientos.*

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Judith Ortiz Cofer: An Homage to a Latina Activist and Literary Innovator

Rafael Ocasio

In Memoriam: To Judith, a dear friend and mentor.

Her dedication to me in my copy of *The Line of the Sun*, “I hope this is the beginning of a long association for us,” predicted a fruitful professional relationship and an inspiring friendship that spanned twenty-seven years. I am grateful for her mentoring through our zillions of emails and our formal interviews, and, most importantly, I am so thankful for her literature and her activism, which she so humbly but accurately described: “I don’t write to change the world, but I don’t mind if my writing changes the reader” (Karr 18).

Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952–2016) stands out among the first generation of Latino writers who in the early eighties attracted the attention of university and commercial publishing houses. Her first novel, *The Line of the Sun* (1989), published by the University Press of Georgia (the first novel ever published by this academic press), received a nomination for a Pulitzer Prize. It launched her into an active career as a storyteller and Latina activist speaker; as I came to witness in 1989 when I first heard Ortiz Cofer reading from *The Line of the Sun*, she often mesmerized her audience with the funny and sincere passion of a consummate storyteller.

Ortiz Cofer started her literary vocation as a poet with the chapbooks *Latin Women Pray* (1980) for *Florida Arts Gazette*; *Among the Ancestors* (1981), poems first read for a program sponsored by the Friends of the Library of Louisville, Georgia; and *The Native Dancer* (1981). She received The Florida Fine Arts Council Poetry Fellowship in 1981, followed by the John Atherton Scholar in Poetry at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in 1982. She maintained a strong connection with this reputable literary center for up-and-coming writers; there she made strong friendships with emerging writers like Julia Alvarez. National notoriety came with the collection *Peregrina* (1986), which won the Riverside International Chapbook Poetry Competition in 1985.

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Ortiz Cofer was born in the colonial town of Hormigueros on the western coast of Puerto Rico on February 24, 1952. The Ortiz Morot family moved to Paterson, New Jersey in 1954, after Judith's father joined the Navy. Their initial settling was, however, highly transient. They became part of a "floating" community of Puerto Rican immigrants, known as the generation of *la guagua aérea*: "the flying bus." Following World War II, massive aerial transportation brought Puerto Ricans to the United States in large numbers. Their presence radically changed the so-called "ethnic" neighborhoods in cities on the northeastern coast. Their physical absence also severely affected the socio-familial fabric of the island as "[r]apid industrialization and modernization in Puerto Rico [. . .] eroded the traditional economic base, giving rise to mass unemployment" (Sánchez Korrol and Hernández 1).

Puerto Ricans arrived as migrant workers at the peak of "Operation Bootstrap," which had thrust the island into an industrialized era (Acosta-Belén and Sánchez Korrol 13; Torres and Velázquez xi). Known in Puerto Rico as *Operación Manos a la Obra*, Operation Bootstrap came on the heels of World War II, when U.S. federal programs like the New Deal propelled the establishment of factories (Remington Brand, Maidenform, and Sunbeam, for example), which were drawn to the island because of special tax exception and cheap labor incentives (Merrill 184).

Operación Manos a la Obra also promoted ease in air travel between Puerto Rico and the United States. With the construction of a modern airport in 1949, Puerto Rico became an affordable travel destination and an emerging competitor in an already established Caribbean market. In 1952, for example, the Puerto Rican Tourist Bureau advertised the six to eight hour flight between San Juan to New York City as "a comparatively short distance from the mainland, a million miles from worry and care" (qtd. in Merrill 187).

Modern and affordable aerial transportation, as Torres traces, also produced a "circular migration" in which Puerto Ricans' frequent returns to the island and back to the U.S. sustained a floating migrant community strongly attached to their native island's "nationalistic sentiment" (13). Cheap airfares brought large numbers of workers to the now easily accessible New York City and other urban centers in the Northeast, like Paterson, New Jersey. They came as "seasonal workers" (Sánchez Korrol and Hernández 9) in staggering numbers: between 1946-1964, Puerto Ricans arrived at the rate of 34,165 per year for 18 years, giving rise to "the first great airborne migration into the United States" (Pérez y González 35).

The Ortiz family experienced a peculiar flying bus-like arrangement. The family had set roots in Paterson; however, each time that

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Mr. Ortiz was deployed on long-term military missions overseas, Mrs. Ortiz demanded to be allowed to go back to Puerto Rico to live with her family members in Hormigueros. As Ortiz Cofer often commented to me, this arrangement was pivotal in her character development:

I have written extensively about this period of my life because it was a time when my imagination was formed. We moved because my father was in the Navy. The actual time frame is rather confusing because I went to Paterson when I was two years old, but then we moved back to the island until I was in the third grade, and then we moved back to New Jersey. So for me, my New Jersey-self and my Puerto Rican-self are very much joined together. (Personal interview)

These trips made for a slow and harsh acculturation process, although they kept the young Ortiz Cofer in close contact with the Spanish language and with specific cultural practices (mainly religious) of the island's western coast. The deeply-felt awareness of displacement was clearly reflected in her having to re-learn English several times, which was a source of angst and personal conflict on several fronts, private and public.

The physical fragmentation and the personal and familial effects of frequent moves between Hormigueros and Paterson were often a subject of our critical conversations: "Indeed, because even though my brother and I tried to belong to one place, we couldn't, because my mother was always taking us out of school to take us back to the island. We were on the island six months and in Paterson six months, so we never belonged to either place." Her family's constant returns to the island, "shifts," as she called them, were "abrupt and always traumatic"; she became a keen observer of culture and language: "As a child going back and forth to Puerto Rico, I became very observant; I guess children who are lonely because they are dislocated and relocated geographically and emotionally become observers of life" (Ocasio, "Puerto Rican Literature" 45).

Ortiz Cofer's unorthodox schooling was also a source of a physical pain. As she wrote in her creative non-fiction essay "Primary Lesson," she found herself a first-time learner of English several times, a situation that placed her, as she candidly remembered, the target of an unwarranted teacher's aggression:

It tells how a teacher who did not know that I did not understand English threw a book over my head because of her frustration. This lesson led me to become a reader and a very

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serious student of languages, a process that was literally and symbolically painful. I decided that my main weapon in life was communication. (Ocasio, "Puerto Rican Literature" 44)

Indeed, a leitmotif in all our interviews is Ortiz Cofer's strong emphasis on how linguistic competency became a tool for keeping herself safe from physical harm: "I had to learn the language of the place I was living in order to survive" (Ocasio, "Puerto Rican Literature" 44).

The Ortiz's peculiar migrant pattern was not an exception. Clara E. Rodríguez, Sánchez Korrol and José Oscar Alers designate the entry of Puerto Ricans into American culture as a revolving process, the *va y ven* ("back-and-forth"), as Puerto Ricans returned to Puerto Rico according to the changing economic patterns in the United States. The impact on the social fabric of Puerto Rican families, as Ortiz Cofer's literary production clearly indicates, "reflects repeated ruptures and renewals of ties, dismantlings and reconstructions of familial and communal networks in old and new settings" (Rodríguez et al. 2). Indeed, Puerto Ricans in the United States became a distinctive socio-economic group, a "Commuter Nation," as Carlos Antonio Torre poignantly designates it: "an entire nation transformed into commuters and reduced to the human waste capital of unemployment and welfare, statistic of war, or to a peripheral existence within the mainstream of society and to non-persons within that periphery" (14).

The large number of Puerto Rican immigrants in the first four decades of the twentieth century had given rise to New York City's "colonias," ethnic neighborhoods "charged with the responsibility of translating the Puerto Rican way of life to unfamiliar territory generated a visual and intrinsic presence which greatly influenced future settlement patterns between the island and the mainland" (Sánchez Korrol 4). As immigration patterns shifted to other urban areas in the U.S.—Philadelphia, Chicago and Paterson—the construct of a Puerto Rican barrio became a central component of a rising artistic and literary production. The Puerto Rican barrio, as Sánchez Korrol has documented, brought together basic cultural elements for the survival of the new arrivals, including *bodegas* (grocery stores), boarding houses, restaurants, and social support institutions, like job placement agencies (4–5). Acosta-Belén and Sánchez Korrol note that key individuals related to specific socio-economic functions, like *bodegueros* (grocers), politicians, *boliteros* (numbers racket men), and clergy, provided "cultural and sociopolitical cohesion, stressing language, religion and heritage, creating workers' benefits societies and other vehicles for change and continuity" (15).

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Ortiz Cofer's first novel, *The Line of the Sun*, documents the ethnographic components of a fictional Puerto Rican barrio in New Jersey set against the familial backdrop of a young teenage girl who deals with acculturation issues that recall some of Ortiz Cofer's key childhood memories. The protagonist, Marisol, born in Salud, a rural town on the Puerto Rican western coast, has to deal with an overprotective mother and a quiet father who is often absent from family obligations because of military duties. The family had settled in Paterson rather than in New York City, an urban locale her father considers an unfit place to raise his two-year-old daughter.

With an eye for detailed historical reconstruction, Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* examines the myriad personal reasons behind the Puerto Rican family's decision to live at "El Building," located in a decaying urban center in Paterson, which was struggling with the so-called white flight that began in the 1950s. El Building also stands for a booming "Puerto Rican in the United States" culture, a hybrid multicultural fusion of marginal ethnicities, including African-Americans, which gave rise to a modern urban culture characterized by eclectic elements, as illustrated in today's hip-hop music.

Although Ortiz Cofer seemingly followed in the footsteps of "Nuyorican" writers who first popularized the ethnic elements of an urban Puerto Rican culture of New York City's "Spanish" barrios, two distinctive elements separate her work from that of the Nuyorican literary production that emerged in the mid-seventies. First, while Nuyorican writers offered highly realistic, raw images of a marginal, impoverished barrio life, Ortiz Cofer explored the cultural signifiers, such as strong nationalist sentiments and attachment to the Spanish language, that seemingly restrained her integration into U.S. mainstream society. An urban Puerto Rican culture was important to Ortiz Cofer, though, because it highlighted the peculiarities of Puerto Rican migration, in particular those characteristics related to "flying bus" patterns, which had shaped the specific social construct of her own incorporation into a Puerto Rican-Latino-American multi-hybrid identity.

A second distinctive characteristic of Ortiz Cofer's work is her use of mainstream English in lieu of "Spanglish," a hybrid, code-switching communicative linguistic form that had become synonymous with Nuyorican literature. Her use of standard English, as she often explained to me, was not an ideological stand against Spanglish. Because of her schooling, which included attending private Catholic schools in Puerto Rico and in Paterson, Spanglish was a marginal form to her: "I couldn't write in Spanglish if I wanted to, because I never spoke it" (Ocasio, "The Infinite Variety" 734).

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Ortiz Cofer did, however, consider herself an innovator of linguistic forms. Speaking about *The Line of the Sun*, she described her experimentation with the English language in order to accommodate for the Puerto Rican characters' original use of Spanish: "they didn't think in the same way as American people, their syntax was different yet readable by a mainstream American reader" ("The Infinite Variety" 734). The differences in language tonality also reflect a variety of Spanish inflections and the use of proper grammar among representative characters who reflect the diverse rural and learned social classes who came to the United States as migrants. Indeed, a notable trait of the Puerto Rican migration is its constantly evolving nature that, as Ortiz Cofer stressed, she had attempted to capture in literary form: "I think that every writer aims to do something new with the language that has been used and abused. If I have done that, maybe that's my own contribution to an always evolving literature" (Ocasio, "The Infinite Variety" 734).

Without a doubt, Ortiz Cofer's most notable contribution to the development and establishment of a Latino literature is her strong handling of women as protagonist characters. Women were an integral component in the adaptation of Puerto Rican traditions, which were re-shaped to serve the socio-economic needs of migrants living in an ethnic Puerto Rican barrio overwhelmingly dominated by macho cultural traditions. While opposing the strongly pessimistic outlook of Nuyorican literature, which throughout the seventies and most of the eighties was dominated by male writers, mainly poets, Ortiz Cofer highlighted the experiences of Puerto Rican women in their struggle against the social stigma associated with life in the Puerto Rican barrio.

In *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990), a collection of essays and poetry, autobiographical memories continued to serve as the basis for her experimentation with the testimonial boundaries of formal essays and fiction. In her acknowledgments Ortiz Cofer credits Hilma Wolitzer, poet, short story writer and novelist, who suggested in 1987 at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference that she "write my family *cuentos* as personal essays" (*Silent Dancing* n.pag). The impact of Wolitzer's recommendation was key to Ortiz Cofer's reinvention of short narrative essays that at this early stage she referred to as *cuentos*. These were stories that retold events surrounding the genesis of key poems or that interpreted and translated traditional Puerto Rican popular folk stories she had heard as a child from her grandmother in Puerto Rico:

It was out of an idea given to me by Hilma Wolitzer, who heard me read at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. I was reading

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poetry and telling my family anecdotes between the poems, and she said, ‘Well, why don’t you write those out as stories or essays?’ I came home with that idea and decided to see if it would work, and so what turned out is in *Silent Dancing*. The essays do not explain or sometimes have little to do with the poems but their genesis was the poems. I took a situation, character, idea, image or symbol and began the essays out of those poems. (Ocasio, “An Interview” 88–89)

Ortiz Cofer eventually referred to her *cuentos* as creative non-fiction essays. This concept, at the core of her mission as a consummate storyteller, was a subject that we often formally discussed as part of our critical conversations “about recollections and memories being partially fiction”: “By calling them creative non-fiction, by introducing the word ‘creative,’ I am admitting, so that there is no confusion, that what I am trying to do is non-fiction in intent, that these events actually happened, but that the way I am transmitting them to the reader may be a recreation” (Ocasio, “The Infinite Variety” 735).

Silent Dancing, winner of the Pushcart and a 1991 PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in Nonfiction, documents Ortiz Cofer’s *criollo* cultural byproducts, what Puerto Ricans called native traditions that had endured a persistent history of colonial intervention. It is also a retrospective examination of formative childhood moments from the ideological point of view of a rising feminist activist. The stories retain their oral origin that, as she frequently referenced, came from the island’s strong folk tradition:

A lot of my stories have to do with the fact that my grandmother, who is slightly suspicious of books, is a woman connected to her work, her children, her family, and has not had the opportunity or the time to be educated. She loves storytelling, though. If she can teach something by telling a story, she’ll do it. My book of essays, *Silent Dancing*, is dedicated to that very strong narrative impulse. Most of the stories in my work date back to the times when I would sit around at my grandmother’s house and listen to the women telling their stories. (Ocasio, “Speaking” 144)

Mamá, Ortiz Cofer’s grandmother, becomes a foreteller of a sort, teaching women relatives to be more like a María Sabida, the know-it-all trickster who manages to tame a mean, rich bandit known as a terrible “macho,” which, as Ortiz Cofer commented, “at that time had not yet become a popular epithet for an unliberated man. This word

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had for us the crude and comical connotation of ‘male of the species,’ stud; a macho was what you put in a pen to increase your stock” (*Silent Dancing* 18). Those who foolishly fall to the bestial charms of men may end up like “María la Loca,” a once beautiful woman, a bride left waiting at the altar, who wanders crazily around Hormigueros in a fruitless search for her true love. In their little town, the grandmother herself had become a notable character, a strong woman. She had kicked her husband out of the bridal room after eight successive pregnancies as “the only means of birth control available to a Catholic woman of her time” (*Silent Dancing* 26).

The Latin Dali: Prose and Poetry (1993), Ortiz Cofer’s second nomination for a Pulitzer Prize, celebrates barrio life as the central setting for a more mature multi-ethnic U.S.-Latino culture in the late twentieth century, a new melting pot that brings together numerous Latin American-based traditions and social ways of living. Though the work has a lyrical view of barrio life, praising the beauty of barrio culture (often viewed by outsiders as a cultural wasteland), Ortiz Cofer is more vocally political in her denouncement of the social backwardness in which local governments continued to keep these urban communities (with poor schools and lack of health centers, for example).

Characters find themselves fighting an existentialist angst that goes beyond their physical survival. This is the case of the protagonist in the story “Nada,” winner of the O. Henry Award in 1994. Upon learning that her only son has died in battle, a lonely old Puerto Rican widow gives up all her possessions before killing herself, causing a commotion among el Building’s residents, who are forced to face her decision to take her life as a representation of the vacuity of their existence. Young characters are, however, called to take action against the social backwardness of the barrio, an understanding that comes retrospectively after having endured key historical events, such as the impact of President John Kennedy’s death upon the residents of a Paterson building.

Ortiz Cofer emphasized children and young adult characters in the collection of stories *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995), winner of the inaugural Pura Belpré Prize from the American Library Association in 1996, which initiated her into the genres of children’s and young adult literature. The teenage protagonists experience the cultural shock associated with the peculiarities of the Puerto Rican “flying bus” migration patterns, particularly the constant feeling of geographical up-rootedness from frequently traveling to the island. It is more difficult for the young characters to deal with feelings of homesickness (often labeled as nostalgia) for a homeland (whether it is Puerto Rico or New Jersey) repeatedly left behind, and they struggle to make a personal connection with elders (parents and grandparents)

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who are seemingly unable to understand the needs of an up-and-coming urban youth not particularly attuned to Puerto Rican cultural values and traditions.

Ancient customs are, however, vehicles for life lessons. This is the ideological premise of *Animal Jamboree: Latino Folktales* (2012), winner of the Pura Belpré Award, which honors outstanding Latino children's and youth literature. A collection of traditional rural Puerto Rican stories for young readers, *Animal Jamboree's* fables appeal to the imagination while communicating ways in which the "smarts" of seemingly weaker animals can defeat the ostensibly insurmountable obstacles of powerful villains.

Ortiz Cofer's interest in tracing teens' experiences dealing with the disruptive effects of migrant patterns—whether because they lose the loving support of a family geographically split or because they struggle to develop their own personalities within the constructs of an urban setting—is central to her development of teenagers as protagonists. *The Year of Our Revolution* (1998), a collection of short stories and poems, includes María Elenita as one of several narrative voices, and who, as a barrio dweller, is influenced by a number of characters in her daily life. In spite of her aloofness toward them, they ultimately impact the development of her Latina identity. This emphasis on young teenage female characters carries over to the short novels, *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003) and *Call Me María: A Novel in Letters, Poems, and Prose* (2004). Both highlight young protagonists whose life stories react to crucial episodes, such as their parents dealing with social malaise stemming from unemployment, alcoholism, and crime in urban America.

The barrio is not a gloomy wasteland; it is home for young people, whose accounts bring to life key iconic characters, such as "The King of the Barrio," the local seamstresses, "el Super," and abuelas visiting from the island. A notable subject is Ortiz Cofer's depiction, in *The Meaning of Consuelo*, of a young gay man, Patricio, who successfully overcomes firmly-rooted cultural homophobia. Similarly, the title character of *Call Me María* is a teenage girl who, along with her Nuyorican father, leaves the island behind; this novel attempts to make sense of the impact of migratory Puerto Rican practices. In her effort to document her improvement in learning English, María writes letters and poems to her absent mother (in Puerto Rico), exploring her growing desire to make English the language of newly-felt emotions.

Poetry can also be an escape from an otherwise colorless life. This is the case of the girl protagonist in *The Poet Upstairs* (2012), who wonders about the identity of the mysterious Puerto Rican woman writer living in the tenement apartment above her, not knowing that she was Julia de Burgos (1914–1953). An iconic poet and strong feminist activist,

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de Burgos lived the last years of her life in New York City, where she wrote her most poignant poems.

A long-time professor of English and creative writing at the University of Georgia, Ortiz Cofer was strongly grounded in academic feminism. Her essay collection *Woman in Front of the Sun* (1999) contains an in-depth analysis of the complex physical and psychological processes that led her to become a writer, including her testimonial of the ways in which writing was her earliest medium to engage in a feminist activism while fighting the constructs of both Puerto Rican and American patriarchal societies. She furthered a feminist ideological platform as co-editor of *Sleeping With One Eye Open* (2000), a collection of essays by women writers recalling the ways they overcame obstacles to become writers. In "The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open: Notes on Being a Writer," a creative nonfiction piece, Ortiz Cofer brings back María Sabida, a well-known folk character throughout the island, as her own literary and critical alter ego. María Sabida represents any little girl, or woman for that matter, who must cleverly make use of her natural "wit" to defeat an aggressive macho, whether he be a mean bandit or a chauvinist cultural tradition.

Throughout her prolific writing career, Ortiz Cofer maintained poetry as key to her literary inspiration: "Poetry is my obsession. I think that poetry has taught me the craft of writing" (Ocasio and Ganey 143). She started publishing poetry in regional publications such as *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Southern Exposure*. National acclaim for a poet of promise came with the poetry collection *Terms of Survival* (1987), published by Bilingual Press, at that time among the top Latino publishers. These earlier poems introduced key cultural types that eventually became fully developed characters in narrative pieces. It also brought forward concepts related to the existentialist anguish of migration and separation from family. One such condition is *El Olvido*, an anxiety that distance and time may result in forgetting the cultural attachment to one's motherland and, consequently, losing one's personal identity.

Poetry is at the core of *Silent Dancing* and *The Latin Deli*, with poems that cross-pollinate key creative nonfiction essays that expand on similar subjects, often ones associated with Puerto Rican culture and their impact on her literary craft: "I consider poetry my primary genre and greatest discipline. Poetry is what connects me to my memory, to my imagination, to my subconscious life, and to my original language. In fact, I cannot think of anything that I have done in fiction or nonfiction that has not found expression in either a successful or unsuccessful poem" (Ocasio, "Puerto Rican Literature" 49).

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The impact of poetry was a frequent subject in our conversations, most particularly while discussing *The Latin Deli*. The opening poem, “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” serves as a thematic anchor for this iconic collection and establishes the powerful influence of common household objects, such as food, in soothing the nostalgia for a distant homeland. This was among her favorite poems to read in public presentations, perhaps because she often appealed to people’s visceral connection to “comfort food,” a security in one’s “feeling at home” that comes with familiarity with cultural practices, whether or not it was an audience of Latino ancestry. Similarly, “Beans: An Apologia for Not Loving to Cook” from *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* (2005), expresses disdain for making *habichuelas*, kidney bean stew, which if made in the traditional Puerto Rican way is a tedious and arduous process that enslaves women in a seemingly vacuous, however delicious, culinary tradition.

Ortiz Cofer’s poetry challenges readers to look beyond the boundaries of one’s given culture and into the exploratory journey that is life itself. The poetry collection *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* marks the beginning of her richest exploration of geographical attachment, including Georgia, which as her permanent home had had a strong impact on her becoming a Southern Latina writer. “To Understand El Azul,” a poem written in 1999 for the Opening Convocation of the new academic year at the University of Georgia, and a favorite of hers to read in public presentations, suggests that one’s native language is just the beginning of one’s “seeing” natural beauties through one’s cultural lenses. No one lens is better than another, whether white, black, southern, or Latin; rather, each individual’s unique background is tied to social constructs, and a recognition of their working dynamics would eventually result in a true “understanding” of one’s self.

The Cruel Country (2015), a cultural memoir begun while she bravely faced the duties of taking care of her dying mother, was her last published work, produced immediately after her retirement from the University of Georgia in 2013. Throughout our correspondence she was excited about her memoir and was clear that she intended it to readily engage socio-political topics. In an email on March 6, 2013, she was beaming with happiness as she described to me her impending retirement and her plans for a new project:

My big news is that this is my last year at UGA. I’m retiring—but only from my teaching job; I plan to dedicate all of my time to writing. I’m currently finishing a memoir I call a cultural elegy, chronicling the time I spent in Puerto Rico while my mother was dying, and afterwards, as I arranged for her

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Catholic burial and novenas—an immersion during which I was reminded by many people and situations that I was now completely ‘de afuera’.

She was mindful, however, that the negative term, “de afuera,” widely used in Puerto Rico to label returned Puerto Rican immigrants as “outsiders,” would dwell on one of the most dramatic consequences of the *guagua aérea* syndrome: “Puerto Ricans in the United States” are often considered marginal to their own “native” heritage by “Puerto Ricans on the island.” That ideological split is, however, deeply emotional; it sets individuals as opponents embracing seemingly opposite political leanings—Puerto Rican vs U.S. cultural values—and as concrete representations of conceptual constructions of a “Puerto Rican citizenship.”

Ortiz Cofer’s mother, a central character in both the poetry and creative non-fiction essays, had also been an important cultural informant. Having moved back to her native Hormigueros after Judith’s father’s death in 1976, her mother kept Ortiz Cofer in direct contact with contemporary Puerto Rican culture and politics through their frequent visits on the island. They also maintained a healthy correspondence, and letters often functioned as literary devices in Ortiz Cofer’s work. Memorializing her mother’s life was to be Ortiz Cofer’s final tribute to a woman who suffered the consequences of Puerto Rican immigration: “This book is important to me as it is in honor of my mother’s life.” (Letter [14 May 2013]).

The Cruel Country was to be Ortiz Cofer’s most realistic and raw depiction of Puerto Rican cultural belief systems and her comment on the island’s political status, with a deep analytical focus on the particularities of funeral customs that, as the only daughter, family members expected her to navigate flawlessly while taking care of the legalities of a bureaucratic system of inheritance. I collaborated closely with her on multiple revisions of the manuscript, and I witnessed her deep urge to preserve ethnic legitimacy while maintaining the ideological perspective as an outsider: “I do want it to be an accurate representation of the Island’s culture, but also it is a work of one individual’s vision—the daughter *de afuera*, and so it won’t be (and won’t claim to be) totally objective; all will be filtered through a particular lens. I do want the facts to be completely accurate” (Letter [30 May 2013]). Her self-characterization as an *hija de afuera* was at the core of her deeply-felt resentment that many Puerto Ricans living or raised in the United States are considered “outsiders,” although in many cases, such as herself, had maintained key Puerto Rican cultural practices (Letter [5 May 2013]).

Yet Ortiz Cofer cherished that multiple personal circumstances had, indeed, converged to shape her into an *hija de afuera*, more spe-

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cifically a “Puerto Rican from Georgia,” as we often joked to each other, feeling as though we were the only two Puerto Ricans in the state of Georgia, although we were not. She was, however, a Southerner, not “by the grace of God,” but she had a strong sentimental attachment to Georgia. Her family had moved to Augusta, where her father had retired in 1968, following relatives serving military careers and wishing to leave behind the radical urban changes in Paterson. Her married life kept her closer to rural Georgia; her husband, John Cofer, a Georgian with a long generational attachment to farming, had built a house in the “piney woods” of Louisville, as Judith often liked to refer to their home on the former grounds of a family farm.

Radical changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of Georgia had caught Ortiz Cofer’s attention. Toward the end of her career she was billing herself with a focus on her unique identity: “As a Puerto Rican Georgia writer, and as an educator, I feel I can be a model for students and show them there are different ways to be a Georgian (qtd. in O’Briant E1). She often took to elementary and high schools the message of an emerging multiracial Georgia, a population that had started to have a visual impact at state-wide levels. In 2010 she was inducted into the Georgia Writers’ Hall of Fame.

Until her death on December 30, 2016, Ortiz Cofer maintained an active literary career while bravely fighting bile valve cancer. A busy guest speaker, she was often invited to writers’ festivals throughout the United States. Her last public appearance was at the inaugural opening of Western Carolina University’s Visiting Writers Series on April 5, 2016, where she read her unpublished creative non-fiction essay “Las Muchachas.” This essay draws on her memories of her teenage years in the closely-knit Puerto Rican community in Paterson, spending time with female relatives and friends, who, like her, were turning into “young women,” struggling with the cultural implications such a new phase entitled. It is, however, an essay that speaks to the difficulties of Latinas everywhere as they too must face the strict codes of conduct imposed upon them as young women responsible for their family’s moral reputation.

Ortiz Cofer was The Distinguished Professor of English and creative writing at the University of Georgia, where she trained a number of rising authors such as Lorraine López. She is survived by her husband of forty-five years, John, her daughter Tanya and her husband Isidor Ruderfer, and her grandson Elias John.

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Both Here and There: Teaching Judith Ortiz Cofer in Puerto Rico

Ricia Anne Chansky

Culture is not something we can wake up one day and remove entirely from ourselves. It is something that is part of us no matter where we are or how much we try to hide it. I know that as soon as graduation comes closer, I'll have to make plans to leave my island to look for a better and brighter future due to the lack of opportunities here. But no matter where we are in the world, our culture will always be with us.

-- Alanis F. Font Vélez, Undergraduate Student, University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez

It scares me whenever I think of people I've never met thinking less of me just because the color of my skin or the language I speak. There are people out there that don't know me, but that hate me and that scares me. If I leave Puerto Rico, which I will, I'll be a Diasporican. I don't want to be anything else than me; I want to be Joe Centeno: huge geek and major bookworm, but that's not how the world will see me. I'll be a Boricua fresh from the motherland, trying to make it.

-- Joe A. Centeno Reyes, Undergraduate Student, University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez

These are difficult days in Puerto Rico. As a professor of Anglophone Caribbean literatures at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, I feel a heightened sense of ethical responsibility to teach my students literatures that address directly the dynamics of their lives not only as undergraduate students, but as Puerto Ricans and United States citizens. I find myself asking, in what ways can I use Caribbean literatures to create spaces for my students to reflect on their own subject positions in the in-between-ness of contested and ever-shifting perceptions of national identities? How can I teach conscientiously in the midst of the economic and humanitarian crisis we are living through, especially since it is one that emerges in large part from Puerto Rico's status as a territory of the United States?

Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Silent Dancing," a chapter from her memoir of the same name, is an important part of meeting these pedagogical objectives. I introduce my classes to Ortiz Cofer as a writer from Hormigueros and students take notice that the author of this assigned

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reading is from the next town over, just seven kilometers south on Route 2. I have always seen this textual meeting as meaningful for students in the sense that it transcribes the possible onto their own lives: They begin to think, if my neighbor can publish her story, what can I do? As I continue to introduce Ortiz Cofer to my students, though, they learn that she is also from Georgia: that she lives a life that is both here and there.

The theoretical components of this course create a contextual lens for reading contemporary literatures of the Caribbean and its diasporas by interweaving together ideas on return and circular migrations from Jorge Duany; reflections on cultural exchange from Juan Flores; theorizations of the third space and contact zones from Homi Bhabha and Mary Louise Pratt, respectively; explorations of postnationalism, especially in the Web 2.0 world, derived from Benedict Anderson's ideas on "imagined communities"; and, Sandra Pouchet Paquet's arguments on intertextuality in Caribbean literatures. Therefore, when the students read "Silent Dancing," they are able to approach this piece with the understanding that lives and literatures can be concurrently from here and there. They read and recognize selves who exist in third spaces that become contact zones, comprehending that individuals caught up in the fraught spaces of diasporas, migratory patterns, and cultural exchanges are both beyond and mired in national identities. Students also come to understand that those who are constructed in—and who simultaneously participate in the construction of—these diasporic spaces, have intersubjectivities that are both of the moment and constantly reaching into history for suitable others through which to define a relational self.

The slipperiness of dual identities—those formed both here and there—explored in "Silent Dancing" offers students an inroad into self-reflexive dialogue on the stratified selves of contemporary Puerto Rican identity constructions. The structure of the narrative and its entwined temporalities—slipping from the present, in and out of a home movie, and concluding with a dreamscape—illustrate the in-between-ness of belonging created by traversing dichotomous spaces of nation and citizenship. These pairings, binary oppositions of national selves, are most prominently observed in the contrast between the three women sitting together in the home movie, all wearing red dresses: *la novia*, who "is just up from the Island, which is apparent in her body language;" *la gringa*, the cousin who has long ago lost "the mark of the new immigrant" (90); and the author's mother.

While *la gringa* has erased *la mancha* (the mark of the recent migrant), *la novia* wears a "green stain on her wedding dress" (95) as if permanently colored by the landscape of Puerto Rico. Ortiz Cofer's

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mother, the supposed balance between these two extremes, “is somewhere halfway between the poles [these two women] represent in our culture;” however, she “never got over yearning for *la isla*” (90). Even her mother, seen by Ortiz Cofer as the meeting place between the disparities of possible diasporic identities, longs for Puerto Rico. The desire for a return to *la isla* positions Puerto Rico as a reward to be re/attained. Throughout the memoir, Ortiz Cofer calls attention to the ways in which the flavors and sounds of the island are interwoven into her early life in Paterson, New Jersey as precious commodities. In *El Building*, “voices . . . in Spanish could be heard all day. *Salsas* blasted out of radios . . . Women seemed to cook rice and beans perpetually” (90). “[P]recious *sofrito*” is “smuggled” in and “hoarded” (94). The first time Ortiz Cofer sees “a grown man cry was at a . . . party. He had been reminded of his mother by the smells in the kitchen” (94). Everyone is hungry for some taste of home; everyone except *la gringa*.

For *la gringa*, *la isla* is a place from which she escaped. She refers to Puerto Rico as “some primitive island,” asserting that she is “an American woman” who will “do as I please” (96). She claims that she “never speak[s] Spanish” and “hate[s] rice and beans” (96). *La isla* eventually becomes a punishment to her. A botched home abortion reveals her affair with “a teacher in her school with a house in West Paterson that he was filling up with real children, and a wife who was a natural blond” (97). She is ultimately “sent to a village in Puerto Rico . . . a place so far away from civilization that you have to ride a mule to reach it” (97). Her too-American ways have resulted in her being sent “home.”

I am always grateful that Ortiz Cofer presents this duality of diasporic Puerto Rican identities constructed here and there in a way that is immediately relevant to my students’ lived experiences. However, it is the representation of Puerto Rico as both reward and punishment on which our current conversations focus. Ortiz Cofer’s family left Puerto Rico in the mid-1950s because of “economic pressures” (87). We on the island are currently living through our own economic pressures as we try to survive an extended recession and navigate the austerity measures enacted by the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act of 2016—a US Congressional fiscal oversight board that is laughably abbreviated to “Promesa” (Promise). While the board was created to oversee the management of the over 70 billion dollars’ worth of debt that Puerto Rico has accrued, the tangible outcomes for the residents thus far have been the dramatic reduction of funds for healthcare and education.

The present state of the economy and subsequent lack of opportunities force the majority of students to leave *la isla* if they wish to pursue the professional careers that they have trained for in their un-

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dergraduate (and often times graduate) studies. CNN reported that in 2014 an average of 230 people *per day* migrated from Puerto Rico to the United States (Acevedo). A 2012 *USA Today* report focused specifically on our university and the fact that recruiters from the continental United States are “aggressively courting the most coveted slice of the U.S. workforce: college grads trained in all the hot-button STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines. Add that these students [from UPRM] are bilingual, don’t need a passport, visa or any government permission to work stateside, and it’s clear why they’re a hot commodity” (El Nasser). Within the context of Puerto Rico’s ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis, success at the university creates a type of homelessness as academic triumphs often tend to dislocate students’ lives and selves rather than remunerate them for their achievements.

As a class, we spend a substantial amount of time discussing the dualities of diasporic identities and trying to pick apart the many layers of Ortiz Cofer’s narrative. In this upper-level undergraduate course, graduation looms near and all-too-real for the enrolled students; some of them even have their post-graduation jobs already lined up. Criticizing and praising connectivity to home culture within the space of the text—under the auspices of the characters’ attempted assimilation to, integration with, and rejection of a new home space—leads to larger conversations of where these readers might find themselves in a year or two. For some students, the three characters of *la novia*, *la gringa*, and Ortiz Cofer’s mother, when read together as distinct parts of a whole, become a metaphor for multifaceted identities constructed as both here and there. For others, wrestling with the concept of home as reward and punishment provides a way into conflicted feelings about the recession, the debt, Promesa, and the austerity measures tightening their grip on Puerto Rico. For all of the students, studying these silent dances provides ways to begin untangling the contradictions of lives lived in a perpetual state of in-between-ness. It offers them a space to confront and begin wrestling with the contours of their own identity constructions.

We’ll miss Judith, my students and me. We’ll miss knowing that she’s in Hormigueros or in Georgia. That she’s in Hormigueros and in Georgia. Both here *and* there.

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Judith Ortiz Cofer and the Ecology of Creating Identity

Donna A. Gessell

Throughout her work, Judith Ortiz Cofer uses ecological imagery to describe the construction of identity and culture, emphasizing their interconnectedness. Her organic images—profuse landscapes, lush gardens, and prolific plants, as well as a lone flower and sparse cityscapes—explore the symbiosis between individuals and their environments both natural and constructed, both physical and social. In addition to detailing organic processes such as the life cycle—growth, decomposition, succession, reproduction, and regeneration—she also notes macroprocesses of change, including location, dislocation, and relocation. Consistently, though, her use of this imagery resists the simplistic. Instead she constructs sophisticated versions of reality through an ecological approach that apprehends interrelatedness and privileges the complex. As with her use of imagery, ecology “deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life,” assuming the interconnectedness of the web of life, especially privileging its interstices, the places of connection (“Ecology”). For example, at the end of “And May He Be Bilingual,” Ortiz Cofer uses a powerful ecological metaphor to invoke the organic imagery of gardening to describe the interdependence of culture:

What I’m trying to say is that the phenomenon we call culture in a society is organic, not manufactured. It grows where we plant it. Culture is our garden, and we may neglect it, trample on it, or we may choose to cultivate it. In America we are dealing with varieties we have imported, grafted, cross-pollinated. I can only hope the experts who say that the land is replenished in this way are right. It is the ongoing American experiment, and it has to take root in the classroom first. (*Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer* 124-25)

Analyzing her ecologically rich passages, this paper employs ecocriticism to examine the intersections between the complexities of the physical environment that Ortiz Cofer constructs and the social environments that she creates as she explores individual identity. It argues that exploring the system interdependences available through ecological models illuminates how she makes available to her characters and

readers alike more sophisticated constructions of reality, like those she first created for herself. When applied to social constructs, the ecological model of restorative change allows for an examination of such aspects as cultural dislocation, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and psychic reconfiguration, all available in her writing.

Dislocation and Resisting a Simple Relocation

Ortiz Cofer's work often deals with her personal dislocation, involving not only her immigration from Puerto Rico to Paterson, New Jersey, but also her move to Augusta, Georgia. Acknowledging her "dislocation and living in two worlds," Ortiz Cofer claims that she writes in order "to put together the disparate elements of my existence" ("Visiting Author"). However, her exploration is made even more complex. Instead of simply exploring dislocation and relocation, she explores restoration, a more sophisticated ecological model that involves constructing an interwoven web of culture. She does so through the use of metaphorical conceits as well as her use of *cuentos* ("stories").

Using metaphors explicates the complex process of constructing identity and describing the experience of living between cultures. Juxtaposing seemingly contradictory ideas, metaphors at once explain the ordinary yet create art, as Ortiz Cofer explains: "I attempt to make the ordinary rise toward all its symbolic potential. I try to make art out of the only material I have available to me, my life and what I have learned from living it and examining it" ("Woman in Front of the Sun" 59). Furthermore, to invoke the complexity of her ecological images, oftentimes Ortiz Cofer uses *cuentos*, again elegantly inviting readers into the multivalent, which at first may seem simple, at least on the surface level. However, these *cuentos* are never naively told, as she indicates with a comment on her grandmother's storytelling: "So to her the story is not intellectual nor political, but of course it is both" (Acosta-Belén 87). She further explains that these "morality and cautionary tales told by the women in our family for generations [are] stories that became part of my subconscious as I grew up in two worlds, the tropical island and the cold city, and which would later surface in my dreams and in my poetry" (*Silent Dancing* 15).

Because the *cuentos* often employ ecological relationships to describe how identity is created and transformed, the hybrid nature of Ortiz Cofer's work is further empowered, as evidenced in her comments on her mental processes of reclaiming the territory of identity through her *cuentos*:

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As I look deeper into myself, I discover that I left the place where my family's well is located. As a writer I am always in the new territory of Myself Alone. I am looking for new lands to discover every time I begin a sentence. I carry nothing but a dowser's wand and my need to make order, to find a few answers. So by recalling kitchen-table conversations in my notebook, re-inventing them as I go along, perhaps I am moving at a snail's pace toward understanding through my poems, stories, and essays. ("A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook" 34)

Through her use of extended ecological metaphors and *cuentos*, her process of restoration recognizes the complexity of societies as well as that of the interstice between the two. The ecologies she employs invoke a myriad of interconnections among the forces she explores. She acknowledges her dislocation, refusing a simple restoration; instead, she claims more sophisticated processes for constructing an identity. This ecological model, because it allows for system interdependence, more nearly describes the process of negotiating between cultures. Likewise, as she rejects a static, single notion of identity, she appropriates a more ecological model of identity, one simultaneously lodged in the imagination, yet linked to her environment, fully evoking their interlaced complexities.

Restorative Ecology

Ortiz Cofer's writing can be described as employing "restorative ecology," a process that attempts to restore the ecology of an earlier time by involving its intricacies and recognizing its transience. This approach is a less usual one than simple relocation because, although change is a given, humans often resist change especially when trying to restore a memory of an idealized situation. Therefore, both in writing and in ecology, restoration attempts often ignore ecological change and environmental variability. As Stephen Jackson explains in "Finding Your Way Back Home, or at Least Learning How it Looked," restoration "implies identification of some pre-existing state to which a landscape or ecosystem can or should be returned" (301). Thus, a very real problem in the process of restoration becomes isolating an earlier time to recover, a process that imagines and then clings to a static moment, ignoring the inevitability of change. Resisting this model that doesn't allow for change, ecologists employing restorative ecology use diachronic analysis studies to determine just how an ecological system changes with time. Ortiz Cofer adopts a similar tactic: "Yet when I write about these

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gypsy days [of her childhood], I construct a continuity that allows me to see my life as equal to any other, with its share of chaos, with its own system of order" ("And May He Be Bilingual" 121). This process of restorative ecology discovers all of the various organisms and processes at work in the earlier time, a task that is daunting, if not impossible because of the complexity of any ecological system. However, autobiography attempts that, as Rocío Davis argues in "Metanarrative in Ethnic Autobiography for Children: Laurence Yep's *The Lost Garden* and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*" the metanarrative it constructs "supports the idea that language, immigrant histories, family, and location exist in a relation of dynamic interdependent parts" (139).

Although Ortiz Cofer resists the static moment, her characters sometimes embrace it. For example, Ortiz Cofer admits that "the idyllic imaginary place which my mother always called la isla, la casa [the Island, the home], existed only in her mind and still does" (Acosta-Belén 88). Other characters who have been in the U.S. long enough to speak "only English even when addressed in Spanish" have created fixed models so that "[t]he Island to them was an exotic place where their parents had been born long ago" ("Corazón's Café" 111, 112).

The process for restorative change, however, is also problematized because the larger environment may have changed drastically, in ways such as changes in temperature or the introduction of "exotics." These drastic changes may prohibit the survival of earlier organisms and may disrupt earlier systems. Ortiz Cofer suggests the results of the inevitability of changes in the larger environment in her poem, "Before the Storm." She describes what may happen at a homecoming if they have to evacuate: "And when we come home, if / we come home, if there's a home where we believe / we left one, it will all be different" (16-18). Although she developed keen insights for her writing from her experience of these shifts, this realization came at a cost to Ortiz Cofer: Multiple times she was dislocated and forced to recognize and adapt to the difference.

Location and Connectedness

In many of her works Ortiz Cofer asserts her identity through a connection with the land, as she does in "Woman in Front of the Sun":

The palm trees lining the road are in such fluid motion that for a moment I feel that I am on the deck of a ship. This effect of group consciousness, of movement choreographed to a frenetic underscore, is all part of my earliest memories of the

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Island; it has always seemed to me that this place is somehow more alive than the roomy mainland, buzzing like a beehive, teeming with lives being lived in close proximity. I am drawn to it, caught in it. (55)

In fact, when Ortiz Cofer's characters are grieving, their connection with the land weakens, invoking plant imagery to show the process. In her poem "Fever," the narrator describes herself living on her mother's "sorrow so sweet / and sustaining that I lived on it, / as simply as the houseplant that adapts / to what light filters into a windowless room" (21-24). In "Corazón's Café," the narrator's father misses his wife so much that he "would not even allow flowers in the house, because she had always had things blossoming and growing her home" (98). In *Call Me María*, her narrator describes her first foray into her new home in a chapter titled "Like the First Flower," evoking the promise of a single bloom in an otherwise bereft cityscape (3).

In other places, Ortiz Cofer illustrates the concept of location through a biological connection by contrasting two kinds of gardens: one in Puerto Rico and the other in the U.S. In the Puerto Rican settings, she connects the riotous growth of the gardens to homes and health; for instance, she describes her grandmother's garden, with its curative powers:

In front of the house she grows flowers and lush trailing plant; in the back, where the mango tree give shade, she has an herb garden. From this patch of weedy-looking plants came all the remedies of my childhood, for anything from a sore throat to menstrual cramps. Abuela had a recipe for every pain that a child could dream up, and she brought it to your bed in her own hands smelling of the earth. ("The Witch's Husband" 43-44)

Another Puerto Rican garden Ortiz Cofer describes is safeguarding: "a thickly overgrown backyard. The banana trees, the huge breadfruit tree, and the assorted plants that their mother had once cultivated but were now like a forest provided great cover" ("Corazón's Café" 96). Indeed, these gardens offer protection with their complexity and interconnectedness. However, in the U.S., the gardens are either paltry or altogether absent. She describes the house next to El Building as "the only house on the block that had a yard and trees" ("American History" 8). In fact El Building not only has no garden, "El Building blocked the sun to such an extent that they had to turn lights on in the middle of the day. I felt ashamed about it" ("American History" 13). Likewise,

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Paterson, New Jersey has “dreary streets with their slush-covered sidewalks and the skinny trees of winter looking like dark figures from a distance” (“The Paterson Public Library” 131). The northern U.S. landscapes offer no life-supporting shelter, and the characters feel a lack of connectedness.

Within such different landscapes, Ortiz Cofer’s characters must imagine a new concept of identity, a process that involves disengaging themselves from the land. Instead of being able to go outside for the produce growing immediately around their homes, they have to shop for it. This dislocation translates into a change in sociological patterns for the characters living in the U.S. In “Corazon’s Café” the connection to these fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices is only possible by truck, driven from Paterson, N.J. to Miami to procure the fresh produce, which has been imported from Puerto Rico. Their disconnection from the land is almost complete, as the connection is held in place by only the thinnest of threads.

The dislocation is particularly evident in her poem “Nothing Wasted.” The narrator claims her mother “always kept / something growing in our homes,” even though her family moved often. That disruption is in Ortiz Cofer’s description of the nest of the doves her mother keeps, which one night results in a broken egg. Ortiz Cofer’s mother “toss[es] it / out the window into thick vegetation / that would absorb it as nourishment” (32-34). However, the negativity of the disruption, the breaking of the promise of new life in the egg, is transformed into new life just outside the window. The ecological image suggests that, although the characters’ lives are constantly disrupted through dislocation, the complexity of interconnectivity will guarantee survival because of the systems of interdependence that it creates.

An extended exploration of this process of dislocation from the land and relocation into a community is available in “Corazón’s Café.” In its first phase Manuel’s mother’s garden is transformed into a riot of sensations, heightened by the context of sexuality:

They made love with the window thrown wide open to the smells of the Island, all concentrated on Doña Serena’s property—her little garden of herbs with the pungent oregano overwhelming all the other aromatic plants, the cayenne peppers, the cilantro, the tasty Puerto Rican coriander, the *pimientos y ajíes* that went into her condiments and permeated even the naked wood of the house with the smell of food cooked in her kitchen every day. The breeze blew through the trees that surrounded and protected the little plot of cultivated ground, and it too added a special fragrance from the papaya with its

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pendulous fruit hanging delicately from its slender branches, and the banana trees that, even when not laden with stalks of the fat little guineitos niños that are melt-in-the-mouth sweet when fried, still bore the leaves that the expert cook knows should be used to wrap food that is boiled--to add final touch of taste and also to make food a gift to be unwrapped in celebration. (102-3)

Manuel reshapes his knowledge of gardening and love of cooking into a career of selling the kinds of food he once grew. When Manuel and Corazón immigrate and he can no longer offer their own freshly harvested food, he wants “to offer people more than a place to buy their groceries; he want[s] to create the ideal food store where he would teach his customer how to select each fruit and vegetable and how to cook them too” (104). His vocation, with its connections to the land, brings purpose to his wife, integrating both of them into the community as they provide foods for community celebrations, which also develops their larger relationships with their business networks as well as their personal relationship. Systemically, then, the connection strengthens the couple and their entire community, extending it beyond the neighborhood. After Manuel’s death, Corazón enters El Building, and

[a]t the bottom of the staircase, she took a deep breath, remembering Manuel’s claim, that, simply from the lingering smells, he could tell her what each family in each apartment had had for dinner that evening and whether they had bought the condiments at Corazón’s Café. Corazón inhaled deeply the aromas of her country and started the climb up to her home. (116)

The ambiguity of “her country” is resolved with the words “her home.” Although she cannot define her home as a place, like the plants, she has formed who she is organically, maintaining a firm network of interconnections. Time has torn apart the finer strands of acquaintances, and death has claimed one of the anchor strands, but the web holds fast, reinforced through its interdependence with the community.

Thus, having lost their connection to the land, the community’s interconnectedness becomes even more pronounced through the symbolism of the physical ecosystem. The relationships are not reductive; instead, Ortiz Cofer insists that imagination is needed to understand the abstraction inherent in the paradigm of the ecological element symbiosis, the act of living for the benefit of one another without diminishing individual resources.

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Dislocation and Reterritorializing

Indeed, much has been written—by Ortiz Cofer as well as her critics—about her dislocation in childhood, her moving between Puerto Rico and New Jersey and her attempts to “construct a continuity” (“And May He Be Bilingual” 121). However, as an adolescent with two and a half years left in high school, she experienced an even greater dislocation in moving to the rural South in 1968 (“The Story of My Body” 144). Her portrayal of this experience, once again, emphasizes the organic nature of identity in her work. Through her use of imagery employing environmental symbols, she reveals truths through an ecological perspective.

In order to find “a better place for us to live,” her father transplanted the family “to Augusta, Georgia, where he had relatives [who] [. . .] had convinced him that it was a healthier place to rear teenagers” (“Advanced Biology” 127). The relocation was perhaps the most disruptive in her psychic configuration of identity, one she describes as “a shock to the senses, like moving from one planet to another” (127). She explains that “where Paterson had concrete to walk on and gray skies, bitter winters, and a smorgasbord of an ethnic population, Georgia was red like Mars, and Augusta was green—exploding in colors in more gardens of azaleas and dogwood and magnolia trees—more vegetation than I imagined possible anywhere not tropical like Puerto Rico.” She continues, “People seemed to come in two basic colors: black and blond. And I could barely understand my teachers when they talked in a slowed-down version of English like one of those old 78-speed recordings played at 33” (127-28). In her poems and essays set in Georgia, she explores just how the South redefines her identity as an immigrant Puerto Rican and transplanted Northern city-dweller. Georgia, both literally and metaphorically, represents sites of conflict and refuge.

In “What We Feared,” Ortiz Cofer uses what she labels as the “economy of nature” in a way that deterritorializes our concept of spring, reterritorializing it into new psychic concepts (29). The themes of dying and pain, transformed into spring and rebirth, show how psychic reconfiguration informs her works. According to Donelle Dreese in *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*, psychic reconfiguration suggests that “The deterritorializations and the psychic reterritorializations are present in the form of landscapes or places used literally and metaphorically to represent sites of conflict or refuge where the writers criticize and reconstruct borders and zones of human and ideological contact” (48). Descriptions of landscapes then become key to understanding how Ortiz Cofer first unmakes identity and then remakes it. In “What We

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Feared,” she describes spring in Georgia as destructive, using terms of dying and pain, both of which are “startling” (17). However, her poem continues in its ecological imagery, asserting that both are necessary to bring about growth. This “economy of nature [. . .] / is spring, what we feared” (23-24), rejecting a simple sentimental vision of spring, instead creating a site of conflicting images. Dominated by Georgia red clay, the landscape becomes “The thawing earth / down with a fever that will break / in beauty” (1-3). The illness of the place transforms into suffering, as “a Victorian woman / dying in childbirth” with her “translucent flesh heaving / in the ecstasy [sic] of pain” (6-7). The red of the land becomes “blood gathered at the mouth / for a final red scream” (9-10). Even the “First rose of the season” (11), offering hope in its redness, “opens limp petals lined in black” (12) and becomes a “sad / as an overdressed girl / passed out on the bathroom floor” (12-14). This poem, through its deterritorialization and reterritorialization creates a new landscape that redefines the author, while redefining place, and in the process transforms the reader. Indeed, the reader is left with “spring, what we feared” (24), but also what we longed for because of its opportunities for new life (29).

Through these images of her dislocation, Ortiz Cofer reconstructs her beliefs about ethnicity and the individual’s connection to place, re-mapping her landscape and self-identity. In fact, just before the frame-ending of the “Advanced Biology” essay, over her dissection of a fetal pig, Ortiz Cofer hints at the true lessons she has learned: “we were ready to delve into this mystery of muscle and bone; eager to discover the secrets that lie just beyond fear and a little past loathing; acknowledging the corruptibility of the flesh and our own fascination with the subject” (128).

Repeatedly in her essays in *The Latin Deli*, Ortiz Cofer uses her own body as both a literal and figurative site of ecology and identity, revealing the secrets of psychic reconfiguration that “lie just beyond fear and a little past loathing” (“Advanced Biology” 128). She explores the effects of moving on her perception of her body image. The essay “The Story of My Body” begins with an epigraph by Victor Hernández Cruz: “Migration is the story of my body,” insinuating that the story of Ortiz Cofer’s body is also migration (135). After considering the categories of her skin, color, size, and looks, the essay concludes with her evaluation that “I had brains for sure and some talent in writing. These facts were a constant in my life. My skin color, my size and my appearance were variables—things that were judged according to my current self-image, the aesthetic values of the times, the places I was in, and the people I met” (146). She acknowledges the direct effects of place on perceptions of ethnicity.

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Perhaps the most chilling lesson set in the Georgia landscape lies in the changing perceptions of her skin color. As part of "The Story of My Body," she recounts a tale from her social life in the Augusta high school where there were "nearly two thousand students that had just that year been forced to integrate," a process with the questionable result that: "[t]here were two black girls and there was me" (144). Already, in Paterson, she realized that skin color determines how others perceive looks: "I came there from Puerto Rico, thinking myself a pretty girl, and found that the hierarchy for popularity was as follows: pretty white girl, pretty Jewish girl, pretty Puerto Rican girl, pretty black girl" (143). Rationally she acknowledges that ethnicity is a sore point in the United States: "where it is a touchy and sometimes even embarrassing topic to discuss, except in a political context" (136). Emotionally, she isn't prepared for how ethnicity determines matters of her heart. Her strict father does not allow her "to date casually" but she "was allowed to go to major events like a prom or a concert with a boy who had been properly screened" (145). When she does desire to date "Ted," she works for a year so that he finally notices her and asks her out. However, she is heartbroken when he breaks the date the night before because of his father's racism. The cruelty intensifies as he repeats his father's words to her, "as if I should understand *his* predicament when I heard why he was breaking our date":

His father had asked who he was going out with. Ted had told him my name. "Ortiz? That's Spanish, isn't it?" the father had asked. Ted had told him yes, then shown him my picture in the yearbook. Ted's father had shaken his head. No. Ted would not be taking me out. Ted's father had known Puerto Ricans in the army. He had lived in New York City while studying architecture and had seen how the spics lived. Like rats. (146)

For Ortiz Cofer, the zone of contact becomes "the heaviness of my blanket in which I wrapped myself like a shroud," while "grateful for her [mother's] understanding silence," despite an earlier warning that "You better be ready for disappointment" (146, 145). She retreats to isolation and silence as refuge in this Southern landscape.

This story is followed by her poem "The Chameleon" in which the reptile "froze as himself / his eyes on me as if waiting / for me to change. / But I stayed the same" (7-10). Despite the attempt of anyone to change her, she remains the same, and "The Story of My Body" ends with the reterritorialization of her body and the reconstruction of her self image: "My studies, later my writing, the respect of people who saw me as an individual person they cared about, these were the criteria for

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my sense of self-worth that I would concentrate on in my adult life” (146).

Perhaps Ortiz Cofer best describes the power of the process of psychic reconfiguration, with its deterritorializations and psychic reterritorializations, in which she creates new landscapes in her zones of contact, places that serve as sites of refuge to reconstruct self, when she writes,

Although as a child I often felt resentful of my rootlessness, deprived of a stable home, lasting friendships, the security of one house, one country, I now realize that these same circumstances taught me some skills that I use today to adapt in a constantly changing world, a place where you can remain in one spot for years and still wake up every day to strangeness wrought by technology and politics. We can stand still and find ourselves in a different nation created overnight by decisions we did not participate in making. I submit that we are all becoming more like the immigrant and can learn from her experiences as a stranger in a strange land. (“And May He Be Bilingual” 121-22)

Hence, reading her experiences in Georgia reshapes the consciousness of the reader. Dreese explains this process: “These writers have made it their goal to unapologetically redefine the ground they traverse and change the consciousness of their readers through writing” (47). Her work develops what Carmen Faymonville in “New Transnational Identities in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s Autobiographical Fiction” terms “new literary spaces [. . .] a hybridized form” of traditions from both cultures (149). She continues: Ortiz Cofer “posits a homeland as a place that also has to be imagined by nurturing a sense of communal distinctiveness. Her imagination of ‘home,’ however, does not have to take the shape of a particular community rooted in a particular sort of place. [. . .] the physical setting and the geography themselves are not a given, but have to be imagined along with the more abstract ‘home’ or ‘community’” (133-34). The reader becomes part of this imaginative process, a process made necessary because “This separation of soil from political and psychological space is nowadays necessary since community always has to be imagined. [. . .] community must go beyond immediate experience and location if it is to embrace inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness” (Faymonville 150). Ortiz Cofer herself admitted in a 2003 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* interview, “But my psychological home has shifted. [. . .] I no longer feel completely at home on the island . . . even though my imagination still resides there” (C2).

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Restoring Identity through Language

Of all of her work, perhaps *Call Me María* most systematically treats the complexity of how an individual can reconstruct identity to become a poet. The novel explores the spaces created within the dislocation of cultures, as María ultimately reterritorializes her identity through her multiple languages. Subtitled “A novel in letters, poems, and prose,” the work explores the budding poetic moments of María, who is torn between geography, relationships, and language: her mother’s native Puerto Rico and her father’s native barrio in New York City. As María’s identity shifts, her memories contrast the brilliant colors of her sunny native country with the grays of New York City. In the process of de-territorializing and reterritorializing her identity, she begins to create an ecologically poetic vision that takes roots in her English writing, where her prose and letters and poetry are intertwined in a language of vibrant, living symbols. Through the garden metaphors she learns to create, she finds her own identity in language and establishes her new location in her writing.

Through María, Ortiz Cofer explores the organic process of forming new identities: suspending identity by detachment from objects related to both cultures, creating different views of identity by relocating its material touchstones, reattaching to details that construct identity with unsentimental attention, and finally constructing new symbols that allow restorative change. Different aspects of variety and play in language form the basis for each poem, letter, or piece of prose that make up the book’s fifty chapters. The language reveals varied traits of identity, as the various pieces of writing chronicle the shift in María’s ideas of identity through the biological images she constructs.

The opening chapter, a poem, is one of dislocation. María contrasts her home in the U.S., a basement apartment, with that of her “house near the sea” (19). By the very next chapter, another poem, we already experience a different view of the apartment, as we also begin to experience María’s abilities to make metaphor of her experiences, using her unique point of view to tell truths in what she calls “Instant History.” In the next chapter, “Like the First Flower,” she relates how

There is one window at sidewalk level
from where I can see people’s legs up to their knees.
[. . .]
From my underground
home I will watch the world go by until
I am ready to surface, *una flor en la primavera*. (1-2, 10-12)

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She takes control of the process of deterritorialization as we learn that she has “had to decide between parents, languages, climates, futures,” and she chooses to use her vantage point where she is able to make up stories or “instant histories,” to “explore a new world, conquer English, become strong, grow through the concrete like a flower that has taken root under the sidewalk. I will grow strong, with or without the sun” (14). Her growth, however, involves the pruning of false history, as she realizes that the reality of her new home is far from what she had imagined from listening to her father’s stories: “[I]t turned out to be very little like the futuristic vision he once had of his *familia* in a shining home replete with laborsaving devices and technology making our lives easier; in fact, here we have traded down from the life we had on the Island. [. . .] But he does not seem to remember his promises of a high-tech, steel-shiny future, and I do not remind him” (17). Her father makes the transition easily: “Week by week Papi is becoming more a part of this building, this street, this life. He is connecting to the people in ways that do not include me” (17). Instead, she uses her view out of the apartment in her psychic reconfiguration, establishing concepts of her evolved identity within language: learning to “dream in two languages,” making comparisons between the words she is learning and those that her mother is teaching to students in Puerto Rico, as she writes to her mother: “I know your *estudiantes* are learning green, blue, sun, mountains, music friends; I am learning gray, snow, dark, cold, lonely, mall, clothes, music, friend” (18, 21). Aware that language and identity are integral, María claims, “I know words in two languages. I will not give up either one. It gives me an advantage to know more than you know. [. . .] I will not forget my first language. And now I know my second language well enough so that I am not going to be lost in America” (28).

María’s awakening sense of how language creates identity is demonstrated through her understanding that others cannot survive as well as she can because they resist reterritorialization. The characters not able to use language are the ones who are less likely to adapt their identities to relocate and adapt—to survive. María comes to understand simple restoration when she sees how her father’s behavior reinforces his tenants’ frozen images when he transforms “himself from janitor to balladeer for the nostalgic little groups of refugees from paradise” [. . .] “who are like Amazons in their daily battles to survive in this place that will always feel like a foreign country,” but who “have been taught in Spanish that they are Island people, and they believe this myth because it makes them feel special [. . . even though] Puerto Rico is a “world that they never really knew” but “they believe they should long for although some of them have never been there” (31-32). Instead, she

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realizes that each person creates his or her own identity through restorative ecology, that these islands

are not exactly the same,
we carry different islas
inside us, yet it is
the same Island
that we love, and
we love it
in the same way. ("What My Father Likes to Eat:" 75-81)

She argues, "Home is where you need to be no matter where you are taken, the place that calls to you" (32).

Cuentos become part of María's process of psychic reconfiguration. As a language teacher, her mother understands the importance of telling stories to create identity and connect with the world. To encourage her daughter's "game" of "Instant History," which she describes as "invent[ing] people's lives as you watch their feet walk by the window of the basement apartment, or just from observing them at a distance," she writes María a *cuento* (33). This particular *cuento* is "about a greedy baker who wanted to charge the starving man for the smell of his fresh-baked goods, aromas which gave the poor man pleasure and hope":

He took the beggar to court to make him pay for what he was taking from him. The judge to everyone's amazement agreed with the baker. "If a man enjoys the smell of your labor, good *panadero*, then he must pay you in kind." The judge gave the poor man some coins from his own pocket and called both men to the bench. "Now, my brother, I want you to put those coins in your pocket and jingle them so the baker can hear the sound of money and thus you will settle your debt to the baker." (33)

Instead of seeing María's game as "violating people's privacy by imagining their lives and enjoying your fantasies," she urges her daughter, "The world is a feast for the senses" (33). She connects identity with the physical, observable world.

María finds her freedom through her struggles between her different languages to explore how their symbols construct different views of reality and grows into her new identity. The space that language opens to her stimulates her imagination to create poetry, to describe a reality beyond her reach, one available only in detachment from both cultures. The poet does not focus on the self; instead, the poet uses a larger

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moral vision as a tool to view reality critically, rejecting sentimentalism. And thus, the created poem, with its exactness and its view that is independent of the self, in turn has the ability to affect others because of its truth. By rejecting the tyranny of identity narrowly defined by culture or other self-limiting factors, the poet embraces the freedom of reason, gained through a morality that is not selfish but community centered, an ecological model in its complex notions of the interconnectedness of the individual with community.

María understands the pitfalls of the process of restorative identity. Her understanding of her father helps her to understand her mother. However, because of their relatively static identities, both her father and mother fail to understand each other. María admits “Both my parents are wrong about each other” and she forgives her father, saying “I felt sorry for my father, who was trying as hard as I was to earn a part in the script of our new American life that we have to write for ourselves, every day” (114, 124). She realizes these insights only after connecting to the poetics of identity as an ecological process.

This organic process of psychic reconfiguration into poet culminates in the seven chapters that detail her grandmother’s visit. First, dislocation occurs when María paints the guest bedroom white, as devoid of life as a New Jersey winter. In the next chapter, “La Abuela’s Island Lament: A One-Act Play,” the now familiar location and dislocation of identity are yet again juxtaposed: María’s mother’s mother and her father take turns stating their memories of place. Hers is sunshine and his is feeling the outsider, his “Spanish sounded funny” and his “Fresh American blood” fattening the mosquitos that bite him (93). Their contradictions are left unresolved, the tension left in the air that has been rent by a sudden thunderstorm and electrical blackout. In the next chapter María makes a connected whole from the disparate pieces when she is charged with creating an “outfit for Who You Are Day at school” (95). The activity is an attempt by her school’s administrators to encourage students to communicate in the school’s multi-cultural setting where students are isolated by their cultures. María accepts her teacher’s challenge to dress “as a poem” and not a joke, by creating a restorative identity, dressing in her mother’s skirt, a blouse made from her friend’s sari, her father’s sharkskin suit jacket, and another friend’s shoes (95). Her grandmother, witnessing the statement, provides her with her own mother’s shawl, and paraphrases *Don Quixote* by saying, “I know who you are and who you may be if you choose” (98, italics in the original). María responds by asserting who she is: “today I am a poem” (98).

The grandmother’s journal, translated in the next four chapters, each with the title beginning “Translating Abuela” offers shared in-

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sights into identity, using biological images. The grandmother intentionally leaves her journal so that María will know “who [the grandmother] really is, and what she thinks is important” (99). In the chapter subtitled “The Ice Age,” María’s grandmother notes her intense dislike of the cold white room, so different from the island colors, and in the chapter subtitled “After I Take Her to the Museum and the Theater,” the grandmother comments on Ansel Adams’s depiction of “mountains, more mountains, trees, more trees, rivers, creeks, puddles, and all of it in black and white!” (100, 101). Through her grandmother’s self-restoration of her identity, María fully understands the extent of her own cultural dislocation, opening herself to the power of the lines from *Don Quixote*.

When María’s mother visits, María already knows what her mother realizes when she reads her daughter’s poems: She is a poet. In fact, she understands her identity more completely, responding “I am a trilingual poet” and explaining that she writes in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, embracing the languages of her mother and father and resolving the tensions created within her by her family’s dislocation and her relocation by understanding that Spanglish is her “third language,” which she calls “my language of adrenaline, of fun, of survival in the streets of my new home” (121).

In the interstices between the cultures, María achieves a detachment that results in an unsentimental attention to detail, which provides a true, more accurate vision that allows her liberation through becoming a poet. Ortiz Cofer shows the ties of language to identity through the speaker’s ability to master language in its poetic richness, including its metaphorical complexity. True mastery becomes the ability to create multiple identities through a nuanced sophistication of language use to restore identity in shifting cultures.

Ortiz Cofer’s Legacy: “Consilience”

Ortiz Cofer’s ecological model of identity constructs a complex concept, presenting a system of relationships. For instance, in her novels, poems, and essays, within her concept of *home*, the complex strands of culture keep a world intact. The community framework is built and strengthened beginning in the home by the people—immediate and extended family and friends and neighbors—who live and visit, and then it extends to the neighborhood and includes the countryside. She reinforces this interrelated network, so that the survival of the individual is interdependent within that of the entire community, inclusive of ethnicity, religion, and politics. But home is more than just the socio-

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logical relationships. In interviews, Ortiz Cofer described the complexity of her own home, which included the Spanish language, Spanish music, talk “about *la casa* (back home in Puerto Rico) all the time,” cultural rituals, an “intense” Catholic religion, and “rice and beans, and that sort of thing” situated within an “outside world” (Acosta-Belén 87, 92).

Using an ecological model, the *cuentos* of identity that Ortiz Cofer creates are ones that resist reduction into simplistic component parts, while insisting on the symbiosis of people, animals, plants, and the land. They interconnect the biota, organisms, with the abiotic, the environment, with all of the various processes that sustain life. In the broadest of its senses, the term “ecological” engulfs the geographical, anthropological, sociological, and historical. Further, E.O. Wilson extends the concept with his term, “consilience,” including environmental policy, philosophy, and ethics and suggesting, “Its surest test will be its effectiveness in the social sciences and humanities. The strongest appeal of consilience is in the prospect of intellectual adventure and, given more modest success, the value of understanding the human condition with a higher degree of certainty” (*Consilience* 9).

In her imaginative process, Ortiz Cofer achieves that intellectual adventure, considering “identity” in various dimensions, encompassing a more inclusive, ecological conception that accounts for how culture affects not only the identity of the individual but also the relationships with others:

I re-envision the scenes of my youth and transform them through my imagination, attempting to synthesize the collective yearnings of these souls into a collage that means Puerto Rican to me, that gives shape to my individual vision. If these *cuentos* I create out of my memory and imbue with my perceptions add up to a universal message, then I consider myself fortunate to have accomplished much more than I allow myself to hope for when I sit down in front of that blank sheet of paper that calls to my restless spirit like a believer’s candle. (“And Are You a Latina Writer?” 114-15)

That interstice between self-definition and the perception of others defines the legacy left to readers by Ortiz Cofer: through her *cuentos*, encompassing a wide variety of genres and using a range of ecological images, she universalizes her experience. The *cuentos* she has left for her readers work the same way as the *cuento* “A Fable for Our Times” which she relates in her essay “In Search of My Mentors’ Gardens.” Just as within that *cuento*, Ortiz Cofer’s work is ever ready to translate for

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us her wisdom, gained from her experiences, influenced by her literary mentors, and shaped through her ecological processes to examine identity and culture. As readers of her *cuentos*, we learn from her the complexity of the construction of our own identities, connecting the multiple ambiguities into our own *cuentos* that inscribe the interconnectedness of life processes.

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The Times They Are(n't) a-Changin': Judith Ortiz Cofer on the False Promises of the Revolutionary 1960s

Dustin Hixenbaugh

I was looking to expand my horizons in the new year with a few new brazen acts of rebellion.

--Elenita in *The Year of Our Revolution* (16)

Come Gather 'Round People

A few weeks before cancer claimed the life of Judith Ortiz Cofer, the Swedish Academy announced its remarkable decision to award a Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan, one of the singer-songwriters who gave voice to a counterculture of restless, rebellious young US Americans in the mid-1960s. The honor added fuel to the perennial debate between politicians and historians over the significance of the 60s—whether the era marked by political assassinations, the escalation of the Vietnam War, Lyndon B. Johnson's pursuit of the Great Society, and the relaxation of the previous era's social prohibitions was a triumph of liberalism or a reflection of liberalism's inconsistency with the values of the white citizen majority (Bothmer 221-32).¹ Of course, even setting aside partisan politics, the 60s looms large as a cultural reference. Its music, fashion, and transgressions—all suggested in the image of the bushy-haired, guitar-toting, cigarette-sucking Dylan—remain potent sources of inspiration and nostalgia even as the Baby Boomers who enjoyed them firsthand enter into advanced age.

Born February 24, 1952, Ortiz Cofer was eleven when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and a teenager when Dylan, Janis Joplin, and the youth counterculture's other heroes rose to national prominence in the years after the president's death. Given the author's penchant for writing her own adolescent self into her works in any genre, the reader should be unsurprised to find her stories littered with references to these and other 60s icons. But perhaps such references offer more than an "essential backdrop" lending Ortiz Cofer's work a veneer of histori-

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cal accuracy (Doyle 153). As I argue in the pages below, invoking the 60s in texts like *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women* (1993) and *The Year of Our Revolution: Love and Rebellion in the 1960s* (1998/2000) is part and parcel of the author's career-long project to articulate the "postmodern transnational identity positions" of Puerto Rican women living as economic migrants in the United States (Faymonville 130). Through these references, the author troubles the idea of fixed ethnic identity and resists the either/or decision that ethnic women tend to face between remaining culturally "pure" and assimilating into the dominant culture.

If Ortiz Cofer's teenage protagonists blast the Beatles and Joplin on their transistor radios in retaliation against their mothers and their inherited customs, then they also ultimately realize that the popular culture fetishized by their white schoolmates provides them an inadequate cultural alternative. While it offers to free them from the patriarchal restraints they associate with their Puerto Rican roots, it also requires them to abandon family bonds and either embrace the white mainland culture in its entirety or exist as incomplete, ethnic subjects on its fringes. As characters standing with their feet planted in different cultural spheres but longing for wholeness, Ortiz Cofer's migrant protagonists learn they must force open resistant third spaces where they are able to construct their identities on their own terms and achieve the kind of transcultural "equilibrium" that Gloria Anzaldúa describes in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981/2015; 209). They become translators of popular culture not only to their bewildered parents but also to Ortiz Cofer's readers, who grasp that for multiply-marginalized migrants the emptiness of the 60s' revolutionary discourse is disappointing but not unprecedented. It is one more promise of social inclusion that white, enfranchised individuals make to Puerto Ricans and then refuse to deliver. To riff on Dylan's infamous 1964 anthem, Ortiz Cofer's 60s narratives reveal that the times may well have been a'changin', but they were a'changin' at a far faster pace for white youths than for their ethnic peers.

Death of a Martyr

The Puerto Rican migrants Ortiz Cofer knew in Paterson, New Jersey, mourned Kennedy as if he had been one of their neighbors. In 1960, they had been a part of a Latina/o coalition that championed the candidacy of the handsome war hero who shared their Catholic faith and acknowledged in his stump speeches their struggles for acceptance and prosperity (García 85-103). After his inauguration, Kennedy aggran-

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dized his support among Puerto Ricans, specifically, by inviting the longstanding governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, and the world-renowned cellist, Pablo Casals, a Catalanian who had made his home in Puerto Rico, to a state dinner, and by visiting the island himself to promote economic cooperation between the United States and Spanish America. He also filled prominent federal positions with island politicians like Arturo Morales Carrión, who served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs from 1961 to 1964, and Teodoro Moscoso, who was Ambassador to Venezuela for several months in 1961 (García III).² Ortiz Cofer writes in “American History,” a story that appears in *The Latin Deli*, that after his death Puerto Ricans accepted Kennedy as a saint and hung his photograph “alongside the Sacred Heart and over the spiritualist altars” in their homes (7). Of course, the inhabitants of El Building were not alone in their feelings of despair and disillusionment. In nearby New York City, the Spanish-language paper *El Diario-La Prensa* eulogized the fallen president as a martyr who, “como Cristo Dios, tuvo que morir sacrificado” (qtd. in Rodríguez Martorell). Days later, the same paper printed an interview with a woman in Puerto Rico who reported that her husband had committed suicide after watching the news of the event break on television (Rodríguez Martorell).

In “American History,” Ortiz Cofer uses the familiar question—Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?—to introduce a story of thwarted adolescent romance. The story’s narrator, Elena, is a bookish fourteen-year-old, a Puerto Rican girl living in El Building, who sits on the fire escape and peers down at the house next door, “the only house on the block that had a yard and tree” (8). A white family from Georgia moves in, bringing a boy, Eugene, who is Elena’s age and attends the same school. Elena does not share classes with Eugene, as the school is “huge” and “overpopulated” and the honors classes are not open to students who are not native speakers of English (9). Nevertheless, the surveillance she conducts from the fire escape (and her bedroom window, to the consternation of her mother) lead her to believe that she and Eugene have common interests, including a love of reading and mothers who are unhappy in their urban, Northeastern homes, and so she decides to pursue him romantically, disregarding the possibility that her skin color, accent, and perceived economic status will obstruct her plans.

Elena is attracted to Eugene not only for his height, blond hair, and intelligence, but also for the chances for social advancement that dating him seems to offer. Elena’s narration proves this point with its descriptions of the two characters’ respective dwellings. The narrator refers to El Building alternately as a “tenement” (7) and a “prison” (14),

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both terms that conjure images of masses of disenfranchised individuals living in close quarters with one another. In contrast, the structure Eugene inhabits resembles the single-family houses that Elena and her parents see when they drive through the Paterson suburbs, “where people mowed grass on Sundays in the summer and where children made snowmen in the winter from pure white snow” (10). It has two stories, a yard where the former tenant had planted flowers, and a kitchen with a large window. While Elena’s parents fantasize about leaving the apartment complex for a house in the suburbs, Elena strives to occupy a chair at the kitchen table she can see from her perch on the fire escape. As her friendship with Eugene develops, she imagines his house opening up to her.

I began to think of the present more than of the future. What I wanted now was to enter that house I had watched for so many years. I wanted to see the other rooms where the old people had lived and where the boy I liked spent his time. Most of all, I wanted to sit at the kitchen table with Eugene like two adults, like the old man and his wife had done, maybe drink some coffee and talk about books. (11)

The metaphor of claiming a seat at a table that in the past had only been open to white people is one that would have made sense to the Puerto Ricans placing their hopes in Kennedy in the 1960 election. Kennedy was not himself a member of a class of individuals that had been systematically denied opportunities for upward mobility and contained in slums, but his religious convictions and apparent concern for the plights of Latinas/os suggested a breach in the existing political order—a space for members of oppressed groups to claim social and political power.

The day of Kennedy’s assassination, Eugene asks Elena to come to his house to study for an upcoming exam in United States history. For Elena, the invitation is a triumph. It confirms that her campaign to be accepted by Eugene as an intellectual peer and potential girlfriend have paid off and that after months of effort she is on the cusp of achieving her dream of entering the house that in her mind has come to symbolize socioeconomic privilege. However, Kennedy’s death overshadows Elena’s plans to claim her victory over the old hierarchies. Ignoring the advice of her mother, who insists that it is disrespectful to go out on the day that “a great man” has died, Elena picks up her books and walks over to Eugene’s house (13). The door is opened not by Eugene, but by his mother, a nurse with eye makeup smeared from crying, who is unaware that her son is expecting a visitor. Elena informs her that she

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is a neighbor and Eugene's friend, and the mother scrutinizes the hulking tenement that casts a shadow over her own house and yard before remarking, in her southern accent, "I don't know how you people do it" (14). Closing the door in Elena's face, she says, "Eugene doesn't want to study with you. He is a smart boy" (14). As crushed by the encounter with Eugene's mother as the adults in the story had been by the news of Kennedy's assassination, Elena returns to an empty apartment to mourn.

As a story, "American History" reveals the persistence and psychological damage of the social barriers Kennedy's idealistic followers believed would be lowered with his election. This is a theme that Ortiz Cofer revisits in "Kennedy in the Barrio," a brief story that appears in *The Year of Our Revolution*. A multi-genre collection aimed at young adult readers, *The Year of Our Revolution* has been published twice, first by Arte Público's juvenile imprint, Piñata Books, and second by Puffin Books. The second edition, which I refer to in this essay, contains most of the stories and poems as the first edition. However, it replaces one story ("The Meaning of *El Amor*") with another ("The One Peso Prediction") and reorders the contents so that the collection reads more like a novel with a single protagonist who experiences the events described in a more or less chronological order. The protagonist is a teenager, Elenita (short for María Elena, a name she shares with her mother), who lives in Paterson but travels frequently to Puerto Rico, much as Ortiz Cofer had done when she was the character's age.³ In this particular story, Elenita recalls Kennedy's inauguration in 1961 and his assassination in 1963, both events that she watched unfold on the television screen in the pan-Caribbean restaurant, Puerto Habana, where her parents work. During the inauguration, her father's Cuban boss summarizes the sense of possibility that Kennedy's ascension suggested for many Latinas/os, stating that "an Irish Catholic being elected mean[s] that someday an *hispano* could be president of the United States, too" (9). He follows the remark with a toast: "Here's to a *puertorriqueño* or *puertorriqueña* president of the United States" (9). In Elena's memory, these words are delivered "not kindly" and attest to the futility of the faith that Latinas/os have placed in the Kennedy administration to improve their conditions (9). The toast also signals another concern that the author will address in the collection's later contents, that of the hierarchies that exist within the Paterson Latina/o community and are represented in this case by the insensitive remarks the restaurateur feels licensed to make in the company of his relatively impoverished Puerto Rican employees.⁴

The day of the assassination, Elenita serves food to mourners who have come to the restaurant to see the event replayed on television and

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are “sobbing like children” (9). When she wearies of the “the *ay benditos*, the kisses and embraces of strangers,” she begs her mother’s permission to return home (10). Looking back on the event, Elenita reflects that the assassination gave rise to “a turmoil of emotions I had never experienced before,” but that “I rose the next day to a world that looked the same” (10). Like Elena in “American History,” Elenita in “Kennedy in the Barrio” shares neither her parents’ attachment to Kennedy nor the intensity of their grief over his assassination.⁵ Certainly, she does not feel that his death will bring into jeopardy new political or economic capital that her family has enjoyed since the election. In the eyes of this young, Puerto Rican migrant woman, the president is not a martyr who sacrificed his life for a cause that would improve her life and deserves canonization on her mother’s altar. As *The Year of Our Revolution* continues, the character embarks upon a journey of self-discovery, but Ortiz Cofer does not frame it as a journey to install another savior in the executive branch. Rather, Elenita rejects her parents’ faith in the national patriarch and invests her own hopes for upward mobility in the “politics, passion, and poetry” of the 60s youth movement (33).

“Politics, Passion, and Poetry”

Ortiz Cofer’s migrant protagonists come of age in a borderlands, living with parents who speak Spanish and attending schools that privilege an Anglo-centric view of United States history. On both sides of this cultural divide, her characters feel the pressure to fit in—to strike a balance between remaining authentic to their parents’ values and traditions and finding acceptance among their teachers and peers. In “New Transnational Identities in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s Autobiographical Fiction” (2001), Carmen Faymonville writes that these characters learn to inhabit a “hybrid space” that is “neither located ‘here’ nor ‘there’” (131). Characterized by a “constantly shifting identification with two cultures,” this third space “allows an escape from fixed, modernist identity and acknowledges that cultures are not discrete geographical or cultural spaces” (135). Faymonville argues that Ortiz Cofer creates hybridity in texts like *The Line of the Sun* (1989) and *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990) by blending languages (English and Spanish) and genres (poetry, fiction, and memoir). The author continues this literary experimentation in *The Year of Our Revolution*. However, this book, more deliberately than these predecessors, reveals how a young migrant woman can attempt

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to negotiate and/or escape cultural expectations through the consumption of popular culture.

In “Kennedy in the Barrio,” Elenita signals her growing opposition to the “naiveté” of her parents’ generation (19). This manifests not only in her impatience with the restaurant patrons’ displays of emotion after Kennedy’s assassination, but also in her mother and father’s deference to the Cuban restaurant owner, a man she considers an “imperialist” (17) and “capitalist” (20). Later, interpreting her parents’ experiences through her school curriculum, the narrator explains:

I resolved to get out of that system of haves, have-nots, and in-betweens that dominated our lives. My father was the middleman and we were stuck in the economic and social limbo. When I read about the feudal system of kings, lords, and peasants, I saw a clear analogy to the barrio structure. (57)

According to María Esther Quintana Millamoto, Ortiz Cofer turned against her parents when she was a teenager because she had interiorized “las imágenes racistas proyectadas sobre ella y su familia” as a result of their being Puerto Rican (118). Among these racist images is that of the subservient yes-person, which the author resists in this excerpt, and that of the “Hot Tamale,” which she critiques in “The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María” (*Latin Deli* 150). In *The Year of Our Revolution*, Ortiz Cofer’s semi-autobiographical protagonist thinks she sees the latter stereotype coming to life in her mother, who dresses “like a Mexican movie star” and appears to be an unwitting enabler of patriarchal oppression (21). Elenita allows that “María Elena was still a beautiful woman” but adds that she is “hopelessly behind the times” (21). Elenita sees herself, in contrast to her mother, as a feminist. She writes a prize-winning essay on the “Brave New World for Women” (17) and eschews María Elena’s black satin dresses in favor of tie-dyed T-shirts, denim bell-bottoms, and a “headband embroidered in Navajo designs” (14). She resents her mother’s compliance with the restaurant-owner’s “scheme” to deliver food to poor migrants, an act of charity that seems to improve the owner’s reputation at the expense of her parents, his employees. Moreover, she dismisses her mother’s recollections of Puerto Rico as an “island paradise” (18-19). From her schooling, Elenita knows that her mother’s “dream island” is a place where poor people “have the swollen bellies of malnutrition” and “drink the putrid waters of rivers now polluted with human and industrial waste” (19).

The story “Gravity” casts the narrator’s struggle to distinguish herself from her mother as a war of symbols. A pious Catholic, María Elena considers herself the steward of her daughter’s moral bearing and ex-

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pects Elenita “to act like a *señorita*” (20). She acquiesces to some of the habits Elenita has adopted in imitation of 60s countercultural icons, such as wearing waist-length hair and bell-bottoms and dabbing herself with patchouli oil (“a pagan smell, calling up for me images of people dancing around a fire,” María Elena says of the latter), as a compromise for Elenita’s compliance with the dress code and behavioral expectations at the Queen of Heaven Catholic school (42). However, Elenita frequently tests María Elena’s limits. At the beginning of the story, she removes the image of a guardian angel that had hung on her bedroom wall for years—a stab at her mother, whom she criticizes for decorating the apartment in “Early Puerto Rican: a religious print in every room” (13). Looking back on this small act of rebellion, Elenita says, “I was a taking a stand by refusing to decorate with angels and saints, and by disdaining everything my parents loved” (13). However, María Elena recovers the discarded picture and hangs it outside Elenita’s bedroom door, ensuring that the teenager will receive its blessing when she emerges from her patchouli-scented refuge. According to Elenita, the commotion over the placement of the guardian angel image, carried out without a direct confrontation between mother and daughter, “came to be a symbol for me of our relationship in those days” (13).

The two women also spar over the music that plays in the apartment while the father is at work.⁶ Scholar Michael Dowdy, interpreting the poem “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” contends that Ortiz Cofer’s characters engage in patterns of consumption that offer them the illusion of power over “the capital flow in which their lives are caught up” (163). The political refugees and economic migrants represented in the poem purchase green plantains, Bustelo-brand coffee, and other nostalgic reminders of their homeland. Accordingly, María Elena plays Celia Cruz, Felipe Rodríguez, Tito Puente, and other Caribbean/American musicians on the living room turntable, inching up the volume to block out the English-language music—most of it rock, folk rock, and R&B—emanating from her daughter’s radio. In her narration, Elenita references a number of 60s-era musicians including the Beatles, Aretha Franklin, Jimi Hendrix, Little Richard, Janis Joplin, the Doors, Joan Baez, and of course Bob Dylan, whose “Mr. Tambourine Man” is quoted in the book’s epigraph. Although she spurns her mother’s nostalgia for Puerto Rico, she finds a similar promise of release in these artists’ songs, which she broadly refers to as “protest music” and can enjoy alongside her white Catholic school friends.

Music helps Elenita develop a vocabulary to decry injustices such as the Cuban restaurant owner’s ethnocentric business practices. (Notably, “The Times They Are a-Changin’” is playing on the radio in the same story in which she calls her parents’ employer an imperialist

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and capitalist.) It also helps her resist María Elena's efforts to control her body, a point of contention that surfaces at the end of "Gravity," when the teenager utters the forbidden word *breasts* in front of a man, her father. In this story, Elenita summarizes her mother's prohibitions as follows: "Sit right so that your underwear doesn't show under your mini-skirt, do not mention sex or body parts in front of men—not even your own father—don't do this, don't do that" (20). Later, in the eponymous "The Year of Our Revolution," Elenita confesses the thrill she experiences while listening to music that awakens the physical impulses her mother expects her to suppress. As she explains, her favorite DJ, Murray the K, praises "rock and roll in an intimate whisper, making it sound as if he were talking about having sex" (34). She continues:

I remember I had been in the tub listening to his show when I'd first heard the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. I'd slipped down into the water, up to my ears in ecstasy, wanting to drown in sound. Joplin's wails of pain and pleasure made my extremities tingle. [...] Her voice, hoarse and choked with pain, went right through my skin, and I began to understand the meaning of soul, *el duende*, in American music. (34)

Elenita tunes into Murray the K's program from her transistor radio, a device small enough that she can carry it across the cultural border dividing her school and home lives, and into the rooms of the apartment that her mother does not enter. In this excerpt, she depicts listening for the first time to *Sgt. Pepper* and Joplin as erotic experiences, the former bringing her "ecstasy" in the bathtub, the latter making her extremities "tingle." She uses similar imagery to describe the poster of Doors frontman Jim Morrison that hangs over the bed in her friend's room. "His tight leather pants did not leave much to the imagination, and that was fine. We both knew what Jim Morrison could offer a girl," Elenita recalls, adding that the friend "indulg[ed] in 'groovy' sexual fantasies" while the poster stared down at her (36-7). The teenager never reveals whether she replaced the guardian angel picture with another image, but she could predict with certainty that María Elena would not permit Morrison's life-sized, half-naked print on her daughter's wall.

Like the "American History" narrator, Elenita measures the extent of her marginalization by her acceptance among her peers and teachers at school. "I was getting an excellent education at the Catholic school although I felt no more a part of the mostly Irish student body than I had at Public School Number 16 in my barrio, among 'my own kind'" (15). However, embracing the music and customs of the counterculture promises to raise her social fortunes. On the radio, DJ Murray the K

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beckons to her with his talk of “our rock and roll,” allowing her to imagine herself an equal part of a regional community of young people who share a taste in music and have had enough of their parents’ rules and hypocrisy (34). And after school, she attends a “café” and meditation circle organized by a “counter-culture nun who fed us revolutionary literature and Eastern philosophy under the guise of teaching English literature” (14). Initially, only a few students attend the café, but others join in “as the *Movement* infected the clean-cut crowds” (15). Elenita’s participation in the café brings her friends and a kind of social prestige, but it also intensifies the alienation she feels from both her native and her adopted cultures. As she says, “I could never ask any of my friends over to our apartment. They would have suffered culture shock. So I divided myself into two people—actually three, if you counted the after-school hippie version as a separate identity” (16). Elenita here reveals the fractured identity that Ortiz Cofer herself strives to restore through her “hybrid Latina style” of writing (Luis 214).

Elenita engages in awkward sexual experimentation with a white schoolmate who attends the counterculture café. A fledgling poet, Gerald represents the youth revolution at its most decadent, evincing a lack of interest in people other than himself and abandoning social protest for a drug-induced stupor. At first, Elenita allows Gerald to twist her body into pretzels that “generated the necessary tension” for him to compose his poetry (35). However, she begrudges his emotional detachment, observing that his “peaceful acceptance” of her company in his bedroom feels like “indifference” (38). On the one hand, Gerald is the paragon of revolutionary virtue and the lover the songs on the radio had created for her. But, on the other hand, he also exposes Elenita to a kind of quotidian racism that recalls Sharon Patricia Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012). In this book, Holland tells the story of a white woman who legitimates her racist desire to dictate the movement of African American bodies by informing the people she seeks to influence that she once participated in a Civil Rights march. In Holland’s view, the story reveals a central tenet of white racism—namely, the belief that racialized bodies belong in the past and cannot enter into, let alone control the terms of, the “temporal plane” of the present and future (18).⁷ Like this white woman, Gerald claims an association with a protest movement that, if it were brought to fruition, would have the effect of curtailing his privilege. However, he also rejects the possibility of relinquishing control of his present and future to a beneficiary of his protest—in this case Elenita, a Puerto Rican migrant woman. Not only does Gerald decline to consummate his relationship with Elenita, insisting that “passivity and self-denial were the keys to Nirvana” (34). He also refuses to acknowledge her as an ethnic subject in their inti-

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mate moments, touching her body only in the dark and repeating the Anglicized version of her name: “Mary Ellen, Mary Ellen, Mary Ellen, daughter of sun and moon, child of heaven” (35).

As he descends into drug abuse and further retreats from society, Gerald begins to display a troubling carelessness with Elenita’s body—leaving bruises, coercing her into a ménage à trois with his sister, and so forth—that confirms for her that while she may be a source of inspiration for Gerald’s poems and a prop in his erotic schemes, she will not be accepted by him, or by the counterculture he emblemizes, as an equal. At this point in “The Year of Our Revolution,” the narrator voices her first feelings of disenchantment with the popular culture and empty universalist discourse of the “Movement” (15): “More and more I began to lose interest in the mediocre poetry and the mindless repetition of slogans. My own pupa-stage poems were seeking out the concrete image that would years later give shape, form and meaning to my fragmented world” (41). Though Elenita will go on to have another row with her mother, who has seen her “groping” (42) Gerald on the street outside the apartment in the view of the whole neighborhood, the character is already signaling her desire to find her way home from the white counterculture and a fresh openness to establishing “un puente cultural” between the cultural spaces she had previously regarded as independent from one another and irreconcilable (Quintana 129).

Mothers and Daughters

Two stories in *The Year of Our Revolution*, “Making Love in Spanish, circa 1969” and “The One Peso Prediction,” take place after Elenita’s father dies of a heart attack. “The One Peso Prediction,” like “Kennedy in the Barrio,” discusses the migrant community’s emotional response to the sudden death of a beloved patriarch—in this case Jorge, a man “who had become our barrio’s father confessor and social worker, with Puerto Habana as his dispensary” (34). However, the story is distinct from “Kennedy” in crucial ways: It is significantly longer, running fifty-six pages to the earlier story’s one and a half, and it depicts an event that has a greater bearing on Elenita, who suffers a grief for the father of her family that she had not suffered for the “father” of her nation. On the one hand, the author uses these differences to invert the priority that historiography tends to assign to crises affecting the white male figures who occupy the topmost rungs of US American society as compared to migrant women, who appear closer to the bottom. As Doyle says of *The Latin Deli*, *The Year of Our Revolution* demonstrates

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how “personal trauma is as much a lesson in American history as the national trauma that will appear in history books” (155). On the other hand, Ortiz Cofer reveals the inability of Puerto Ricans to place their dreams of social advancement in the hands of mainland politicians. Now wending toward its conclusion, the collection shows how the United States’ national priorities have been enacted at a cost to Puerto Ricans, not only in the 60s but extending further back into the history of relations between the two regions.

In “The One Peso Prediction,” Elenita’s narration incorporates long stories told in her parents’ own words. The title is drawn from María Elena’s recollections of coming of age during World War II (like the 60s, a tumultuous era for the people living through it), which she shares with Elenita after Jorge’s funeral (58). Often, Ortiz Cofer’s writings position storytelling between female family members as a source of truth and strength that resists the domination of “masculine spaces” such as the drawing room and business office. As William Luis explains, these stories are educational in nature; they teach crucial lessons that if followed will help the listener become “independent from those she loves as she matures” (218). Prior to this point in *The Year of Our Revolution*, Elenita had declined to participate in the storytelling ritual, dismissing her mother’s memories of Puerto Rico as fantastical and naïve and looking for guidance in the songs of Dylan, Joplin, and other icons of 60s popular culture. At the time, she believed that distancing herself from her mother and associating with the white youth counterculture would help her claim an adult, socially mobile identity. However, looking back on this time in her life, the narrator reflects a new perspective. She casts a critical eye on the popular culture hero/ines of her adolescence, whom she describes as “the self-destructive figures we injected into our unconscious, taking the words of their songs and the needle-sharp notes of their music directly into our veins” (36). Furthermore, she recognizes that her connection to her mother and the culture her mother represents is more a help than a hindrance to her, especially in times of crisis. In “Origen,” the poem that opens *The Year of Our Revolution*, Ortiz Cofer poses a question that might be on Elenita’s mind as she considers the legacy of her father, a man she loved but resented for putting up with “the daily humiliations of his low paying job” (59):

In the unimaginable moment
of the union of parental flesh
was there love, or
are we the heirs of carelessness? (ii-v)

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Suffering the shock of her father's death, Elenita seeks comfort not in the counterculture, but in hearing her mother tell a story that holds an answer to this and many other questions about how Elenita had come into being in the interstices between cultures and generations.

María Elena's story begins, "Your father was the only man for me" (59). But then it rewinds to a time before Jorge claimed María Elena's love, when the most significant person in her life was her mother (Elenita's grandmother), Mamá María. A headstrong woman, midwife, and *Nacionalista*, Mamá María once disappeared for three days and returned wearing blood-soaked bandages. To her panicked daughter, she explained that she had had a fall; however, María Elena would later learn that she had received the wound in the Ponce Massacre (1937), an historical incident that began as a *Nacionalista* protest against the United States' intervention in island politics and ended with police officers firing into the crowd, killing seventeen civilians and injuring hundreds.⁸ Throughout her childhood, María Elena assisted her mother's charitable endeavors, in the process internalizing her mother's lectures about the injustices plaguing the island—not only colonization by the United States, but also sexism, poverty, and a lack of compassion for the weak. As an adult, María Elena claims that her mother's rebelliousness had been inspired by love: "She believed in love, although not always in romance" (77). But as a teenager, she rebelled against Mamá María's politics and appearance, just as Elenita would rebel against María Elena's conventional gender presentation and fashion. María Elena recalls, "I wanted to see my mother dressed in flowery dresses with lace collars like the other mothers instead of embarrassing me by wearing men's pants and a white cotton shirt" (63).

"The One Peso Prediction" reveals that Elenita's family line includes women who could serve as role models and did not die young of "self-destructive behavior." The obvious example is Mamá María, whom the narrator had always liked because she "instinctively recognize[d] in her a streak of rebellion and pride I identified with and did not see in my mother" (53). Another example is Jorge's sister Rita, who, like Dolores Huerta,⁹ "had spent her adult life fighting for the rights of migrant workers" and "worked harder than anyone else" (51). However, the story primarily redeems Elenita's impression of her mother, whose conventionality is repositioned as a young woman's rebellion against the unflinching political convictions of Elenita's grandmother.

Unlike Mamá María, María Elena desired romantic love. As a child, she had been immersed in her parents' political activism, playing with the children of Mamá María and Papá José's *Nacionalista* friends while the adults discussed "boring matters" (62). At bedtime, her mother would tell her stories about revolutionary heroes, some of them women

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(63), and recite the poems of José Martí (64) and José de Diego (72). After the war, María Elena would watch her parents' relationship fracture as the male soldiers returning home reclaimed control over Puerto Rican politics and the legislature passed the Gag Law (1948) turning the supporters of independence into criminals. (Luis Muñoz Marín, the governor Kennedy would later entertain in the White House, was this legislation's chief proponent.) Mamá María continued to oppose US colonization, but Papá José, a shopkeeper, established a contract with the US Army to provide furniture for a new base. When Mamá María accused him of having betrayed his *patria*, Papá José dismissed her as a "martyr for the cause of independence" (72). Soon afterward, he began a second family with another woman who did not shame him for taking advantage of "postwar economic expansion" and whose baby Mamá María would be called upon to deliver (Ayala and Bernabe 167). Observing her mother's loneliness, María Elena made a decision to embrace romance at the expense of politics. "I know that you probably think that I am a hopeless romantic," she says to Elenita, "but how can you know how years of walking in mud and talking only of sickness, hunger, and war can make a girl yearn for someone special to come along and take her away" (78). Of course, María Elena does not abandon all of her mother's teachings. To Elenita's surprise, she opposes the Catholic Church's stance on birth control: "As if the Papa in Rome knew what it's like to have a child" (50). Nonetheless, María Elena rebels where it hurts Mamá María the most: She marries Jorge, a "lacke[y] for the imperialists," who sees the United States as a place of promise, not colonial aggression, and raises a daughter, Elenita, in exile (97).

Ortiz Cofer's works muse on the ways that relationships between mothers and daughters evolve over time, often in the context of urban neighborhoods populated by Caribbean migrants. By the end the "The One Peso Prediction," Elenita has learned that the "streak of rebellion" she observed in her grandmother did not skip a generation, as she had formerly believed. And María Elena, recognizing that her daughter, the fruit of her own revolution, is now a woman, places an image of Mamá María's favored saint, "Alta Gracia, Mother Mary as the Queen of Heaven," around Elenita's neck (105). María Elena's efforts to guard her daughter against the world's evils by surrounding her with spiritual artifacts had been a contentious point between the two women throughout the book, as we have seen with the fuss over the placement of the guardian angel picture. However, in this final story narrated from Elenita's perspective, the character relaxes her resistance to her mother's rituals, mirroring a change of heart the author herself experienced as she grew older. Reflecting on her own mother's faith

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in an interview with Stephanie Gordon, Ortiz Cofer allows that religion “gives [individuals who feel powerless] the sense that someone higher than their bosses, than their husbands, than the machinery of the world, is listening to them.” She continues, addressing the experiences of women during times of war,

In a world where women could not keep their men from going to war, could not save their sons, could not do anything else, they could still go up on their knees to a sanctuary and ask this powerful woman behind the throne, Mother Mary, to intercede for them. (22)

Like Ortiz Cofer, Elenita learns that in her mother’s religious devotion there is room for female storytelling and feminist subversion. The flames of Elenita’s revolution had been fanned by a white teacher, white schoolmates, and the consumption of popular music curated by a white DJ, and these influences had led her to identify her Puerto Rican mother and heritage as adversaries in her fight for social advancement. However, now that she is emerging from the coming of age process, she recognizes that she has judged María Elena too harshly. At last, she is ready to embrace her mother as a model of female strength in the face of cultural conflict.

Equilibrium

In *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities* (2012), Laura Lomas positions the Cuban freedom fighter (and author of some of Mamá María’s favorite bedtime readings) as a translator, and the United States as his text. Attending to Martí’s circumstance as a Cuban migrant in New York City, Lomas defines *translation* as “an unavoidable, absolutely necessary shuttling between cultures” and “a creative transformation that enriches the North American text in keeping with limits imposed by the translator’s cultural location and by a range of meanings available in the original” (29). As the title suggests, the author is interested in how Martí relayed his perception of the United States’ intensifying imperial urges back to readers in Spanish-speaking nations that might become the objects of the Anglo nation’s imperial desires. In Lomas’s view, Martí’s translations granted Spanish Americans access to texts written in English that exhibited useful democratic virtues and aesthetic innovations but avoided promulgating an image of the United States as a beacon of progress or the hemisphere’s benevolent watchdog. For instance, he

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“provincializ[ed]” the nationalist poet Walt Whitman by demonstrating that the Anglo writer’s worldview was neither objective nor universal, but rather circumscribed within the logic of empire (186).

Martí, Ortiz Cofer, and Ortiz Cofer’s teenage protagonists are different in multiple ways, yet they share the crucial similarity of living (and writing) as Caribbean migrants in the densely populated Northeastern United States. From their tenuous positions on the margins of the white, English-speaking majority, they observe emerging trends in the nation’s politics and culture, wonder what impact these trends will have on their lives and the lives of the people they know in the Caribbean, and carve out for themselves new, hybrid subjectivities that resist the dominant culture’s homogenizing imperative. Like Martí, who translated Whitman’s poetry for Spanish America, Elenita translates the popular culture of the 60s for her Puerto Rican-born parents (when she is speaking to them), as well as for Ortiz Cofer’s readers, who follow the narrator through a cycle of hope, disappointment, despair, and synthesis that reflects a journey toward Anzaldúa’s notion of transcultural “equilibrium.” *The Year of Our Revolution* places the promises of social inclusion and upward mobility that had beckoned to Elenita through the radio in the context of a persistent history of the United States’ broken promises. The collection documents injustices that islanders have suffered at the hands of the United States government, including being conscripted into foreign wars but prevented from casting a vote in the election of the politicians who declare those wars—a point Ortiz Cofer emphasizes in “Making Love in Spanish, circa 1969,” which sees Elenita attempting to consummate a relationship with a Vietnam veteran who caught shrapnel in the groin. Moreover, the book centers the experiences of female migrants, insisting that United States history is lived by their bodies and passed onto future generations through their stories. To borrow once again from Lomas’s remarks on José Martí, Ortiz Cofer’s stories build a space for young, female, migrant protagonists to thrive in this country by awakening them to “their role in defining America through their criticism of it” (24). As *The Year of Our Revolution* ends, Elenita abandons her countercultural idols’ “slogans” and concentrates on producing her own writing. Like the author who created her in her own image, Elenita will use the written word to affirm the experiences and the humanity of her family and her fellow Puerto Rican migrants.

Notes

1. As an “era,” the 60s is difficult to confine to the span of ten years. As Bothmer writes, Kennedy’s election was a culmination of the values and political priorities of the 1950s (13). In the view of Bothmer and other historians, it was

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Kennedy's assassination in 1963 that heralded the "paranoia and culture shock" that vexed the nation through the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon and have become the era's characteristic traits (qtd. by Bothmer 12).

2. Kennedy did not extend the same offers to members of other Latina/o groups, an oversight that generated heated criticism from prominent Mexican Americans, according to García (110).

3. The two characters, Elena and Elenita, share characteristics with each other, in addition to their name. However, Ortiz Cofer distinguishes the young women's families from one another. Two notable differences: Elena attends a public school and her father works in a blue jeans factory, while Elenita attends a Catholic school, and her father and mother serve food and complete other miscellaneous tasks for a Cuban restaurant owner.

4. In the 1960s, Cuban migrants, who tended to be middle- and upper-class refugees fleeing the 1959 Revolution, enjoyed a higher standard of living than Puerto Rican migrants, as Safa explains in "Migration and Identity: A Comparison of Puerto Rican and Cuban Migrants in the United States" (1988). In "The Year of Our Revolution," Ortiz Cofer addresses the disparity more directly: The Cubans "had apparently been doctors, lawyers, socialites and descendants of Spanish aristocracy. Now, though, they worked alongside the Puerto Ricans in factories and textile mills doing menial jobs" (33).

5. As Doyle observes, the stories intermix national tragedies and events that seem like tragedies to Ortiz Cofer's protagonists. Thus, they show that the personal is political and vice-versa (155).

6. Elenita and María Elena silence their music when the father comes home, knowing that he has spent the day listening to the restaurant jukebox and "expected [...] that the music be kept down" when he arrived home (13). The fact that the daughter sees her mother, rather than the father who directs his family's actions when he comes home, as her adversary in her war against patriarchy, is an early indication that the war itself is misguided and waged as a result of her own naiveté.

7. Holland's book is grounded in the experiences of African Americans. However, the sections that I am drawing upon speak to the phenomenon of racism more broadly and thus apply to Ortiz Cofer's Puerto Rican migrants, despite the different ways racism has impacted the two groups.

8. Here, Ortiz Cofer uses storytelling between women to inscribe a female figure, Mamá María, into the historical record. Ayala and Bernabe, who call the massacre "the most dramatic event" of the 1930s in Puerto Rico, name only male figures who participated in the protest and delivered speeches at the mass funeral of fallen *Nacionalistas* that occurred afterward (116).

9. Another woman whose contributions to an era-defining protest, the 1965 Delano grape strike, tend to be overshadowed by the contributions of a man, César Chávez.

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Finding Peace in the Liminal Space:
Understanding Identity, Cultural Fluidity,
and the Power of Storytelling in Judith
Ortiz Cofer's *Woman in Front of the Sun:*
On Becoming a Writer

Victoria Cabrera-Polk

Identity, culture, and storytelling are three significant areas that Judith Ortiz Cofer explores throughout her texts. In her book, *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer* as primary example, Ortiz Cofer encourages fusion of identities and multiple cultures. Similarly to Ortiz Cofer, Gloria Anzaldúa explores mixed identity and cultural fluidity using the term “*mestiza* consciousness.” Anzaldúa defines *mestiza* consciousness in her essay, “La conciencia de la *mestiza*: Towards a New Consciousness” as a “consciousness of the Borderlands,” a consciousness that “juggle[s] cultures,” has a “plural personality” in which “nothing is thrust out . . . nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (101). This consciousness, although Anzaldúa applies it specifically to the Chicana, could also help the Latina embrace her multiple identities and find peace living within the liminal space of the borderlands. Anzaldúa’s chapter “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan” suggests that the *mestiza* consciousness embraces hybridity. She notes how culture consistently forms the human consciousness: “we perceive the version of reality that [culture] communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture” (38). However, what Anzaldúa believes to be *unchallengeable* and *unquestionable*, Ortiz Cofer boldly challenges and questions. Anzaldúa’s ideas, though notably beneficial ideologically, can be physically difficult to actually practice; through Ortiz Cofer’s unique focus on identity, culture, and the power of storytelling, Ortiz Cofer demonstrates a concrete and tangible example of the *mestiza* consciousness. Furthermore, her attainment of the *mestiza* consciousness displays how it can be physically achieved, taught, and developed, thereby making it accessible and understandable for the Latina.

It is culturally expected that the woman must sacrifice herself for her husband and her children and dive into positions of caretaker,

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homemaker, entertainer, and cook. Certainly there is nothing negative about these titles, but Ortiz Cofer suggests going beyond them. She states that regardless of the demands of the woman's life:

which may include choices that were made *before* she discovered her calling, such as marriage and children . . . The true artist will use her creativity to find a way, to carve the time, to claim a kitchen table, a library carrel . . . She will use subterfuge if necessary, write poems in her recipe book, give up sleeping time or social time, and write. (*Woman* 84-85)

The term "subterfuge" is key in reaching the *mestiza* consciousness because despite all obstacles of dominant paradigms, she must designate a time, set aside all excuses that she allows to confine her, and dare to explore her hybridity through the act of creating. This book is a crucial tool in navigating the juggling of more than one culture and identity because it emphasizes the importance of writing to preserve memories, to tell stories, and to serve as an outlet for self-expression and self-realization. For Ortiz Cofer, writing serves as the tool in connecting with herself and sharing her ideology with others. In turn, her words within *Woman in Front of the Sun* denote one way of grappling, exploring, and eventually achieving the *mestiza* consciousness.

Review of Literature

Unfortunately, there is not a multitude of literary scholarship devoted to *Woman in Front of the Sun*. There are some scholars, such as Jacqueline Doyle, Teresa Derrickson, Carmen Haydée Rivera, and Alexandra Fitts who discuss Ortiz Cofer's works of fiction and poetry, but none who focus on the notoriety of *Woman in Front of the Sun* in particular. While the title may suggest that it is an instructional text that guides new writers in their writing ventures, this book not only initiates aspiring writers into the complex act of writing, but also provides a palpable portrayal of the *mestiza* consciousness at work. The book is not simply an instructional guide, but the epitome of who Ortiz Cofer is—a blend of entities that can never be simply one form. The book mixes the Spanish and English languages, and genres of creative nonfiction, poetry, and stories. It represents what scholars discuss as her unique autobiographical narrative: a combination of memory, cultural affiliation, and personal experience that replicates an exploration into fragmented identity, and a resistant form of writing that incorporates many genres.

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Although Doyle, Fitts, Derrickson, and Haydée Rivera do not concentrate specifically on *Woman in Front of the Sun*, they do provide analysis of Ortiz Cofer's views of culture, identity, and storytelling. In her essay, "The Coming Together Of Many 'I's': Individual And Collective Autobiography In Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Latin Deli*," Doyle focuses on how Ortiz Cofer "negotiates the indistinct boundaries of autobiography . . . as an emergent, shifting . . . territory for experiment and generic border crossings . . ." (217). Ortiz Cofer's style of writing suggests a resistant strategy that crosses borders that are not only positional—Puerto Rico to America—but also cultural—the island culture intermingling with the mainland culture. This distinct style is highlighted in Ortiz Cofer's chapter, "A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook" specifically when she reflects on her parents' conversations on returning home, and the differences between life in America and Puerto Rico:

I would gather their whispered words: discarded flowers to keep between the pages of my notebooks, clues to a mystery I hoped someday to solve. I write about tyrants and martyrs, and about lonely women who find solace in books. All the words I heard my parents trade like currency for each other's loyalties, like treaties to be negotiated so that their children might have choices. (33)

The clashing ideals between parents inspired Ortiz Cofer to write in a distinctive way that experimented with fragmented narratives and clashing characters, such as the tyrant and the martyr.

Doyle highlights how Ortiz Cofer's experimental narrative of fragmentation, dissonance, and "manipulations of the narrator and narrative voice by such means as shifting narrative points of view in some cases, multiple voices or perspectives" is indicative of her experience (234). In "A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook," Ortiz Cofer conveys her experimental shifting narrative with the back and forth perspectives between her father, mother, and herself. Her father wants her to have a life free from tyrannical husbands and martyred mothers: "she would just end up a slave to some ignorant man" (32), while her mother felt that he was wrong, "you are wrong to think that the future is hopeless in our own homeland" (32). Following their dialogue Ortiz Cofer provides her perspective: "the memories emerge in my poems and stories like time travelers popping up with a message for me" (33). What is significant in *Woman in Front of the Sun* is that her use of narrative fragmentation is a crucial example of her fluidity. Her combination of many styles of writing, such as poetry and multiple narratives, prevents the reader from ever feeling comfortable with one distinct literary form

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and suggests the beauty of multiplicity, thereby highlighting her approach to writing as a form of resisting conformity to one style. In the same chapter she opens with a poem, "A Childhood Prayer," and closes the chapter saying "sometimes, *most* times, I allow a prayer or a poem to drift like sweetly scented candle smoke into me" (35), which gives the narrative a dimension that looks not only to the chapter as a memory of her childhood, but also the creative influences that inspired her childhood and helped her understand her place within her borderland.

Similarly to Doyle, Rivera's essay, "Telling to Live: Identity, Race, and Gender in the Works of Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago" speaks directly to cultural/identity fluidity when she states that Ortiz Cofer tells of a "broader awareness of cultural and national identity, of historical merging and linguistic hybridity" (105). Rivera notes that the ability to travel back and forth from island to mainland assists Ortiz Cofer in uniting two different cultures and highlights how "aspects of the Puerto Rican culture were perpetuated in the Spanish-speaking communities in the United States" (106). Suggesting that, when Ortiz Cofer brings her *island* Puerto Rican culture into the *mainland* Spanish-speaking communities of the United States, she blurs the idea of a definitive "place." Growing up, she lived in America, but lived within the Spanish home of her parents. Her visits to Puerto Rico—what was once her home—became foreign and she was labeled as the Americanized *gringa* because of her accent and Americanized demeanor. Rivera finds that Ortiz Cofer's development of a "'transmigratory consciousness' allows her to create a contestatory [*sic*] culture of resistance" (106). As a result, her "transmigratory consciousness" resists the constant influence of division because she learns to intermingle both Puerto Rican and American cultures. Ortiz Cofer conveys to her reader a tangible example of juggling two cultures by including both cultural influences in her writing.

Cultural fluidity is a specific area that Fitts explores in her essay, "Coming of Age and the Transnational Subject in the Works of Judith Ortiz Cofer." One example of cultural fluidity Fitts discusses is transnationalism. Fitts finds that Ortiz Cofer demonstrates transnationalism with her smooth connection between cultures that does not emphasize disorientation, but instead empowers "the transnational subject economically" and "eliminates the need to establish what is single, stable, and nationalized, and allows for an identity that flows between places and cultures" (61). The necessity for definitive and categorical labels is, in other words, diminished, while fluidity between identities is encouraged. Ortiz Cofer's relatable position between her mainland culture and island culture motivate her to become her own writer, rather than model after others. In an interview she highlights how she "did not

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have any models from [her] native language and generation, so [she] can't say that they influenced [her]. [She] had to invent [herself] as a Puerto Rican writer" (61). Despite the lack of role models, Ortiz Cofer invents herself as a writer who disregards any form of distinct identity labels. In the past, finding Latina literary influences was difficult; even today the influences of Latina writers, while rising, have a ways to go to balance the Anglo classics. Though Ortiz Cofer's influence is more permissive than prescriptive, Latina writers who follow her may use her work as a foundation upon which they build their own identity and style. But her model, rather than paving *the way*, encourages others to forge their own.

Further, Derrickson expands upon the uniqueness of Ortiz Cofer's voice and writing style in her essay, "'Cold/Hot, English/Spanish': The Puerto Rican American Divide in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*." Derrickson focuses on identity, using Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of *mes-tiza* consciousness. Derrickson notes that Anzaldúa opens her theories up to a broader audience and can be "applied in a much broader context . . . by acknowledging that borderlands exist in other physicalities [*sic*] and social settings as well" (123). By intermingling her Latin identity with her American identity, Ortiz Cofer manages to form a hybrid identity. According to Derrickson, what Ortiz Cofer demonstrates "is not a dilemma about what values to choose, what ideas to prefer, or what rituals to borrow from; instead, the dilemma becomes a question of how best to cope: what special knowledge, what tools, and what survival strategies are needed to navigate the foreign landscape of both sides of the border" (130). As a first generation Latina, Ortiz Cofer experienced the challenge of what to keep and what to leave in both cultures in order to navigate both foreign landscapes. Ortiz Cofer's chapter, "And Are You a Latina Writer?" explains this directly when she states, "I re-envision the scenes of my youth and transform them through my imagination, attempting to synthesize the collective yearnings of these souls into a collage that means Puerto Rican to me, that gives shape to my individual vision" (114). Because she traveled back and forth from homeland to mainland she could never be fully influenced by a singular culture, and was therefore forced to navigate not only foreign America, but also foreign Puerto Rico. However, navigating does not impact her negatively. Instead, Ortiz Cofer combines her youth with imagination to create her *own* idea of what it means to be Puerto Rican, not allowing others to dictate her perception of what a *puertorriqueña* must be. To further Derrickson's discussion, Ortiz Cofer becomes an accessible example of Anzaldúa's ideological solution for opposing marginalization, because she creates her own identity that does not permit predefined concepts to deter her.

Resisting Dominant Paradigms

Woman in Front of the Sun can be seen as a pivotal tool in resisting dominant social identity paradigms such as class, race, ethnicity, and culture. The chapters emphasize the need for the Latina writer to contest the norms of identity categories and create an individual self that incorporates a blurring of those categories. “The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open” serves as a warning to the woman writer that conveys the inevitability of the sacrifices she must make in order to create: “the artist and the world struck a compromise, albeit an uneasy one on her part. She had to sleep with one eye open and watch what was offered her to eat” (81). Ortiz Cofer goes on to say, “some women eat sleeping-inducing figs early in their lives. At first they are unwitting victims of this feminine appetizer. Later they reach for the plate. It is easier to sleep while life happens around you. Better to dream while others *do*. The writer recognizes the poisoned fruit” (81). There are two women, those who eat the sleep-inducing figs, and those who recognize their poison. The sleep-inducing serves as a symbol for the excuses the woman makes not to awaken her creativity—these excuses are life, the spouse, children, work, and time. “Occasionally,” Ortiz Cofer states, “my *comadre* will try to save other women who have eaten the *higos de sueño*. She will try to rouse them, to wake them up. And sometimes, the sleepers will rise and follow her to freedom. But very often, they choose to remain unconscious. They rise briefly, look around them. They see that the world goes on without them. They eat another fig and go back to sleep” (82). Eating another fig is what is familiar and comfortable, it is the traditional and normative presence of the woman’s everyday life. But eating those figs is detrimental because those who choose to sleep again only contribute to the ever-constant presence of silence.

In the same chapter Ortiz Cofer encourages a group of Latina women writers to find a place and time to write her *cuento* (“story”). She states, “I had dared them to use the strength of character that allowed them to survive in a harsh world of barrio and factory and their endless *lucha*. The struggle for survival was familiar to them” (87-88). Some women were able to find time and space, while others did not, but they all understood that a “fierce devotion” to defend their artistic space was required—it is not a simple task (88). The journey to encompass and accept every part of what makes up the woman writer’s identity, rather than attempt to keep parts of their identity separate is crucial in learning how to create the *mestiza* consciousness. The women Ortiz Cofer taught chose to write through the raucous of their children, the messiness of their homes, and the work at the factories. They took those parts of themselves and melded them into their writing, creating *cuen-*

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tos (“stories”) that inspired self-actualization instead of continued silence. Ortiz Cofer demonstrates in this chapter how the many excuses the woman writer may have should not inhibit her narrative but in fact show that identity is self-made and not imposed.

In her text Ortiz Cofer prioritizes how to look beyond separating the different parts of the self and embrace the wholeness of uniting one’s multiple identities. In her chapter, “And Are You a Latina Writer?” she feels no need for others to authenticate her works as “Puerto Rican” literature (113). She states, “finally, I am not lost in America. I am not searching for an identity. I know who I am and what I am. . . . I know what I am because my *puertorricanness* [sic] was not awarded to me: it is part of me; it cannot be legislated out. . . . one’s essence cannot be either given or taken away” (113-14). Ortiz Cofer’s ideology only adds to the growing conversation on the reality of race and how it defines the self. Michael Hames-García’s ideas on race connect to Ortiz Cofer in his chapter, “How Real is Race?” when he argues that race is not concrete and cannot be distinctly categorized (314). He states that race, “like most social concepts . . . means many different things and is not reducible to neat, orderly categories. . . . social identities, including race, have blurry boundaries, change over time and from place to place, and produce ambiguities and indeterminacies” (314). Ultimately for Ortiz Cofer, her Latina heritage plays one part in the many parts of her writing. She represents more than one culture, she intertwines many different types of literary genres, she intermingles different languages, and she denounces the idea of being solely feminist—all because she understands that character should not be constrained by the notion of one identity. For one identity, after all, is unrealistic and nonexistent.

When Ortiz Cofer declares ownership of both her Puerto Rican and American cultures she states, “I claim both. I plant my little writer’s flag on both shores. There are exclusivists who would have me choose sides: I do not find such a choice necessary . . . It is neither necessary nor beneficial to me as a writer and an individual to give up anything that makes me a whole person” (*Woman* 110). Exclusivists are the detriment to young people who have emigrated from other countries and are forced to leave their accents and language at home in order to assimilate into an American culture, successful career, and social acceptance. These choices are unnecessary and mentally conflicting. Ortiz Cofer highlights this conflict in an interview with Edna Acosta-Belén. Ortiz Cofer comments on her identity struggle, stating:

one of the things that is so dissonant about the lives of children in my situation is that I would go to school in Paterson and mix and mingle with the Anglos and Blacks, where the

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system of values and rules were so much different than those inside our apartment, which my mother kept sacred. In our apartment we spoke only Spanish, we listened only to Spanish music, we talked about *la casa* (back home in Puerto Rico) all the time. We practiced a very intense Catholic religion . . . So I would come home from the 'outside world,' . . . into this apartment where I was supposed to be a proper *señorita*. (87)

Her struggle invokes *mestiza* consciousness because she chooses to keep parts of her heritage, family influences, and Puerto Rican culture, and fuse them into her newfound American culture. She does not relinquish her Spanish accent, but rather embraces it and learns to feel comfortable as "different." She states in the interview, "never quite belonging because after all, I speak English with a Spanish accent and Spanish with an American accent. I may end up with a Southern/Puerto Rican/American accent!" (89). Her self-realization only furthers the idea that she creates her own accent, her own essence, and her own identity.

Ortiz Cofer practices Anzaldúa's theories by forming a myriad of identities. Blurring the boundaries of identity paradigms enables the self to be free from the confines of one definitive identity. While some find Anzaldúa's ideology of the *mestiza* consciousness to be utopian and intangible, Ortiz Cofer is a substantial example of the *mestiza* consciousness because she disregards social constructs and essentialism and finds a place of unity that looks beyond ambivalence and racial ignorance. Her writing reflects a combination of her experiences in two very distinct worlds; as she states in her chapter "Woman in Front of the Sun," "I attempt to make the ordinary rise toward all its symbolic potential. I try to make art out of the only material I have available to me, my life and what I have learned from living it and examining it" (59). The *mestiza* consciousness empowers the Latina to embrace her multiple identities and treat the borderland as a positive place, rather than a rejected place. The borderland is no longer a place where the marginalized are *forced* to go, but where the creative individual finds home. Ortiz Cofer does not feel the need to be placed within any specific cultural identity when she states, "although I often seek the counsel of my scholarly colleagues who are experts in the field of Puerto Rican Literature . . . I do my best work in a room alone . . . I am not confused about my cultural identity" (*Woman* 113). This only further confirms her ability to reject identity categories and embrace the cultural-multiplicity of her hybrid self.

Woman in Front of the Sun encourages writing as an instrument to develop women's creativity and defy the deterrents that keep the

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woman silent. Ortiz Cofer states that “writing exposes me to the world, daring it to accept me in spite of the fact that I have an overwhelming need to expose its many foibles and failings. The writer is the matador of the empty ring. We incite the beast to attack us, displaying as much red . . . as we dare” (*Woman* 71). This passage challenges the woman writer to confront her constraints, become the matador, and incite the beast to attack in order to expose its failings. In her poem “Claims,” Ortiz Cofer writes about a Grandmother,

*Children are made in the night and
steal your days
for the rest of your life, amen. She said this
to each of her daughters in turn.
Once she had made a pact with man and nature
and kept it. Now like the sea
she is claiming back her territory. (Woman 113)*

Claiming territory is different for each woman, but what this poem emphasizes is the urge to claim. Inciting the beast and claiming her territory gives the Latina the chance to discover who she is as self and writer. Ortiz Cofer urges women writers to share their issues, and in this practice, begin to recover, transform, and create works that involve women, not as the damsel, or the whore, or the mindless homemaker, but as a matador.

Learning to Juggle Cultures Successfully

In her chapter, “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan,” Anzaldúa recognizes that humans perceive their identities and physical bodies based upon cultural norms, which are habitually the result of hegemonic identity categories (42). Oftentimes, the Latina of the first/second/third generation struggles to find her voice because she is marginalized by the dominant patriarchal Western culture. She feels inferior, bound to the borderlands, and is unable to belong to any definitive place because this “borderland” feeling is also imposed once the Latina visits her homeland. In her homeland she is perceived as “Americanized” and labeled la gringa or americanita. Ortiz Cofer notes in an interview with Acosta-Bélen that, “when I go to Puerto Rico I am always reminded that I sound like a gringa . . . I cannot change the fact that I have lived most of my life in the United States, I am married to an American, I live in Georgia. . . . When you go to Puerto Rico, they call you la americanita” (89). Through her writing, Ortiz Cofer creates

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a window into a free space that embraces her differences and her two cultures. She highlights how she often identifies with her more “eccentric” characters because she sees herself in them: “so in many aspects of my life, in school, in Puerto Rico, being a navy brat, I felt like an outcast. Maybe my identification with the eccentrics is because I saw myself as different” (89). Rather than bottle up these emotions, Ortiz Cofer creates characters that reflect her feelings and also connect with others so that they too may learn how to navigate the juggling of multiple identities.

Anzaldúa notes that the woman who moves from homeland to mainland is “alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of herself. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (“Movimientos” 42). In short, the woman of color is caught in the liminal space of the borderlands, which is viewed as a negative place by the dominant culture. Anzaldúa recommends a way to conquer the negativity connected to the borderland by using a “new culture—*una cultura mestiza*” that is built “with [her] own lumber, [her] own bricks and mortar and [her] own feminist architecture” (“Movimientos” 44). Ortiz Cofer illustrates through her life and her writing, *una cultura mestiza*—a fluid culture built on both the experiences of her life on the island and the mainland. Through her style of writing, Ortiz Cofer uses her multiple identities and creates an independent invention of self, thereby displaying the tangible possibility for every woman to form her own identity with the “lumber” and “bricks” and “mortar” that is available to her. Ortiz Cofer takes her experiences and reflects upon the culture in which she lived. During her interview she explains, “. . . I feel that every time I write a story where a woman is strong or a woman is victimized, that I am making a statement about being a woman. And every time I write a story where Puerto Ricans live their hard lives in the United States, I am saying, look, this is what is happening to all of us. I am giving you a mental picture of it, not a sermon” (86).

One key strategy stressed throughout Ortiz Cofer’s writing is the ability to bridge the gap between her Puerto Rican and American cultures. She states in her chapter “And Are You a Latina Writer” that, “my mission as an emerging writer became to use my art as a bridge, so that I would not be like my parents, who precariously straddled cultures, always fearing the fall, anxious as to which side they really belonged to” (109). Straddling of cultures impacts all immigrants who are forced to assimilate into a new country. But rather than constantly seek for a place to belong and relinquish parts of herself to assimilate, Ortiz Cofer invents her own place with her own design that is free from fear

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and uncertainty. She continues, "I would be crossing the bridge of my design and construction, at will, not abandoning either side, but traveling back and forth without fear and confusion as to where I belonged—I belong to both" (109). In essence, the bridge Ortiz Cofer creates is her own hybrid identity that remains connected to more than one culture and place. By creating her own identity, she inspires immigrants and children of immigrants not to feel as if they must surrender their cultural influences, but instead look upon their differences as contributions to the American culture.

Preserving one's individuality is pivotal. In her book Ortiz Cofer emphasizes the importance of individuality in recording the *cuentos* obtained through childhood memories, legends, and family stories: "the earliest stories I heard were those told by the women of my family in Puerto Rico . . . They taught me the power of the word. These *cuentos* have been surfacing in my poems and my prose since I decided to translate them for myself and to use them as my palette, the primary colors from which all creation begins" (*Woman* 73). *Cuentos*, such as the stories of María Sabida and María La Loca, or *La Cenizosa*, the Puerto Rican Cinderella "[who] is rewarded with diamonds and pearls that fall from her mouth whenever she opens it to speak. [Who] finds that she can be brave enough to stand up to her wicked stepmother and stepsisters and clever enough to banish them from her home forever" (*Woman* 47) inspire the gift of words. These *cuentos* emphasize the prevalent need to continually pass down stories to each new generation so that cultural identity can be preserved.

By relaying these stories, Ortiz Cofer bestows the importance of preservation and how it shapes individuality—these three fictional characters serve as symbols of individuality because each represents a different essence of the woman. However, Ortiz Cofer notes, in order to find the time to preserve these *cuentos*, memories, culture, and heritage, a selfishness is needed: "if she is not fortunate enough to be truly selfish (or doesn't have enough macho in her to do as men have always done and claim the right, the time, and the space she needs), then she is doomed to do a balancing act, to walk the proverbial line that is drawn taut between the demands of her life . . ." (*Woman* 84). "Macho" is her term that encapsulates the selfishness required to find the time to write. In order to plunge into the creative realm, the creator must understand that it is not an easy journey and that it requires a sense of "macho" to be achieved.

Ortiz Cofer urges the woman writer to become the macho writer, but she questions the term "macho" because it automatically signifies masculinity. She states:

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Using the word 'macho' to modify 'woman' may be a call to semantic controversy. Can a woman have 'macho'? Does she need it? After all, she can have her choice of many other less-loaded epithets that mean courage, that mean essentially the same as this masculine modifier. But not quite the same. . . . It takes balls to do anything dangerous and new, or so it seems. But we may be able to transform an anatomical fact into a useful metaphor. And maybe we need to liberate the word, because unless we can claim macho we may be doomed to a degree less of what we need for this dangerous exploration of inner space called artistic creation. (*Woman* 69)

Rather than see the term as masculine, Ortiz Cofer suggests it should be understood as a metaphor that is liberated from its connotation. Again, in order to claim the artistic journey and to find peace within the marginalized self, the woman must take up a form of macho-ness that fully understands the dangers of exploring the creative inner space. Divested of gender, Ortiz Cofer defines the term macho as "the arrogance to assume that you belong where you choose to stand, that you are inferior to no one, and that you will defend your domain at whatever cost" (*Woman* 74). Furthermore, the Latina writer must not permit the cultural clash of her "old home," and her "new home" to hinder her writing. Instead she must take up the arrogance of the "macho," separate from inferiority, and stand for the domain that is rightfully hers.

Ortiz Cofer believes that the macho is encapsulated in María Sabida. The story explains that this woman outmaneuvered a villain who wanted to kill her by marrying him, mastering him, and becoming the macho woman. María Sabida inspires Ortiz Cofer's ability to become macho: "when I feel that I need a dose of 'macho,' I follow a woman's voice back to María Sabida. I have come to believe that she was the smartest woman on the island because she learned how to use the power of words to conquer her fears . . ." (*Woman* 75). She goes on to say, "as a writer, I choose to interpret the tale of the woman who outmaneuvers the killer, who marries him so that she does not have to fear him, as a metaphor for the woman creator" (*Woman* 80). According to Ortiz Cofer, the killer does not necessarily have to be a man, the killer can also be "the destroyer of ambition, drive, and talent—the killer of dreams. . . . It is anything or anyone who keeps the artist from her work" (*Woman* 80). Resistance is key to conquering the killer. In other words, the woman who cares for her children and/or spouse, or who works all day and comes home exhausted at night, should not feel bound exclusively to those parts of her identity and put off her need to create. What Ortiz Cofer conveys in *Woman in Front of the Sun* is that ob-

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stacles—both familial and cultural—should be seen as tools to use in writing, instead of killers that prevent writing. She goes on to say, “the smartest woman on the island knows that she must trap the assassin so that he/she/it does not deprive her of her creative power” (*Woman* 80). Furthermore, whatever deprives the creator from expressing her story is the assassin. In order to conquer the assassin the writer must get in touch with what makes up the self and transition that into a narrative for others to understand; it is only then that culture becomes a tool of reflection, rather than an inhibitor that already predefines what is perceived and accepted as reality.

The Power of Storytelling

In Miriam Decosta-Willis’s introduction, “This Voyage Towards Words’: Mapping the Routes of the Writers,” she highlights a notable scarcity of published Latina literature in Latin countries due to the difficulties in publishing. She finds that part of the reason for this scarcity is because the Latina writer needs “money to support herself; to write, she also needs support from the literary establishment, including editors, publishers, distributors, and reviewers. Literary production is difficult in countries where there is a small publishing industry or where the works of women and Blacks are not priorities” (xviii). In addition, there are many variables that prevent the uncovering of their narratives, such as patriarchal conditions, accessibility, low demand, and loss (xix). All of these detrimental obstacles lead to a desert in Latina literary influences and signify the loss of the stories of Latin history. Further, Mary Crow writes in her introduction of *Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings* that “unfortunately, relatively few transcriptions of oral poems by native Latin American women exist, and it is impossible to tell how much has been lost” (19). In addition, she states, “. . . we will almost certainly never learn anything about the native women poets of the past. Their work, if it existed, is lost, and the work of contemporaries remains undiscovered” (19). The ability to recover these works of literature is a prominent issue.

Crow notes that if “we measure Latin American women poets by their appearance in national and international anthologies, they have clearly been judged wanting—if, indeed, they have been judged at all, since their work is frequently not even considered” (24). The history of Latina literature is limited; therefore, what is needed is the creation of current literature that explores and provides insight into the Latina life. By creating Latina literature, the Latin culture can be re-discovered and re-claimed. Sharing memories, personal experiences, and cultures

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through storytelling and writing is the tool to preserve what has been lost and what will be written. Ortiz Cofer, while she wrote in the U.S., was able to use her American privilege to publish her works and make life both on the island and mainland accessible for others to learn from and become familiar with. Her example encourages preservation of the Latina perspective—for once she shares her perspective, she has now given others permission to feel and connect with her experiences, and has opened a window of understanding and knowledge into an entirely different culture and world.

Ortiz Cofer tells a story in *Woman in Front of the Sun* that involves Columbus's son, Fernando Colón, who sought hospitality from a small Caribbean island composed of only women. The sailors were confronted by the women's fierceness because they were "dressed for battle" and wore the "plumage of warriors" (63). These men were "affronted" by the fierceness of these "*unnatural*" females because they were not used to such vigor from a woman (64). When these men landed on the island the women refused to allow them to come ashore and "refresh themselves" from their journey (63). In response, the men shot the women, destroyed their village, and took the "remaining women warriors captive" (64). The Spanish forced their masculinity upon these women and created a dominant culture devoid of macho femaleness. This story highlights the fierceness of these women. It is an example to encourage the woman writer to become a warrior in her own writing style—daring the pen to write beyond any obstacle that threatens to suffocate her creativity. The warrior woman did not *know* she would be unable to conquer the Conquistador, she did not *know* that only men could have what patriarchy has termed "macho." Ortiz Cofer says, "No, she had not yet been *civilized*, so she believed that if she needed macho, she could summon it out of herself, and that's why she fought back" (72). The woman warrior was not burdened with "civilized" cultural tyranny that instructed her in how to behave; thus she was free to behave how she saw fit—declaring a fierce battle cry. Using this story, Ortiz Cofer explains that the Latina cannot simultaneously be both silent and creative. For when her story is told, whether it be to her children or to her friends, or published for a wider audience to receive, her heritage, culture, and individuality can be experienced, remembered, and preserved.

Even though Ortiz Cofer did not have native literary models growing up, she states in her interview with Acosta-Belén that she did have female family members who influenced her storytelling (86). From these women she embraced a strong sense of imagination, one that explored the outsiders' perspective—the María La Loca within each of

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her stories (86). Ortiz Cofer tells Acosta-Belén that for the women in her family, stories,

. . . played a purpose. When my *abuela* sat us down to tell a story, we learned something from it, even though we always laughed. That was her way of teaching. So early on, I instinctively knew storytelling was a form of empowerment, that the women in my family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life in a world where women led restricted lives. . . . To summarize, I felt that the women in my family empowered me and when I got my college education I could transfer that oral tradition into literature. I took what they gave me and made it into a weapon for myself. (86-87)

Her weapon was used to combat the woman's restricted life and move beyond into a world of college education that served as a part of her development as a writer. Ortiz Cofer highlights the magnitude and significance of story-telling because it is a personal account that relays vocals, sounds, and emotions geared toward the audience. Older generations may not have written down their stories, nor had they received the college education to develop their stories, but when they share these *cuentos* with the next generation, they empower their listeners with a treasure to preserve and in turn pass down and keep alive. These women gave Ortiz Cofer a "weapon" to combat feelings of inferiority, and instead use storytelling as a tool to empower and formulate life lessons that contribute to an ever-growing diverse audience. Ortiz Cofer takes her grandmother's stories and transfers the oral tradition into the written word so that through action, preservation, and memory, she can embolden those who read her works and embolden them to do the same.

While *Woman in Front of the Sun* may be viewed superficially as a writing guide, Ortiz Cofer uses the *cuentos* passed down in her life to connect to the reader in a way that is personal and not explanatory. She finds that the best way to teach is through parables, "I have always told my classes that the best teachers know that the parable is the best way to teach. Christ could have stood on the mountain and talked about philosophy and bored people to death. Instead he talked about the prodigal son and the specific things that touched people through the imagination" (Acosta-Belén 86). The parable of María Sabida offers a woman to aspire toward and use as an example to master her assassin; María La Loca is the woman one should avoid becoming, for losing herself over love causes her eternal misery; *La Cenizosa* serves as Oriz

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Cofer's feminist example of Cinderella—rather than allow others to do her harm, she stands up for herself. *Woman in Front of the Sun* explores the significance of storytelling. For within storytelling there is an implicit message that always aligns with reality. Every time Ortiz Cofer's *abuela* sat down to tell her a story, she learned something:

I remember hearing my first feminist story (that I now label feminist) in my grandmother's living room. . . . We used to laugh about it and I did not realize until many years later that what my grandmother was saying was that no one can make you a prisoner. You can always use your imagination to escape. Right now if I said to her that was a feminist story she would say . . . It's just a little story. So to her the story is not intellectual nor political, but of course it is both. (Acosta-Belén 87)

The story may seem like “just a little story,” but the meaning beyond the story can carry a potent message to its readers. Once it is told, or written down and read, it has now been preserved and can be used to share a message that was not originally intended, or not known otherwise. Storytelling conveys values, morals, and cultural norms that connect to its audience on a personal level. By implementing storytelling throughout her book, Ortiz Cofer manages to captivate her readers on personal level that inspires the desire to find creativity within the self and acknowledges each person's individuality as a gift to share.

Using the chapters within her book as an example, Judith Ortiz Cofer relays lessons on identity, culture, and storytelling that immigrants and children of immigrants can learn from. Identity and culture are such an influential part of humanity and must be viewed together, rather than separately. Because Ortiz Cofer builds her own identity that intertwines each part of her that makes her whole, she proves that the *mestiza* consciousness is attainable; she essentially takes what she feels she needs, and leaves what she believes she must—it is her decision and is not left for others to determine. Having an identity composed of the many parts of the self, which are not embarrassed or looked upon as inferior, is a significant step towards self-acceptance. According to Anzaldúa the *mestiza* consciousness requires flexibility. She states, “rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically” (“La Conciencia” 101). By choosing what to leave and what to preserve Ortiz Cofer demonstrates a vital example of what fluidity looks like. Anzaldúa feels that *La mestiza* must

constantly shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality

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to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (“La Conciencia” 101)

Convergent thinking happens when the immigrant feels forced to exclude parts of the self in order to mold into the “Western mode”—it is detrimental. In response, Anzaldúa recommends, *la mestiza* must be tolerant towards contradictions, have “a tolerance for ambiguity” (“La Conciencia” 101).

While Anzaldúa suggests that tolerance is needed in order to cope with contradictions and ambiguity, Ortiz Cofer does not gain this consciousness through tolerance. Tolerance is a term that accepts contradictions—internal (mental) and external (social)—as undesirable. Instead, *La mestiza* should see every contradiction as parts and experiences that blend together to evolve the self. Ortiz Cofer does not *tolerate* contradictions; rather, she embraces the experiences she encounters as equal parts that fulfill her wholeness. The contradictions are beautiful challenges that Ortiz Cofer essentially turns into the art of her stories. Ortiz Cofer develops a mixture of two cultures, of stories, of her experiences, values, and beliefs, and depicts the epitome and tangible representation of what the *mestiza* consciousness is. Anzaldúa believes that the future “depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (“La Conciencia” 102). To achieve these abilities is a great success, but what the future needs in order to obtain these abilities is not tolerance, but resistance. Ortiz Cofer breaks down her paradigms of cultural and identity contradictions by resisting the need to compromise with what the Western mode sees as blemishes.

Similarly, *La mestiza* must resist the need to view contradictions as blemishes, and instead see them as beautiful parts that continually develop the self. She creates from the qualities she has obtained, and invents a self that does not need social approbation. *La mestiza* experiences a cultural clash from leaving her home to venturing into society. She feels like an outsider because her home life differs from her social life—clothes, ideology, family dynamics, religion, and culture all send opposing messages that tend to cause what Anzaldúa calls “un choque, a cultural collision” (“La Conciencia” 100). As a result, she struggles to find a place to belong. Ortiz Cofer instructs the writer to use her identity and culture as a tool to construct a new identity, one that encapsulates her Old World and her New World. What Anzaldúa conveys in the essence of *La mestiza*, Ortiz Cofer portrays through the art of writing. Ortiz Cofer uses storytelling and the act of writing to alleviate feelings

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of marginalization and to stimulate the idea that juggling cultures and mixing identities is a beautiful way to internally process a new form of consciousness. Through expression, the creator can preserve and embrace her individuality. She can resist the feeling that the liminal space is marginal and recognize it as a unique place where creativity is born. Upon telling her personal truths and daring to write, the Latina not only shares “little stories” that entertain, but also finds harmony within herself by acknowledging and understanding her home within the liminal space as a place of comfort, creativity, and individualism.

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For Judith, With Love & Abrazos

Julia Alvarez

Judith and I first met at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in the early 80s. She had won a coveted waiter scholarship; I was there on another scholarship--both of us "scholars." Back then, BLWC was mostly a homogeneous group: white, mainstream writers, very little diversity. In fact, the composition of the place mirrored contemporary American letters at the time. Latino writers hadn't yet been "discovered"; most of us were publishing in small regional publications based in areas of the country where there were large concentrations of Latinos. Vermont, I don't have to tell you, was not among them (still isn't). I had yet to meet other Latino writers (Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chavez, Helena María Viramontes, Ana Castillo, Rudolfo Anaya, Dagoberto Gilb, Cherríe Moraga), so I can truly say, Judith was my first *hermana* in letters to meet in the flesh. What a *bendición* she was! Not just Hispanic (a term we used back then without censure) but female and originally from a neighbor island, Puerto Rico.

We Spanglished our way through the conference that summer (1981), comparing notes and exchanging work. I loved her soulful poems full of characters, insights, rhythms I had never before encountered in American letters. It seems like we nonstop-talked every time we happened upon each other, moving back and forth between our two languages, sometimes voicing confidential grievances as there was no forum back then in which to register insensitive, sexist, or disparaging remarks from the big shots, and even, alas, from mentors/muses/fellow writers.

I loved that dreamy-eyed look of wonder of hers—she was gorgeous—her readiness to sass, her explosive and contagious laughter relieving any angst about being considered "minority" writers, her *cariño* and intelligence, her resilience and lack of self-pity. I learned so much from her about writing, about sticking to the small, humble details that capture the soul and alma of our lives and those of our characters; about life, about not taking myself so personally (still learning on that front).

We dressed together for those Barn parties in our long skirts and shawls; we talked about our hair (always a ripe subject among our demographic), about poetry, love, other writers, poetry, our dreams for

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the future, jobs we needed to find, publishers we hoped would “discover” us. A heady time on that mountain. Full of hope and promise and passion. And poetry, poetry, poetry.

We finished each other’s sentences and tweaked each other’s lines on paper. We stood equal height, dark haired and eyed in the Bread Loaf photos, compañeras in Langston Hughes’s kitchen of American letters, soon to be invited to the big table, where alas, we lost sight of each other over the years, too busy with the lives we had dreamed about, though every once in a while when a new Judith Ortiz Cofer book came out or her name was mentioned, a warm sweet feeling flooded my heart.

Last summer on the mountain, I was shocked to learn she was ill, and I wrote her, and she wrote me a thoughtful, eloquent email (a form not known for either), catching me up on her story and asking about mine. She finished with these words I will treasure now more than ever:

Bread Loaf will forever be my magic mountain. While you are there, think of us in our flowing skirts, being who we were, the two Latinas taking our place in the writing world, and perhaps opening the window just a bit for the diversity that now, finally, exists in what once was a dream under a bell jar. Sending love and abrazos, Judith

About the Author

Julia Alvarez has written novels (*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *¡Yo!*, *In the Name of Salomé*, *Saving the World*), poetry (*Homecoming*, *The Other Side/ El Otro Lado*, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*), nonfiction (*Something to Declare*, *Once Upon A Quinceañera*, *A Wedding in Haiti*), and numerous books for young readers (including the *Tía Lola Stories* series, *Before We Were Free*, *finding miracles*, *Return to Sender*, and *Where Do They Go?*). A recipient of the National Medal of Arts, Alvarez is a founder of Border of Lights, a movement to promote peaceful collaboration between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. She lives in Vermont.



Begin with This

Christy Desmet

the cool kiss
of a September morning in Georgia, the bell-shaped
currents of air changing in the sky, the sad ghosts
of smoke clinging to a cleared field . . .

—“To Understand *El Azul*”

Judith Ortiz Cofer and I joined the University of Georgia faculty at exactly the same time, in 1984. As we lurched fitfully toward tenure, we nevertheless managed to have some fun together in our new academic habitat. At that time, Judy and I both wore quite high heels, and as we walked each day from the coffee room to our little third-floor offices, one of the older professors would emerge from his office with arms crossed and brows furrowed, to see who was making such a racket. Women’s high heels were apparently a novelty on the third floor of Park Hall. Judy and I started fantasizing about how when we grew old, we would march around Park Hall loudly in high heels with our walkers.

As time went on, I was aware of how important Judy had become as a writer, both at home and in the world at large. In 2008, I chaired an informal Ortiz Cofer poetry reading in the big classroom of Park Hall, which filled up immediately with students, colleagues, and members of the public. When, one year, Judith was the featured writer at the national Conference on College Composition and Communication—the leading organization for college writing faculty—it was standing-room only in the double-wide hotel ballroom, seating 500 to maybe 900 people. Two hundred people showed up at the Georgia Art Museum to hear Judith’s undergraduate students read their poems. But when Judy died, I learned anew just how many people’s lives she had touched, including a high school teacher I know in Wisconsin and undergraduates from many years past. Colleagues reminded each other of how generous Judith was with her time, agreeing repeatedly to read to and talk with their students. More than one undergraduate left class fired up by the short piece “5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual,” Judy’s account of

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how, and when, she found time to write. Even in her final years before retirement, Judith would mentor four or five bright undergraduates as interns in her creative writing seminars, helping them learn to become writers and teachers.

Judy had such a powerful effect on us for two reasons. First, she always let you know that you were loved. Second, she showed you that *your own life* was fun, an adventure, even worthy of storytelling. My greatest memories of Judith and her family involve the Cofer farm, the 750-acre family spread in Louisville, Georgia, with fields where you can find Native American artifacts; the house with a deck overlooking the pond; the little cabin where Judy wrote, which had received improvements after her retirement; and in later years, what came to be known as the “beach” named for her and John’s grandson—the homemade sign “Eli’s Beach” is clearly visible as a landmark on Google Earth. Judy loved the farm and its rituals deeply, and her enthusiasm was contagious. Each visit was going to be a great event: we would fish, sometimes have a fish fry or eat a sumptuous southern meal cooked by John, watch the University of Miami play UCLA or *The Big Lebowski*, or just let the dogs run around while we enjoyed one another’s company.

Farm visits could also become adventures, less like the idyllic setting of Judith’s story “Tales Told Under the Mango Tree” and more like the daring feats of María Sabida, the feminist, folkloric heroine who rescued children, outwitted bandits, and served as one of Judith’s own avatars. There was that time in the nineties when my husband David, John, and I were creek fishing, and it started to rain; our dog, who was thunder-phobic, disappeared to an unknown location for four or five hours. Fearful that she might head for the road, David and I took the Taurus down the long dirt road that had once almost defeated a seasoned Fedex driver, and we promptly got stuck in the sand. John had called his parents to be on the lookout for the dog, and eventually C. H., John’s father, arrived with his tractor to dig out the Taurus. The tractor bucked up and down ferociously, and just as the car came loose, out of the woods wandered the dog, mildly interested in the hullabaloo. By now it was 9 p.m. and growing dark. John went out and got steaks—the projected dinner of fresh-caught fish, understandably, had not materialized—and we retired in relief at 11 p.m. The next morning, we were having coffee when Tanya emerged, undoubtedly from studying mathematics this day as on New Year’s (see “Notes for My Daughter Studying Math on the Morning of a New Year”). Suddenly Casper, the deaf cat, tore around the corner with the handle of our dog food bag stuck around his neck, slinging kibble all over the house. We’ll never be invited back, we told each other. After we left, Judith later said, as she had turned back to go in the house, all she could see were tails

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hanging down from the trees. The unrepentant dog had treed every one of the then-plentiful outdoor cats.

We were invited back again for John's southern feasts and later, organic vegan feasts from the Cofer garden, and the family grew, with Tanya, Dory, and Eli home for visits. On our last visit to the farm during Judith's life, adventure struck again. John, David, and I went out in the little boat on the pond to fish, while our current dog stayed behind to nap and keep Judy company. At some point, John decided to see if he could knock down a leaning birdhouse in the middle of the pond, which was becoming an eyesore. There were no birds inside, but there was a swarm of displeased wasps. As John tried to fend them off, I tucked in and stayed very still, while David tried to get hold of the paddle and push us out of the wasps' reach. John was about to abandon ship, which would have upended the entire party into the water, when we finally pulled clear. But we had to return to Judith in defeat, sans fish, scarred from battle, and feeling pretty sheepish.

Judy came to see the farm and Georgia as her home and tucked hints of its beauties into her writing. Think of that brief evocation of how a September day in Georgia feels in "To Understand *El Azul*"; the "iced sky" and "rustling leaves" in the background as Tanya, at eleven, gathers holly at the farm ("Holly," lines 18-19); or the prose piece "The Sign," in which Judith and her friend Kathryn got lost while looking for yard sales on the Georgia back roads. As they wandered, looking for a sign of where they might be, and surrounded by "woods circled with trees, still green but tipped with gold, and a field of soil so rich red it looks like velvet cake" (13), suddenly there arose in a cotton field a barn on which someone had painted an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Two of her worlds, an ocean apart, came together briefly, like a mirage.

In a 1992 interview with Rafael Ocasio, when asked about how she wrote as a Latina from rural Georgia, Judy laughed:

I am sitting right now in a cabin that I use as my office on the farm. If I look around me I see hundreds of acres of trees and they are my community as far as a physical community. However, if I look around my cabin I have shelves and shelves of books by writers who are present here as if they were in my company. (46)

The farm, like the Virgin of Guadalupe presiding over a cotton field, was a point of convergence between worlds, a solitary cocoon that nevertheless offered connections back to Puerto Rico, Paterson, NJ, and the University of Georgia campus. During our farm visits, whether victorious or defeated in our adventures, we often ended the day with a

cool drink on the front screened porch overlooking the pond, reporting out to Judy the day's events or just sitting peacefully with the dogs, sheltered by the tall pines, the soft air, the clean smells of the woods. In those moments, we told Judy our stories, and she listened. It was enough.

I am one of the people whom Judith helped to see their own lives as a story. Although I never wrote fishing stories, as she had suggested, even giving me an anthology of women's writing on the angler's art, and I rarely rise voluntarily at 5 a.m., I do see myself as a writer apart from the publish-or-perish regimen of academia. That was the greatest gift that Judith Ortiz Cofer gave to us all, an urgent need to remember and recount people and places in all their specificity.

Looking back through her books as I write this, I was struck by how prominent aging and death can be in Judith's stories; think, for instance, of Lydia, who found God in New York City, at the funeral for the narrator's father in *The Latin Deli*. But, I realize, her lovingly crafted *cuentos* are really more about the persistence of life and the joy of keeping the past alive in all its specific colors. If I talked to Judy today, I would tell her that the fish are still biting, that John's brother has a state-of-the-art fryer, that John himself bought an electric scaler, and that Eli is a fun dinner companion, very grown up. Rereading Judith Ortiz Cofer's work and remembering her, I understand again that writing, like time itself, is a healer of wounds and that "the heart, / like a well-constructed little boat, will resume / Its course toward hope" ("To a Daughter I Cannot Console" 26-28).

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About the Author

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Writing the Immigrant Experience, Writing as Immigrant Power

Rigoberto González

During the late 1990s I was just beginning to admit to myself that, quite possibly, I might want to be a writer. This was a huge step for me because during my college education I came across very few names on the bookshelves that sounded like mine, but there they were: Gary Soto, Sandra Cisneros, Alberto Ríos, and Judith Ortiz Cofer. The first three were Chicano, so I had a very different relationship to their works—I recognized their landscapes, their cultural references, their particular use of urban Spanish—but the fourth was a Puerto Rican writer who wrote about an island I had never been to, and about New Jersey, a state I had never visited. Yet I was still drawn to her work because she was the only one who wrote about the power of language. Her speakers and narrators made an important connection to writing and it was this skill that allowed them to exist, and to make visible the private world of their imaginations that gave them critical orientation in moments when they felt lost or abandoned. Judith was also the only immigrant in that cluster of writers. I understood her because I had lived through the experience of leaving a homeland and struggling to find a place—and a voice—in the United States.

Eventually, I learned that for Judith “immigrant” was a much more nuanced identity since all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, but that didn’t weaken the affection I had for her work. If anything, it strengthened it because, even though I was raised in Mexico, I was born in California—I too was a citizen who had lived a childhood in a landscape culturally separate and distant from the U.S., and I too had navigated similar paths from Spanish to English, from one homeland to another, from rural space to urban space, from a homogenous community to a diverse one. In her work I found my story: the richness and the heartache of relocating during the formative years of my adolescence—that unsettling feeling of dislocation but also the dazzling promise of new opportunities.

I kept up with Judith’s work because she had much to teach me about writing interiority—about the big worlds inside the not-so-big bodies of everyday people. I first encountered this in *The Latin Deli*, and in particular in a poem that haunted me for many years because I didn’t quite understand it, “The Women Who Love Angels.” Who were these women? Nuns? But I did recognize the love and respect that the poet

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had for these women whose story was worth telling. They died but they were not forgotten. I remember being overwhelmed by a sense of grief, but just as quickly I realized that these lives were not meaningless and empty because they were filled with joy and music and beauty, and sadness—the extraordinary narrative of ordinary people. That was the key to what I wanted to do as well: to shine a graceful light on those whom society, politics, and sometimes other people did not want to see.

Over the years, I had very few opportunities to speak to Judith. I preferred to admire her from a distance because she meant so much to me as a mentor on the page. It seems like such a juvenile admission, but I understand it as I age and I observe how young writers become too timid to approach their idols. She is no longer with us, but her books are, and I take comfort in knowing that Judith's words are connecting to new generations of readers and dreamers and immigrant kids who want to see their journeys mirrored in the stories and poems they encounter.

Our writers die, but their books won't as long as we keep reading them, and I am certain Judith will hold a special place in our lives for many years to come. Gracias, maestra, por la palabra, la sabiduría, y el amor.

About the Author

Rigoberto González is the author of 18 books of prose and poetry, and the recipient of NEA, Guggenheim, and USA Rolón fellowships. A contributing editor to *Poets & Writers Magazine* and a book columnist at *NBC Latino* online, he serves on the board of trustees of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) and is professor of English at Rutgers-Newark, the State University of New Jersey. His email is rigozal@andromeda.rutgers.edu.

Judith Ortiz Cofer: A Remembrance of My Compañera and Colleague

Barbara McCaskill

I'm an academic, and we try to put colons in our titles as much as possible,
makes them legitimate.

—Judith Ortiz Cofer

Just about every time I taught the Multicultural American Literature survey course, ENGL 2400, Judith Ortiz Cofer visited my classroom. I made it a point to assign one of her works on every syllabus: *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, or her novel *The Meaning of Consuelo*, or her memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. Judith was sharp, witty, informed, ambitious, disciplined, funny, and tough. If you've read her writings, attended her readings, or had the privilege of taking her classes, I don't have to tell you that. For what seemed like the longest time, we were the only tenure-track women of color faculty teaching in Park Hall, and we counted ourselves among a handful at the University of Georgia's birthplace on North Campus. For those of us from groups historically excluded by the politics of race and gender, or the privileges of birth and title, I am proud of how Judith, my compañera and colleague, made that building, and this university, more welcoming and cosmopolitan places. I am proud of how her writing and teaching emphasized the U-N-I-T-Y framing the word "university."

In *The Latin Deli: Poetry and Prose*, Judith includes a series of poems titled "From 'Some Spanish Verbs'" which are named with Spanish verbs: "Orar: To Pray," "Dividir: To Divide," "Respirar: To Breathe," and "Volar: To Fly." I am not into writing poetry, just as Judith was not into cooking. For example, in her poem "Beans: An Apologia for Not Loving to Cook—for Tanya," she associates "the cloying smell of boiling beans / in a house of women waiting" with the sacrifice of women's lives and spirits and children in service to the needs of men—and Judith rejected such "surrender" of female power utterly and without concession (*A Love Story* 1-2). As Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés notes in her response poem "Hombre, Hambre, Hembra (After Judith Ortiz Cofer's 'Beans:

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An Apologia for Not Loving to Cook’),” too often a community can pressure a woman into “service to those who would use her” (*Everyday Chica* 14). Judith later admitted that she had come to understand her aversion to the kitchen and stove as “a truth I had needed in order to become who I needed to become” (Untitled remarks).¹ So, in Spanish first and English second, I am beginning with infinitives but celebrating—as is my own preference—in prose, remembrances from our days in Park Hall together.

Pertenecer: To Belong

My first memory of Judith is a confrontational one that places her in the Creative Writing Office, owning that space and her power like a gangland don in the film *Goodfellas* (1990). Head to toe in black, one hand on her hip, one brightly lacquered finger leveled at me, she told me, “Bár – Bar – Ah,” to stop it! I was the new kid on the block, the newbie struggling with imposter syndrome, and Judith wasn’t having it. The secret to belonging is to act like you belong, she said, no matter how you feel. As a Navy brat and an Army brat, growing up on the move in military families, we both knew what it meant to be the new kids on the block every two or three years. For gypsies like us, life was not always a Norman Rockwell painting full of smiles, sunshine, and soda pop.

In her autobiographical essay “The Paterson Public Library,” Judith describes how she lived in “knee-liquifying fear” of an African-American student named Lorraine who bullied her during sixth grade. As “the new kid on the block” coming from Puerto Rico to live in New Jersey, Judith was what she called “the perfect choice” for Lorraine’s “ritual humiliation.” She was too smart, too skinny, too small, and like Lorraine, too different to fit in. Judith writes that she came to “depend on knowledge as my . . . security,” to find in library books what she “needed to survive in two languages and in two worlds.” Judith and I shared this common ground: that the gifts we received from literature gave us an escape from society’s pigeonholes, and they helped us find “inner freedom” as a barometer of self-worth to live and grow by (*The Latin Deli* 131-134).

Colaborar: To Collaborate

As a bold and beautiful woman, a full, chaired professor, and a department head, Judith smashed preconceptions of what university scholars look like and how they should behave. She was what US Congressional

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Representative and fellow southerner John Lewis calls a “necessary troublemaker,”² who disarmed her detractors and neutralized their reactions of shock, disbelief, disrespect, and/or anger by making up-
pitness and success her twin badges of honor and distinction. She was here to stay in this Humanities field, and she expected the respect she deserved and had earned. She took mentoring seriously, and she understood correctly that mentoring is a reciprocal effort where both parties give and receive. Because of her mentorship, more women know they have a right to enter and stay in spaces like this one.

Judith prioritized time to write alone and think in solitude every day, so it may seem surprising that I celebrate her as a frequent collaborator. We never co-wrote an essay or co-presented at conferences, but we came together often to plan campus events. In fact, we collaboratively organized two that were held on the stage of the University of Georgia’s historic Chapel³: *New Voices in American Literature: A Multicultural Symposium* (2007), which included UGA graduates Sean Hill and Lorraine López, both mentees of Judith who are now professors and published authors; and *Black Poets Lean South: A Cave Canem Symposium* (2008), which featured poets from the prestigious national collective. Judith and I also served together on every kind of committee under the sun: for hiring of new faculty, evaluation of dissertations and theses, faculty promotion, solicitation of guest speakers, selection of student awards. It took me many years to realize that by conscripting me into this service, Judith taught me that collaboration brings strength to the workplace, raising money in a recession is a blessing, and political intelligence is a skill that must be learned. I will sum up my understanding of collaboration from her description of the power of speech and song in *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*. “Each time you do it,” Judith writes, “you risk public failure. But when it works, you hold people’s attention, and for a few moments you may change their lives” (164).

Descubrir: To Discover

The doors of our hangout, East-West Bistro, are closed and its windows sealed; it is gone, but not forgotten. Named for one of the University of Georgia’s busiest campus transit routes, on the school’s main drag of Broad Street, East-West Bistro in its day was appropriately Judith’s second command center, an extension of her office and classroom. It was Judith who introduced me to East-West, where I promptly became addicted to the black bean burgers and fries, and the fish tacos and fries, and the ketchup, while she downed all manner of salads, and

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where the ritual of consuming multicultural cuisine felt like a metaphor for our multiethnic teaching. Proficient at savoring the little joys of life like bingeing on fish tacos, Judith would be delighted that the University of Georgia community remembers her as a great artist and teacher who made opportunities for us to belong, to collaborate, and to discover life's gifts large and small. In Spanish first and English second, Judith is and will be una gran artista, my "friend and partner in books and adventures," as she signed one of her many books for me. She mastered many genres of writing—poetry, essays, speeches, novels, short fiction—while most count ourselves lucky to be competent in one. It sometimes pained her that critics pigeonholed her with one label or the other, or that they devalued her award-winning works which targeted young readers, so it means so much that we recognize and applaud her talents. For what many turn their backs to, out of indifference, or ignorance, or fear of unknowns and uncertainties, the artista confronts and engages: *muy animada*, throwing open windows; *a la fuerza*, unbolting the doors; *de la lucha de la vida viene*, out of the struggle bearing life.

Notes

1. In his Introduction to *Writing on Napkins at the Sunshine Club: An Anthology of Poets Writing in Macon*, Kevin Cantwell reads Judith's poem as a metaphorical expression of regret for cultural imperatives on women to "put their artistic work aside" (10).
2. Lewis defines himself and other change-agents this way to underscore their willingness to violate rules and challenge authority and long-held shibboleths in order to eradicate racism and bigotry. "Good trouble" and "necessary trouble" are phrases he has coined to illustrate the positive transformative social outcomes "of peaceful protest and civil disobedience" (Milne).
3. Judith gave frequent readings in the Chapel, one of the oldest buildings on campus, and typically reserved for the institution's most distinguished scholars and speakers.

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About the Author

Barbara McCaskill is Professor of English and Associate Academic Director of the Willson Center for Humanities & Arts at the University of Georgia. She also co-directs the Civil Rights Digital Library Initiative. She wrote *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (UGA Press, 2015); and she co-edited *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919* (NYU Press, 2006) and *Multicultural Literature and Literacies: Making Space for Difference* (SUNY Press, 1993). She has published a teaching edition of *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (UGA Press, 1999). She teaches and writes about nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American literature and print culture, and the literature of the American Civil Rights Movement. Her email is bmccaski@uga.edu.

A Fierce Devotion

Lynn Pruett

I met Judith Ortiz Cofer at the Kentucky Women Writers Conference in 2000. Her anthology, *Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival*, had been published the previous year. As a mother of three sons, who never seemed to get much sleep, I was intrigued by the title and thrilled to be assigned to Judith as her driver.

I picked her up at the Bluegrass Airport in Lexington. As I drove, I was so overcome by my desire to ask her significant questions about writing that my conversation was stilted, and my face flooded with heat as we passed horse farms and I said odd and obvious things, like “they paint all the fences every summer” and “there’s only fast food restaurants on this road.” Judith was kind in that she didn’t ward me off but nodded politely and sighed. I was shy, having been schooled by my mother never to ask for anything and always to put everyone else in the world ahead of me. Terrible lessons for a writer, much less for a woman who writes.

The next day, the first day of the conference, Judith changed. She was intense, anxious about getting to the Carnegie Center, which was within walking distance of her hotel. But she had a terrible sense of direction and needed a driver. When I pulled up, her focus on meeting the professional obligations was palpable. I had to get out of the car and open the door for her as she fumbled with her briefcase. I became the calm presence, the steady guide. Yet when she got on stage, her warmth and wit erased all traces of anxiety. She was radiant with good will and intelligence and talent. Even my mother, who often spoke with disdain about women giving readings, was absolutely charmed by Judith and her stories.

When I dropped Judith off at the airport two days later, she was gracious and gave me her contact information. I was shocked that a writer of her stature would exhibit generosity like that. In the program where I earned my MFA, such contacts were hoarded and traded exclusively among the men who ran the program and the male students they deemed talented enough to warrant such gifts. During that short weekend Judith came to represent much to me. She had the kind of career I desired. She was both true to herself, in the palpable anxiety she exhibited when she was off stage, and she was thoroughly engaging, dramatic, and stellar in performance. I bought the anthology, *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, and read every essay, trying to find a way

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to be a writer in a life where I was a mother of three sons, aged four, six, and fifteen; a wife; and an adjunct teacher.

To be honest, I was a bit crushed to see that Judith's answer to the quandary of writing time was to rise early in the morning and take valuable hours from necessary sleep. My children did not go to sleep early, nor did they sleep in. In fact my oldest needed only about six hours a night from the time he was seven months old, hence the gap of nine years between him and his next brother. I can remember holding him as an infant at 5 a.m. and noting that it was only three more hours until I could take him to the babysitter so I could teach my 8:30 class. With my youngest I was up in the night, nursing him, watching the headlights on Winchester Road, telling time by the direction of the cars. Heading out of town it was 2 a.m. when the bars closed; heading in meant 6 a.m. for the 7:00 shift.

As an exhausted mother juggling work, children, marriage, in addition to trying to write fiction, I was put off by Judith's insistence that the true artist will use her creativity to carve the time, that she will give up sleeping time to write ("The Woman Who Slept With One Eye Open" 9). I struggled with this idea. I wondered, am I not strong enough to do this? Am I not a true artist? What if a woman's husband is abusive? When an artist suffers for her art, must she risk her life or that of her children in order to write?

Judith had an answer for that, which meant that my experience was to be expected. It was not a unique or a particularly personal deprivation. In the same essay she wrote, "It takes fierce devotion to defend your artistic space, and eternal vigilance over it because the needs of others will grow like vines in your little plot and claim it back for the jungle" (11). I had already established a small office for myself in the house. I'd been secretly relieved that my third child was another son because I could keep my office instead of turning it into a bedroom for a girl. In defense of my little plot, I had taped a self-made sign to its door as a warning. It was a newspaper headline glued on orange construction paper: "Mother of Four Kills All." The worst violator of the sign was my husband, who barged past without knocking, setting a precedent for the little guys. It seemed I had to devote inordinate amounts of energy defending my space and time, an effort which is contrary to the creative spirit. Yet Judith's acknowledgement of this struggle as normal made me understand that this is the duty a professional writer owes her talent.

This talent was apparently relentless in its demands. Judith went on to claim that "the artist, too, suffers—but selfishly. She suffers mainly because the need to create torments her. If she is not fortunate enough to be truly selfish (or doesn't have enough macho in her to do as men

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have always done and claim the right, the time, and the space she needs), then she is doomed to do a balancing act" (9). I lived that suffering and it made me an unhappy kind of gorilla in my house, short of temper, always pissed, resentful of housework. I often thought of this creative need as a curse and wondered why it had been bestowed on me if I had so little support for acting on it. Perhaps because Judith's statement was so true, it angered me more. Women like me were required to act contrary to our upbringing. We had to overcome choices of marriage and children in order to become true artists. It was a high hill to climb. Yet it was also absolutely true: this is the only way for a woman writer to get things done.

After this internal debate in which it was hard not to blame myself for being so "unmacho," I did take a few tentative steps toward my writing goals. I applied for a state art's council grant with a chapter of my thesis, and was surprised that I won one. That gave me a semester off teaching. I joined a writing group made up of women. I kept serving on the Kentucky Women Writers Conference Committee, meeting other professional women writers. I revised my MFA thesis novel, went with the writing group to a conference in New Orleans, and secured an agent. For me it was key to have an outside affirmation in order to justify the time I needed.

The following summer I got up at 5:00 and wrote until noon, revising the novel. At noon, I took over mom duties for the boys until they went to bed around 11:00 pm. Their dad was writing his own book. He was in charge of the boys in the morning while I wrote, so he let them sleep until I took over, which meant that I had their care and my novel while he essentially had no childcare. But that battle was not worth fighting.

The reward that Judith does not mention in her essay was this: If I wrote in the morning, I lived more lightly the rest of the day. The normal family disasters became jokes I could handle without fighting tooth and nail. This was the true reward for the artist I am. Even if there had been no contract, no sale, no publication of that first novel, the act of writing, the claim of relevance, was crucial to my survival. For showing me the way and insisting on a fierce devotion to creativity, I have Judith Ortiz Cofer to thank.

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About the Author

Lynn Pruett is the author of the novel *Ruby River*, and other stories and essays. The most recent appear in *Unbroken Circle*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Appalachian Nature*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Kentucky Arts Council, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and Yaddo. She teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Murray State University. Her email is jpruett@murraystate.edu.

Remembering Judith Ortiz Cofer

Hugh Ruppersburg

Judith Ortiz Cofer was a writer of poems, essays, and novels. She was a teacher, a mother and grandmother and a partner in marriage, a friend, and a passionate representative of who and what she was—a Latina woman, born in Puerto Rico, who spent most of her life living and working in the Deep South of the United States. She embraced all these roles. I knew her as a writer whose work I admired and as a distinguished member of the University of Georgia English department and of the greater University community. I knew her also as a friend for more than thirty years. We exchanged e-mails, chatted on campus, and met in downtown Athens for occasional lunches. We discussed mutual interests—books we'd read, films we'd seen, our families. She talked of her students, in whom she took great satisfaction. She talked often about her husband John and her daughter Tanya, of whom she was very proud, and of her grandson Eli and son-in-law Dory. She would also talk about projects she was working on, books she was writing. Sometimes she asked for my opinion of what she was working on, and though I would dutifully offer my thoughts she really didn't need them. She had a firm sense of where she wanted to go. She asked me to read an early draft of her first novel *The Line of the Sun* (1989), as well as of her final book, about her mother's death, *The Cruel Country* (2015). *The Line of the Sun* draft began in a promising way but also needed revision and further work. I told her what I thought. She didn't immediately acknowledge my comments, though later she thanked me, and the published novel had none of the problems I thought I'd found.

Judith and I both enjoyed the *X-Files* TV series. At one of our lunches we discussed an episode ("El Mundo Gira") that centered on the mythic chupacabra. Although I knew little about this beast, she knew a great deal, given its importance in Puerto Rican folklore and superstition, and she thoughtfully, thoroughly critiqued the episode and schooled me in chupacabran lore. This was twenty years ago and I don't remember many details of the conversation—however, I do recall that although she spoke of the chupacabra as a mythic beast, she would not, even at my prodding, dismiss it as something that wasn't real. It was important to her—a part of her past, her upbringing, which she could not put away.

Judith had a great and sometimes wicked sense of humor. She gave me a good-natured hard time about my personality, which she felt was

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too reserved. We joked about colleagues and departmental meetings, about other writers, about national issues. She could be quick to anger when she felt that someone had been rude to her, or had mistreated a student or friend. I saw her temper flare on a few occasions, but not often. Language poetry infuriated her. Visiting artists who expected to be treated like celebrities irritated her. Overbearing personalities especially drew her ire. She mostly showed her anger in private moments. In public, she maintained a friendly manner, a reserved but passionate intensity.

Judith was especially conscious of her role as a representative of Puerto Rico. She realized that as a Puerto Rican writer who wrote in English and lived on the mainland, she had made choices which some saw as political. In fact, at least one of these choices was made for her: She had lived so long in an English-speaking country, had spoken English for most of her life, that she found she could not write well in Spanish—she dreamed in English, she said, and she thought and wrote in English. She remained a fluent speaker of Spanish.

Judith thought of herself as an American writer as well, even as a writer of the American South, as some of her work makes clear. (See her poem “First Job: The Southern Sweets Sandwich Shop and Bakery,” for example). Her desire to be a great writer drove her in her work. Yet she also wanted to be a good teacher and a contributing citizen of the University. She served on many departmental and University committees, mindful that such service could be tedious and that it took away time from her writing. She never failed to visit my classes when I invited her to talk about her work. She did the same for many other colleagues. She was generous with students—no question was too simple or dim. She answered their questions with patience, clarity, and insight. Her sense of herself as a citizen of a national and international writing community was evident in how often she traveled to read and discuss her work at schools and universities across the country.

At the end of each spring term, Judith organized a public reading for her writing students—she invited their parents, friends, fellow faculty, and others from the local community to attend. This was, as I took it, her way of providing a culminating experience for her students, her way of celebrating them and introducing them as writers to the public world. She continued to encourage and support them long after they left the University.

Judith loved writing. She worked hard at it. She was extremely self-disciplined. For many years she rose at 5:00 in the morning to write for two hours before seeing her family off to school and work. Her work ethic, her commitment to writing, was a daunting model to her students and colleagues. She saw writing as her vocation, as a higher

Hugh Ruppensburg

calling, and she answered it with every particle of her being. She was pleased that others admired and enjoyed her work.

Judith looked forward after retirement to many years of writing and of time with her family. It is such a sadness that she did not have these. Her life and her presence enriched us all.

About the Author

Hugh Ruppensburg is University Professor Emeritus of English and retired Senior Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Georgia. He has written books on William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren and edited five anthologies of work by and about Georgia writers, as well as a collection of essays about the writer Don DeLillo. He has received the Governor's Award in the Humanities in Georgia, Georgia Author of the Year award, and the Albert Christ-Janer Creative Research Award at the University of Georgia. His email is hruppensburg@uga.edu.

Invisible Gifts

Pauline Kaldas

Years ago, I acquired a copy of *The Latin Deli* by Judith Ortiz Cofer. From the first poem, “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” expressing longing for a homeland, I entered a world that was familiar and which, at that point in the mid-1990s, I had rarely encountered in literature. Judith Ortiz Cofer had come from Puerto Rico and I had emigrated from Egypt, but her words offered the shared experience of cultural displacement, the sense of unbelonging felt acutely by child immigrants, and the grave responsibility of being a cultural translator.

When I came to “The Story of My Body,” I felt as if I were reading my own life. I had lived these same things, but I had never seen them expressed in words. Ortiz Cofer’s essay moves through the journey of a body’s migration, saying, “My skin color, my size, and my appearance were variables—things that were judged according to my current self-image, the aesthetic values of the times, the places I was in, and the people I met” (146). Her writing created a bridge between two worlds, one that other immigrants could cross to find themselves.

When I read “5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual,” I was approaching the end of a PhD program, struggling with my dissertation and my role as a mother of two young daughters. My brain was filled with feeding schedules, laundry, cooking, and urging my husband to finish his own dissertation before our funding ran out. Overwhelmed, I looked at my life and thought I would never be able to write again. This essay was Ortiz Cofer’s own story of trying to balance her responsibilities as a wife, mother, teacher, and writer. Her struggle to write while fulfilling her duties mirrored my own frustration.

In it, Ortiz Cofer explains how she began waking at 5:00 A.M., creating time for her words: “Since that morning in 1978 when I rose in the dark. . . I have not made or accepted too many excuses for not writing. This apparently ordinary choice, to get up early and to work every day, forced me to come to terms with the discipline of art” (167). Her words spoke to me, and I decided to follow her example for the summer.

Those first days of rising early, I struggled to pull my body out of bed and sit at a desk. But I recalled Ortiz Cofer’s experience—the first day she turned off her alarm, so the next day she set another alarm across the room. I understood that rising at five to sit and write required confronting my fear and taking the risk to follow my calling, that as artists we must demand more of ourselves than we think we are capable of.

Pauline Kaldas

There were mornings when I had an hour before my family awakened, and there were others when I only had fifteen minutes. I wrote what came. *The Latin Deli*, which contains poetry, essays, and stories, taught me that I did not have to choose a single genre. I let each piece take its own shape. Ortiz Cofer's book showed me that different genres could mingle and speak to one another.

At the end of summer, I gathered my pages, astounded at having written so much. I learned that it was possible to write on demand, that writing needed to be a daily habit, and that sometimes it had to be pulled out of you against your own resistance. Ortiz Cofer articulates what it means to do this: "The initial sense of urgency to create can easily be dissipated because it entails making the one choice many people, especially women, in our society with its emphasis on the 'acceptable' priorities, feel selfish about making: taking the time to create, stealing it from yourself if it's the only way" (168). I felt her words guiding me, and I made the decision to switch from a critical to a creative dissertation. It was a way of defining myself as a writer.

* * *

In 2011, I opened my email to find an invitation to read at the Eudora Welty Writers' Symposium.⁴ Judith Ortiz Cofer was the featured speaker. I had never heard of this symposium, and I didn't know where Columbus, Mississippi was, but I responded immediately, confirming that I would be there.

My anticipation for meeting Judith was a mix of wanting to tell her how much she had influenced me and the hope that I wouldn't make a fool of myself. The first evening, we were picked up to attend a reception. Judith was staying at another hotel, and we stopped to get her. She slipped into the van, and I introduced myself and told her that she had changed my life. She accepted my awkward compliment, saying, "This is what a writer lives to hear."

Judith's reading took place the first evening. She held her audience captive, reading from her current manuscript, *The Cruel Country*, about the loss of her mother. The next morning, I read along with the other writers. After lunch, we were placed at a rectangular table set up on the stage. Judith sat in the middle and responded to questions with brutal wit, saying, "Don't live a stupid life" and "Writer's block is a leisure activity."

After my reading, she paid me the greatest compliment, saying, "Your work is similar to mine." Our bond came through our words. On the last day, I gave her a copy of my most recent book, and she saw the

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acknowledgements in which I had thanked her and the essay she had written that opened a way for me to write. We had given each other gifts through the years in invisible ways.

* * *

At the symposium, I bought another copy of *The Latin Deli*, and I asked Judith to sign it. When I came home, I placed it on my desk. I wanted to remember what it had taught me and the miracle of meeting Judith. Her loss enters deeply inside me. Having little support in my pursuit of writing, I realize now that Judith was my literary mother, the one who encouraged me to forge ahead, whose words and example gave me both the confidence and tools to pursue my desire to write. Inside *The Latin Deli*, Judith addressed me as her “compañera in art.” Even after her passing, I feel her companionship every morning when I sit down to write.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Kendall Dunkelberg, the director of the Eudora Welty Writers’ Symposium and all the writers (Judith Ortiz Cofer, Sefi Atta, Jean W. Cash, Joy Castro, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Minrose Gwin, Randall Horton, Michael Kardos, Michael F. Smith, Latha Viswanathan, Jianqing Zheng) who participated in the 2011 symposium focused on the theme of Crossing Cultures in the South.

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About the Author

Pauline Kaldas is the author of *Egyptian Compass*, a collection of poetry; *Letters from Cairo*, a travel memoir; *The Time Between Places*, a collection of short stories; and *Looking Both Ways*, a collection of essays. She also co-edited *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including *Others Will Enter the Gates*, *At Home: Essays on Place and Displacement*, and *Borderlands and Crossroads: Writing the Motherland*. She is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Hollins University. Her email is pkaldas@hollins.edu.

A Tribute to an Extraordinary Faculty Member: Remarks Given at Judith Ortiz Cofer's Memorial Service

January 27, 2017

Jere W. Morehead

On behalf of the University of Georgia, I would like to welcome Judith's family, friends, colleagues, and former students as we gather today to mourn the passing of such a wonderful and unique individual and to celebrate the many ways in which she enriched the lives of everyone.

I was privileged to have known Judith and to have worked with her for many years at the University of Georgia. She was, as everyone in this chapel knows, an extraordinary faculty member. She also was a model citizen at the University of Georgia. She was the type of person who stopped you on the sidewalk to ask about your family, your career, your triumphs, why you were worried, and what challenges you were facing. She was always warm, inquisitive, thoughtful, and caring. You knew that she cared about you on a personal level and that she had profound things to say to you and great advice to give to everyone.

She was a gifted translator of culture. She gave us glimpses into her life in Puerto Rico, and she was a shining light on the immigrant experience in America. She helped every student who came in contact with her, as well as everyone in the University community, make sense of the world around them.

Judith and I became good friends in the winter of 2002, when she attended a Foundation Fellows retreat. I know Dr. Steve Elliott-Gower has returned today for this service, and he was there when we all witnessed Judith do something very profound at a period in our own history that was quite disturbing and quite unsettling. She came to provide perspective and comfort to our Foundation Fellows, who were all grappling with the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. Through her extraordinary writing, she connected with our students surrounding the events of that terrible day in our nation's history. She was inspirational, and she literally connected with every student at that retreat as she shared her

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poetry and encouraged our students to express their own fears as well as their own hopes for our future.

She had an equally profound impact on the literary world as one of the most important Georgia writers in our history and, indeed, one of the most important American writers of our time. Her devotion to her craft can be seen in the essay “5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual” from her Pulitzer Prize-nominated collection *The Latin Deli*, which was published by the University of Georgia Press. In this essay, Judith described her writing practice as simply an act of will. She awoke every morning at 5:00 A.M., two hours earlier than the rest of her household, and she used that time to channel her talent into words of universal and lasting value. In this and in many other ways, Judith set an empowering example for other writers to follow.

She also served as an outstanding teacher and mentor to her students. She taught them to be open. She taught them to be disciplined. She taught them to understand and be engaged in the world around us.

We were all very fortunate at the University of Georgia that she shared her wisdom and time with us for so many years as the Regents’ and Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing. It is with great sadness that we say goodbye, but it is with great admiration and tremendous respect that we will always remember Judith. She will be dearly missed by the University community as a friend, as a colleague, as a profound and extraordinary faculty member, and as a beloved member of this entire community.

About the Author

Jere W. Morehead became the University of Georgia’s 22nd President on July 1, 2013. Prior to becoming President, he served UGA in many key administrative roles, including Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, Vice President for instruction, and Associate Provost and Director of the Honors Program. President Morehead is the Meigs Professor of Legal Studies in the Terry College of Business, where he has held a faculty appointment since 1986. He is a 1980 graduate of the UGA School of Law. His email is president@uga.edu

A Performance of Hope

Chantel Acevedo

For many years, I taught at Auburn University, in Alabama. A small college town, Auburn is an hour and a half from Atlanta. It is a Southern town like many others—football-obsessed, Southern Baptist at its heart, dotted with magnolias and dogwood, and conservative as one can imagine. The town had only one used bookstore, and there wasn't an independent bookshop anywhere nearby. The nearest Barnes and Noble was across the Georgia state line, forty-five minutes away. Harper Lee, Winston Groom, and Fannie Flagg incited literary pride across age groups. Thanks to the presence of the university, a kind of progressivism existed alongside the usual Southern tropes. There were hipster coffee shops, music festivals, rainbow flags flown on lawns. Into that mix, I founded a writers' conference.

The Auburn Writers' Conference existed for five years. I always called it "my second Christmas." From the outset, my hope was to bring diverse writers to town for three days of readings, workshops, and camaraderie. Each January, I screwed up my courage and wrote to my favorite authors, inviting them to be our keynote speaker, offering them a paltry sum (because one had to wring money painfully out of the deans at Auburn when it came to the arts and humanities), good company, and many avid readers and writers to spend time with. And so many said yes, including one of my literary *madrinas*, Judith Ortiz Cofer. Judith and I had never met, and I'm not sure she had ever heard of me when I reached out. But I knew of her, had studied her work, and had long considered her to be one of the writers who laid down the pavement early for other Latinas in the arts, including being one of only a handful of Latino/as nominated for a Pulitzer. Needless to say, I was grateful and humbled to host her at Auburn.

As her keynote began, Judith noted that the podium was too high for her. Only her eyes and dark hair showed from above it. One got the sense that this happened to her often, such was the ease and charm with which she stepped aside from the podium and took the microphone in hand. She spoke gently, but with great enthusiasm, about the power of the written word, the way it heals, and the way it removes the limits of possibility from above our heads. Then, she told us that there came a time when she thought she might give up writing. She had sent out one last poem, thinking that, if no one took it, she would be done, would switch careers, and find a new passion. That poem was accepted

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and published by *Southern Humanities Review*, a journal I was editing at Auburn. So it was that Judith had come to the one place, the one small, Southern town that long ago had given her hope. As a conference organizer, I never knew what a keynote speaker had prepared for her speech. Most often, I was pleasantly surprised. This time, I was incredibly moved. The attendees were nearly all beginning writers. And the story that Judith told was exactly the one they needed to hear—that the work is in revision, and that the courage is in persistence. She had given them, through a personal example, a great deal of hope. There was not a dry eye in the room when she told that story: everyone's sense of the circular nature of life heightened, and her performance imbued with hope everyone present.

The poem, called "Moonlight Performance" may not have been her first published work, though I believe it may have been her first acceptance.¹ In it, she describes a man, naked and alone, leaping into a pond. He waits until a train rounds a bend, and the lights shine upon him. Then, he leaps "as the headlight / suspends him in place" (14-15). There is something both ominous and beautiful about the jump. In the train he can make out "dozens of faces peering / into the night" (9-10). This is his "moving audience," and surely, some of them will see him jump, and wonder about his fate.

I love that this particular poem is one of Judith's first published works. I find kinship with the jumper, who, like the emerging writer, needs to find the courage to jump, will never know her audience in any intimate way—they will be like faces on a train at night. And it seems to me that Judith's life was one of leaping into beams of light, from her infancy in Puerto Rico, to her New Jersey youth, to her productive life as a teacher and writer in the Deep South. How frightening all of those moves must have been, how capable of stymieing Judith's creative spirit. And yet, she persisted, she wrote, she published, she taught, she laid down pavement.

I came to know Judith late, via emails mainly. She was supportive and kind always, and frequently, she would send students my way, either encouraging them to publish in the *Southern Humanities Review*, or to attend the Auburn Writers' Conference. I am now at the University of Miami, a place Judith briefly called home, too. I would have loved to have had the chance to host her here, to provide another kind of homecoming among students who read her work avidly, who see themselves in pieces like "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria," and "And May He Be Bilingual." She must have known the impact of her work, an effect that can only grow with time, reaching new generations.

Chantel Acevedo

In her essay, “In Search of My Mentors’ Gardens,” Judith writes about Flannery O’Connor and Alice Walker. She says, “Their hope, and mine as their apprentice, is that the reader might also catch a glimpse of herself when she looks into that glass darkly” (104). For me Judith Ortiz Cofer held up one of the very first mirrors in which I saw myself in literature. When I first began writing, I did not write about the place I came from (Miami), or the place my family was from (Cuba), nor did I think that I had permission to use Spanish in my writing. My literary education had been very traditional in the English-only, read-the-canon way, and it wasn’t until I discovered writers like Julia Alvarez, Oscar Hijuelos, Cristina Garcia, Sandra Cisneros, and, of course, Judith Ortiz Cofer, that my own sense of what was possible was expanded. Judith’s *The Latin Deli* remains for me a very formative text. It was a mirror for me, reflecting what I didn’t know I needed to know as a writer. At the Auburn Writers’ Conference, too, she held up a mirror to beginning writers, showing them her very vulnerable past self, allowing them to peer “into that glass darkly” with her.

Judith signed my copy of *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer* in her lovely, flourished script with the words “For my compañera in art.” It means the world to me today, as it did when the ink was still fresh. For her example, her art, and her generosity, I will always be grateful, and will return to her books again and again, to the garden of her mentorship on the page.

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About the Author

Chantel Acevedo’s novels include *Love and Ghost Letters* (St. Martin’s Press), winner of the Latino International Book Award; *A Falling Star* (Carolina Wren Press), winner of the Doris Bakwin Award; *En Otro Oz*, a chapbook of poems; and *The Distant Marvels* (Europa Editions), one of Booklist’s Top Ten Historical Novels of 2015. “The Living Infinite,” a novel about the Infanta Eulalia, is forthcoming from Europa Editions in 2017. Acevedo is currently an Associate Professor of English in the MFA Program of the University of Miami. Her email is chantel.acevedo@miami.edu.

Judith and I

William Luis

My relationship with Judith was mainly academic, but also personal. While I had been familiar with Judith's works and devoted a significant section of *Dance Between Two Cultures* (1997) to her writings, I had a unique opportunity to travel with her to Spain. The trip was related to a special issue I was organizing on Latino Caribbean poetry for the *Boletín de la Fundación Federico García Lorca*, which the famed Spanish poet's nephew, Manuel Fernández-Montesinos, edited. A kind, unassuming, and generous man, who acknowledged the importance of Latino literature as a coherent body of work, Fernández-Montesinos asked me to prepare a bilingual issue on the topic, making it the first publication in Spain, or in any other Spanish-speaking country, to promote Latino literature (1995). In preparation for the issue, I invited four Latino Caribbean poets to tour three Spanish cities: Madrid, Granada, and Alcalá de Henares, where they would read their poems and publicize the issue.

I contacted Ricardo Pau Llosa of Cuba and Franklin Gutiérrez of the Dominican Republic, and I communicated with Judith Ortiz Cofer and Víctor Hernández Cruz of Puerto Rico, wanting to highlight two different aspects of Puerto Rican poetry: Víctor paved the way for a Nuyorican style poetry and Judith differentiated herself by writing in Standard English. Certainly, there are literary differences between Víctor, who was reared in New York City, and Judith, who traveled regularly from the island to the mainland.

I met Judith for the first time at the Atlanta airport. Judith and I had been assigned separate seats on the transatlantic flight, but we made arrangements to sit and fly together. From that moment, we established an ongoing dialogue that would continue across the Atlantic, throughout our travels on the Iberian Peninsula, and well into the future. Equally important, the trip allowed me to gain greater insight into the person behind the pen. It was Judith's first trip to Spain, and she was elated to visit the motherland. The experience provided insights into the language and culture of her native Puerto Rico, and she was fascinated to hear different versions of Spanish expressions that were dear to her. Her frequent visits to the island had nourished the language she employed when speaking to native speakers. As the only woman in a group of strong personalities, Judith more than held her

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own. She expressed herself with clarity and purpose and spoke her mind openly, candidly, and confidently.

Upon the completion of a fruitful tour, I wanted to spend more time with Judith and show her other parts of Spain before returning to the States. I offered to take her and Franklin to visit Salamanca, a city that dates back to the pre-Roman period. I rented a car and drove them first to the medieval city of Ávila, which preserves an appendage belonging to Santa Teresa, and afterward to Salamanca, known for housing Spain's oldest university, dating back to 1218, where I had studied as an undergraduate student. We sat for a drink at an outdoor restaurant located on the baroque Plaza Mayor and ate tapas at bars once familiar to me. Judith was delighted to explore these other regions of Spain.

There is no doubt that Judith was admirably intelligent, hardworking, savvy, and strong, as is made evident in the lessons she learned as a child, elegantly expressed in *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990). Indeed, in her childhood recollection, she underscores the difference between island and mainland cultures in general and women's relationship to men in particular. This is illustrated by her grandmother's stories told under the mango tree, instructing the women in the family how to navigate a male-dominated society. Her grandmother explained the difference between María Sabida, who was savvy about men, and María la Loca, who was abused by them. Clearly, Judith drew inspiration and strength from María Sabida. And like her, I believe that Judith also slept with one eye open, a lesson her cousin, mother, and brother's girlfriend did not and would not learn. It is not by accident that in *Silent Dancing*, the sexually permissive Americanized cousin (La Gringa), the brother's girlfriend (La Novia), and the hastily wedded underage mother sitting on the couch were dressed in the same red color dress. Judith's distance from the other women in the stories is further clarified at the end of the memoir, when the daughter challenges her mother's recollections about the narrator's childhood. Upon her father's visit from the US Navy, the five-year-old child was placed in the crib, from which she climbed out and accidentally stumbled into a fire pit. Judith also questioned her mother's remembrance of a different visit, when her father left the household and returned late at night, inebriated and with the scent of rum and other women on his clothing. Judith's final and most convincing proof is a photograph featured as the book's cover, in which she sports a short hair style, ensuing from the fire she had fallen into.

During our trip, I came to know Judith as the narrator of her stories, one who vividly recollects past events, but also the person who exerted her presence, voice, ideas, and relished a good conversation. The title of this essay, "Judith and I," alludes to Borges's master story, "Borges y

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yo” (“Borges and I”), which outlines the difference between the person, who travels and enjoys a good cup of coffee, and the author, whose name appears on the cover of a book. However, I also use the title to refer to my relationship with Judith, author and person, and I, the author of this essay.

Judith will be remembered as a serious and hardworking scholar-writer, who made a permanent contribution to Latino writing. After our return to the United States, our interactions continued. On occasion, she even sent me drafts of her work. Though Judith the person is no longer with us, Judith the writer and character will be an enduring part of our lives. With her multifaceted writings, Judith the author has left us with a wealth of information about her vision of the Puerto Rican experience at home and abroad that will enrich future generations of Latino and mainstream readers.

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About the Author

William Luis is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of Spanish at Vanderbilt University, where he also directs Latino and Latina Studies and edits the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. Luis has authored, edited, and coedited fourteen books and more than one hundred scholarly articles. His books include *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* (1991), *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Literature Written in the United States* (1997), *Juan Francisco Manzano. Autobiografía del esclavo poeta y otros escritos* (2007), and *Looking Out, Looking In: Anthology of Latino Poetry* (2013). Luis was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for 2012. Born and raised in New York City, Luis is widely regarded as a leading authority on Latin American, Caribbean, Afro-Hispanic, and Latino U.S. literatures. His email is William.luis@vanderbilt.edu

La Maestra Judith: The Privilege of Mentoring

Lorraine M. López

The preeminent critic and scholar of Latino literature, the late Juan Bruce-Novoa, identified me as a second-generation writer in an essay on my work. He wrote that I am “one of the new writers privileged to study craft with a Latina mentor of established reputation, in this case Judith Ortiz Coffer [*sic*]” (110). To this day, I feel that privilege keenly, as no one has provided me more guidance, more support, and more practical help in my writing life than Judith. Aware of the singularity and significance of our relationship—an established Latina writer mentoring an emerging one—Judith took her role seriously. She gave so freely of her time, her insights and wisdom that I worried I would never be able to reciprocate. When I was a graduate student, a single mother supporting two teenagers on a teaching assistant’s stipend, Judith would often call mentoring meetings over lunch or dinner—always her treat—and steer me toward opportunities to earn a little extra to help make ends meet. She would also give me clothes she no longer wore—beautiful flowing skirts and smart-looking blazers that I treasure to this day—and buy me the dangling earrings she claimed Latina writers must wear. If generosity was one of Judith’s defining traits, another was grace. She not only helped me scrimp by in graduate school, she showed me how to deal with challenging situations with tact and poise. With a dancer’s ease, Judith finessed the glide of our mentoring relationship into a lasting and dynamic friendship. In so doing, she showed me how to develop close and enduring connections with the students I teach and mentor, and in this way, I finally understood that I must pay forward what she has given to me.

Beyond the mentoring, the skirts and blazers, the dangling earrings, Judith endowed me with faith in myself and skills to develop my writing. Disdainful of cool and aloof contemporary narratives, she urged me to risk sentimentality, to write to its very precipice to achieve the transaction of feeling with readers that constitutes art. A consummate poet, Judith insisted verse must perform superbly on five stages, all at once: image, language, metaphor, music, and meaning—a rubric I apply to this day in my teaching and writing. By example, she demonstrated dedication to craft, along with an impeccable work ethic. She taught me to honor commitments conscientiously and promptly. Whenever I requested letters of endorsement from my professors for

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applications, Judith was always the first to allay my anxiety by submitting her recommendation well before deadline. She was aware of that anxiety, mindful of the feelings of others and responsive to the emotional textures of our lives. She would no more make me wait and worry than she would jab me with a pin.

Her knowledge and wisdom, her intellectual curiosity matched her emotional intelligence. She had a keen interest in science and nature, a fascination with the world that was truly infectious. Judith read voraciously and shared the books she loved with me, including a few texts on natural science that she'd devoured with enthusiasm and that I dutifully struggled to read. One after another, books on my shelves bear Judith's large and looping scrawl of ownership. Many are published by Arte Público Press, Bilingual Review Press, or Floricanto—upstart independent publishers of Latino literature that mailed out copies to la Judith in the hopes that she would disseminate, review, or teach the work. Others among my books are hardcovers, a few first editions, some autographed for Judith who would nonetheless dispense them to me like prescription remedies after diagnosing problems in my own writing. One shelf contains books written by Judith herself: *The Latin Deli*, *Silent Dancing*, *The Year of My Revolution*, *The Meaning of Consuelo*, *An Island like You*, *The Line of the Sun*, *Call Me Maria*, *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, *Woman in front of the Sun*, *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish*. . . . These are also inscribed in her bold script, all of them signed *tu compañera* or simply, *love, Judith*.

Judith Ortiz Cofer's stories, essays, and poems provide enduring evidence not only of her prodigious talent, but of the richness of her life—her generosity of spirit, her attention to emotional undercurrents, her love of learning and fascination with language. Perhaps the most resonant concern in her work, and the one most commented upon by scholars and critics, is her examination of “the between” status that characterizes the bicultural condition. Her writing persistently argues against a fixed multiethnic identity, and not just for the obvious reason that the formation of self is not static, but constantly in flux—like the storytelling tradition of her grandmother, wherein one story is never again exactly as it was when told before. Identity-building—as a focal point for Judith's writing and also as it pertains to all people—entails an ongoing process of self-discovery, change, and growth.

As she did in personal relationships, Judith enacted inclusion in her writing. Her poetry and prose apply sharp humor, keen insight, arresting imagery, and compelling storytelling as strategies to disarm even the most reluctant readers. Schoolteachers and college professors attest to the efficacy of such strategies by assigning her books to entice and inveigle students. Over and over, readers succumb to the warmth

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and wit in Judith's writing, while opening up to experiences either similar to or remarkably different from those offered by their own lives. As a consequence, many mainstream readers empathically inhabit another sphere of culture, language, and race, expanding upon *their* understanding of other lives and perspectives.

The thematic concerns of her writing, its inclusivity and appeal, initially attracted me to Judith's writing before I met her over two decades ago. In fact, *The Latin Deli* drew me to the University of Georgia for the chance to work with Judith, never imagining the magnitude of this privilege, how it would transform my life, personally and professionally. After she had served a stint as visiting professor at Vanderbilt University, Judith mentioned a position would soon open up at that institution for a fiction writer. "You should apply," she told me. If anyone else had offered this advice, I—with just one book out from a small press—would have scoffed, but coming from Judith, this suggestion had the force of a command. Though I had little hope, I submitted application materials, and to my astonishment, I was invited to campus for an interview. Soon after, I was offered the job. Judith, of course, had paved the way by talking me up to her friends and colleagues at Vanderbilt. When I tried to thank her for interceding on my behalf, she waved this away with the only sports comparative I ever heard her utter: "I just wanted the ball to go in your direction," she said. "You are the one who caught it."

Of course, no one has just one way of being, and Judith, I believe, was more complex, more nuanced than most. She was many things to many people—a proud and loving wife, mother, and grandmother; a sharp and savvy colleague; a prolific and gifted writer; an inspired and inspiring teacher; a wise and devoted mentor; and a generous and caring friend. Judith's family would not be surprised to learn how extraordinarily kind and giving she was to me, how she brokered and shared her hard-won success to help me succeed, but to this day, I am awed, even overwhelmed by the bounty of our relationship.

Ultimately, Judith was far more than a mentor, more than a friend. She blazed and still blazes like a torch, illuminating for me the path she struggled to break on her own. Through her books and my memories, Judith continues to guide the course of my writing life. Though Judith is gone and I miss her terribly, the privilege of her mentorship endures, and sometimes I can almost hear her voice, warm and urgent in my ear, "You can do this. I *know* you can."

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About the Author

Lorraine M. López is Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. Her first book, *Soy la Avon Lady*, won the Miguel Marmól Prize. Her second, *Call Me Henri*, was awarded the Paterson Prize. López's short story collection, *Homicide Survivors Picnic*, was a Finalist for the 2010 PEN/Faulkner Prize. Subsequent publications include three novels: *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*, *The Realm of Hungry Spirits*, and *The Darling*, and three edited essay collections: *An Angle of Vision: Women Writers on Their Poor or Working-Class Roots*, *The Other Latin@: Writing against a Singular Identity*, and *Rituals of Movement in the Writings of Judith Ortiz Cofer*. Her email is lorraine.lopez@vanderbilt.edu

Las Muchachas

Judith Ortiz Cofer

So, they started calling us by our baby names and trying to make us their *nenas* again, offering to take us shopping and sharing their *Vanidades* magazines. We saw their fear, and we played up to it. “Ramonita, Carmencita, Inesita! ¡Vengan! Let’s go downtown and do a little shopping.” We saw it for what it was, a trap. They told each other where we were and paid each other *visitas* when we happened to be there. They claimed it was to roll each other’s hair in those hideous pink curlers, or to exchange books and magazines in Spanish. But we knew they were spying on us. We didn’t fall for it, no señoras. “No tengo ganas,” one of us was sure to say, not in the mood for shopping, or “We are working on el homework.” We knew our mothers wanted to curb our tastes and desires and we said no, *gracias*. It was the year of diminutives. Three of us were turning fifteen in the next month and we were ready to bust out of our Catholic school uniforms. Not so much for me, as the school insignia and Sacred Heart patch on my school straps barely stood out. But Ramonita and Carmencita, chests out, proudly displayed their school pride. Our mothers, two *primas* and a neighbor, all three as close as triplets, saw our wildness and worried. “Pero, hija. You are too young for bras with stuffing.” My mother refused to buy me a padded bra, so I stuffed it myself with tissues. I did it right before I stepped out on the street from our front door. I’d once overheard my male cousin tell other boys that he was planning on giving me a box of band-aids for my quinceañera. “Save her bra money.”

When we knew they were busy reading their Corín Tellado romance novels to each other, and watching their telenovelas, we locked the bedroom door to whoever’s apartment it was. Sometimes we turned the radio up loud and we whispered our secret plans. Other times Cousin Brucie played “96 Tears,” a good song, over and over—we liked hearing a guy say he cried for a girl—and the stupid “These Boots are Made for Walking,” sung in a teeny voice by that girl with Frank Sinatra’s face, who could be him in a frilly white mini-dress with knee-high white boots. She couldn’t dance, either. She took baby steps as she screeched, “These boots are made for—” (baby walking, we also yelled out every time we heard it). “I’m gonna be a professional dancer,” Carmen declared, doing a total body spin like she was on ice-skates. “I’m gonna

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do the hair and makeup for movie stars,” Ramona, the Woolworth’s makeup queen, exclaimed while wearing a huge hair dryer bonnet attached to the motor by a pipe that sounded like your own private tornado. The whole time her long hair dried in big plastic curlers, she’d be doing our nails, though we’d have to use smelly acetone on them before school Monday. We could get detention for nails in any other color but virginal transparent pink, so why paint them at all? The smell of the nail polish remover would fill the apartment, making my father say, “You are a walking fire bomb, hija. If anyone lights a match next to you, you’ll explode like una bomba atómica.” And this made my mother pause, if she was in the middle of lighting up a Salem mentholated cigarette (good for sore throats—it was la pura verdad if she heard it on the TV), and give me the cuchillo look—death by eye dagger. I kissed my azabache hanging from my gold chain, a little ball of coral and ebony, right next to my confirmation crucifix, to protect me from the Evil Eye. “Gracias por darme el mal ojo, mami,” I’d say disdainfully. My own mother giving me the Evil Eye. “Malcriada y maleducada,” she’d shoot back. So, if I was the badly raised, ill-mannered daughter, whose fault was that? Better to let it drop. “Ay, Dios mío.”

When we were satisfied with our makeup and outfits, Ramona, Carmen (we did not babify our names once we left our apartments), and I walked to downtown Paterson where we bought our *Cosmopolitan* magazine from a disapproving clerk at the Woolworth, ate our hamburgers at the White Castle and planned our lives. We shared our breakout plans from the barrio—fantasies of being discovered for the talents we knew were our gifts from God. If asked, I talked of being a reporter or a teacher in the City (which always meant New York, just across the Hudson, but a million miles away in our minds). I earned good grades in English mainly because I read everything. But for las muchachas there was no serious talk of college yet. It was hard to imagine. We didn’t even know what a college campus looked like. When I did think about going away to college, I daydreamed it was like high school, except with students as older versions of the kids I knew. I’d live in a dorm, my own furniture and my own key to my own room, no nosey parents checking for “funny” cigarettes in socks, or evidence of la vida loca in my private possessions.

The best part for me was thinking of owning my days, no more reglas at the house, rules your parents invented on the spot to keep you from making any decisions on your own. No more curfew times, no eating rules, not even the etiquette of Puerto Rican greetings, like if you meet an older relative, or family friend, you have to ask for a blessing, “La bendición.” If you didn’t, they’d complain to others about your lack of respeto, “No me pide la bendición.” She doesn’t ask for my

Judith Ortiz Cofer

blessing. Snob. Changa. Americanized. Too good for the barrio. If I went away to college, I could open the door of my own room, and not have to ask for permission; I could eat pizza in the middle of the night; I could take a bath that lasted for hours. At home, I couldn't even take a quick shower without announcing it, since the only toilet in the house was in the same room with the tub. No luxurious long tub baths for me—someone always needed to use the bathroom. Small dreams of privacy were attached to my breakout plan. This was the year of easy dreams, no effort on our parts. We were destined to be rich and famous simply for being us. *El destino*, we believed in it like we believed in the *Starship Enterprise*. To explore new worlds, to boldly go where no *muchacha* from the barrio had gone before. Oye, you better believe we were going places.

Weekends you might find us in the parking lot of White Castle, leaning on somebody's car, a new one preferably, shiny and smooth. We'd trace its curves with our hands. We'd seen how boys touched their cars. We were mostly sharp angles and fins jutting out, but the hips were sure to round out like eye-catching hubcaps. One of us always brought a transistor radio. When it played one of the songs that made our bodies twitch, we felt something like desire rising from our toes up to our scalps, we exchanged hot glances full of yearning, and sometimes we danced in front of the customers eating their burgers and ogling us. I could read their lips. At least, I knew how lips moved when someone said "Spanish girls," and I knew how the eyes changed when the looking was in contempt. But sometimes it was something else, something more exciting we wanted to elicit from strangers with our bold moves. We swayed to "Wild Thing," going at it like corkscrews, until it built up to a little bump and grind. We trembled at the thought that someone we knew would see us, but the fear was part of it. We needed to feel it. So, we danced in a parking lot; we laughed at ourselves, wild things that we were; and waited for someone to say, "I think your dancing is fantastic, *muchachas*. Come on tour with us. You can be a Go-Go girl behind one of the British invasion bands." Oye, hey, it's just a matter of time.

Then it was time to go home, our two hours of freedom up. Our parents sent brothers or other male relatives or, worse, they'd come themselves to drag us home. Outside our building, we'd rub the lipstick and eyeliner off each other's faces with a little spit on our *pañuelos*, the white linen squares our mothers embroidered for us with our initials, no sharing hankies, and I threw them in the tub when I took baths, to wash off the evidence. Like a good girl, *una muchacha decente*, I washed my panties, and little bra, and my hankie at bath time every night. I hung them smelling of Palmolive soap on a string or wire my

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father made into a laundry line from one end of the bathroom to the other. But it was OK, only family saw the pastel with tiny flower print underpants, and the A-cup bras hanging like caught white fish. If company knocked unexpectedly, I rushed to take them down. A woman takes care of her own intimate garments. These secret clothes never took the trip to the Laundromat on Saturdays. A woman's underwear is not for public display. Oh, *la vida* was full of lurking dangers, and we, *las muchachas*, could not wait to find it, or for it to find us. A blind desire for experience drove us, and what we couldn't articulate, we mimed through our electric bodies, wild things. Our open palms said, give us the world, we are ready, and our feet danced and took us as far as we dared. And we loved our lives, until there was nothing more to love with a passion.

One day, the diminutives were dropped, and we claimed our grown women's names. Eventually we stopped being *atrevidas*, the wildness seemed to fall off like a baby bird's down, or we shed it, a snake's skin. We did not feel it slip off, but it happened. And in one year, we walked away from each other. We went separately into the fog of adulthood. No longer *las muchachas*, we were *las mujeres* now, mature young women. And we learned to fear what we once sought, the dangers, the blinding surprise. We walk with caution now, having learned that *la vida* is doling out what we wished for, the unknown. Sometimes it's a minefield that bursts into shrapnel, leaving us scarred, and other times, rarer times, the days surprise us like a tossed bouquet, floating right into our hands. It goes on and on, this slow adventure, *la vida*, just like our mothers' telenovelas, postponing the happy ending, but promising one in every episode.

Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750-2000. By Karen Y. Morrison. Bloomington: Indian UP, 2015. 372 pp. \$32.00 (paper).

After acknowledging that most scholarship recognizes race to be a social construct rather than a biological fact, Karen Y. Morrison argues in *Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750-2000* (2015), that in Cuba, as with others areas in the world, family and reproductive choices have been as important in the formulation of race as has politics: "For Cuba, as with most post-emancipation and post-colonial settings, race-making has been a process occurring just as much in intimate private spaces as in public political discourse" (xiv). This argument serves as the starting point for her book which seeks to explore the ways in which sexuality and race in Cuba merge. Morrison, an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a social historian, explores this merger by examining the reproductive choices, the genealogical records, the prescribed state-and-Church guidelines determining family formations, and the discussions highlighting family as critical to the societal wellbeing of Cubans (xxi). Her examination reveals, Morrison says, that race mixing does not eliminate racism, that "miscegenation alone is not a corrective to racism and racial inequality" (xxv).

In Chapter 1, entitled "Ascendant Capitalism and White Intellectual Re-Assessments of Afro-Cuban Social Value to 1820," Morrison focuses on Cuba's colonial period. Morrison begins the chapter with a poem entitled "Himno Del Desterrado" (1825), "The Exile's Hymn," to illustrate a major concern of the colonial period—whether Africans were to help the growth of Cuba's economy as slaves or as participants in nation-building efforts (2). These conflicting ideas reveal, Morrison argues, how in colonial Cuba racial differences were usually unrelated to slavery or the making of money through slavery. Rather, they were connected to concerns about the preservation of the Spanish Empire. She says that early Cuban historians such as Nicolas Joseph Ribera (1724-1775) saw Spanish monarchs as having "a utilitarian approach to the social differences marked by race [which] suggests a de-emphasis on slavery, and perhaps even capitalism, in favor of a larger set of imperial objectives" (3). Considerations of race and their connection to racism appeared during colonial Cuba with Philippe de Bourbon, who became monarch in 1700, establishing the Bourbon Reforms. Emerging from these reforms was the order to move away from importing African slaves to increase the white Cuban population (4). For Africans and their descendants in Cuba, the government did not circumscribe every

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aspect of their lives, a point that Morrison makes in Chapter 2, which she entitles “Slavery and Afro-Cuban Family Formation during Cuba’s Economic Awakening, 1763-1820.” In this chapter, Morrison says that Afro-Cubans during the colonial period were able, even in slavery, to exercise some agency in how they forged their families. She uses the family life of writer Juan Francisco Manzano as an example of this. Born in the late 1700s, Manzano had strong familial connections despite slavery. His mother, who was creole, grew up in a household in which she and other black and creole children were treated well by their mistress, being given their freedom when they were ready to marry. When Manzano’s mother married the chief slave of a household, she gained her freedom. After giving birth to Manzano, she became the chief waiting woman for another mistress who treated Manzano as his own child and who Manzano often referred to as his mother (43).

Manzano’s story of family formation in the midst of slavery was the story of many Afro-Cubans, particularly as guidelines set by the Anglo-Spanish Treaty of 1817 no longer allowed Africans to be shipped to Cuba, as Morrison points out in Chapter 3, entitled “The Illegal Slave Trade and the Cuban Sexual Economy of Race, 1820-1867.” The ability of Afro-Cubans to create family life during this period arose, in part, when the ending of the slave trade, despite continued illegal importation, prompted the colonial government and owners to protect the health of the enslaved. According to Morrison, the government desired “to maintain the institution of slavery. However, in its view, the better economic and political future lay more in the improved treatment of the existing slave population than in the continued importation of costly and potentially rebellious Africans” (85). Improving the treatment of the enslaved involved, as it relates to family, the creation in 1842 of regulations governing how slaves were to be fed, clothed, and worked and in the guidelines shaping the care of enslaved children. One aspect of the regulation, as Morrison points out, “mandated a type of daycare for these children, with older women minding them while their mothers worked” (86). In addition to regulating childcare, plantation owners sought to encourage marriage among the enslaved (9).

While marriage among slaves was encouraged, different racial groups were restricted from marrying one another. As a result, illegitimacy characterized the reproductive activity of interracial relationships, according to Morrison in Chapter 4, entitled “Nineteenth-Century Racial Myths and the Familial Corruption of Cuban Whiteness.” This reinforced, in turn, notions of there being greater value associated with some races as opposed to others (111). Morrison argues that novels like the 1839 *Cecilia Valdes* by Cirilo Villaverde suggested that the value placed upon various racial categories prompted some Cubans to attempt moving up these hi-

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erarchies particularly through marriage or through the entering of sexual relationships. In the novel, the mixed-raced heroine Cecilia attempts unsuccessfully to rise above her low racial station by having a child with a wealthy mix-raced young man whose wealthy Spanish father is a slave trader. Her presence in the novel symbolizes the way in which marriage served as one means by which Afro-Cubans shaped race and social status, with Afro-Cuban women choosing, for instance, to marry white men for the purpose of whitening their children. However, Morrison says that many Afro-Cuban parents sought ways other than marriage to determine the racial category with which their children would be associated. For example, mix-raced children were sometimes temporarily orphaned because their parents knew they would be received by the Catholic Church, baptized, and labeled by the Church as white. Later, these parents would return to adopt the child they had abandoned, knowing the child had been “whitened and legitimated” (106-108, 116). Children were an important component in how Afro-Cubans not only thought about race but also how they forged family.

As Morrison notes in chapter 5, which she entitles “Afro-Cuban Family Emancipation, 1868-1886,” free mothers often sought freedom for their children, wanting to take advantage of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which dictated that children follow the social status of their mothers (134). However, this advantage was offset during the final phase of Cuba’s slave period between 1868 and 1888 as certain measures obstructed Afro-Cuban efforts at forging family. For instance, while the Moret Law eliminated the system of children acquiring the social status of their mothers, it dictated that children born free could not leave their mother’s master until they were 22 years old. In such a situation, a mother could be sold eventually to another owner, resulting in family bonds being disrupted (142).

This disruption of Afro-Cuban families complicated notions about family formation as Cuba moved into its post-slavery period and into a greater sense of racial pride among Afro-Cubans. In the late 1800s, what it meant to be Cuban was shaped by a Euro-Cuban view which pointed to Cuba as having Spanish origins, as Morrison highlights in Chapter 6 entitled “‘Regenerating’ the Afro-Cuban Family, 1886-1940.” This view allowed Cuba to be included among those nations considered most civilized and to be distanced from countries considered less civilized. From this perspective, Cuban identity was seen as having no connection to African culture and practices (162). With this mindset, many white intellectuals tended to promote a conservative view regarding gender roles and family formation (164). While Afro-Cuban intellectuals tended to lessen the negatives associated with being Afro-Cuban, many still tended to embrace European culture as superior, promoting the idea that the general

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Afro-Cuban population should exalt European standards. As Morrison says, "This philosophy argued that through education and moral reform under middle-class guidance, the Afro-Cuban masses would renounce their 'primitive' lifestyles and embrace the 'civilized' norms of the Euro-Cuban elite" (166). Embracing this notion meant adopting a patriarchal view of the family that saw men as leaders and women as belonging in the domestic sphere. Morrison says that this view prevented those interested in Afro-Cuban inclusion in Cuba's growth from addressing some basic realities (166). This model did not, for instance, acknowledge that most Afro-Cubans had the most menial and the lowest paying jobs and that even for those Afro-Cubans in working in professional fields, pay was less than that of their white counterparts. Afro-Cuban men could not make enough, therefore, to support a family and allow Afro-Cuban women to work in the home (175).

This was a reality little acknowledged as efforts were made to view and shape Afro-Cuban life according to European cultural standards. However, in Cuba in the early 1900s, there arose a movement known as AfroCubanismo that gave public recognition to the influence of Africa on Cuba. In Chapter 7, "*Mestizaje* Literary Visions and Afro-Cuban Genealogical Memory, 1920-1958," the chapter before her epilogue, Morrison says that AfroCubanismo attempted to affirm Afro-Cuban art, religion, and other culture concerns and productions, making them a part of popular culture (191). While those involved in AfroCubanismo were criticized at times for being unconcerned about equality for Cuba's different racial groups and for exaggerating the exoticism of Afro-Cuban culture, AfroCubanismo was still a very important part of Cuban history as new images of presenting Afro-Cuban culture emerged, images divorced from stereotypes. According to Morrison, "it represented one of the seminal moments in the evolution of Cuban identity, as several major intellectuals and artists from all colors and classes created new images of Afro-Cuban forms" (192). Morrison says that AfroCubanismo helped the larger Cuban citizenry begin thinking about *mestizaje*, that is, race mixing, in a positive way, in a way that provided an alternative view of culture and a solution to capitalism: "The sexual politics and imagery associated with Cuban nationalism of this period celebrated race mixture as a counter-hegemonic trope or an 'antidote to Wall Street'" (192). However, as Morrison notes, views on race and race mixing were not the same in AfroCubanismo. One view embraced the various continental influences shaping race in the country. Another view saw race mixing as that which allowed whiteness to clean up African influence (193). One important aspect of AfroCubanismo in the 1920s was, Morrison says, the rise of the black woman as a nationalist symbol for Cuba, someone distant from and untainted by outside

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influences: “She embodied an extreme sense of distance and purity in the face of the corrupting, imperialist presence of the United States that Cuban nationalists struggled to reject. For many white authors, the mulatta, with her racially mixed ancestry, became less useful for their anti-imperialist purposes” (196).

One of the greatest strengths of *Cuba’s Racial Crucible*, particularly in the opening chapters, is Morrison’s use of literature along with historical records to discuss the formation of race and family among Afro-Cubans. While Morrison could have drawn upon historical facts exclusively to develop her conclusions, her decision to consider literature as well points to her understanding of the powerful philosophical truths that emerge from narrative fiction and poetry. She draws upon the literary world not only by looking at literary texts themselves but also by exploring the lives of literary artists. In chapter 2, she turns to the life of self-taught poet Francisco Manzano to talk about race and about the agency of Africans and Afro-Cubans in forming family. Her inclusion of his writing is significant in that it allows the enslaved a voice in this discussion Cuba’s history. Manzano is not merely a historical figure to be examined and spoken about only.

Another strength of Morrison’s book is the use of diverse sources, such as Catholic Church records and literature, to provide a more complete view of race and family formation in Cuba. For example, in Chapter 4, after beginning with a discussion of the novel *Cecilia Valdes* by Cirilo Villaverde to show marriage as one means by which Afro-Cubans shaped race and social status, she turns to Church records to reveal other strategies that Afro-Cubans used to shape race, revealing, for instance, how some Afro-Cuban parents secretly abandoned their mix-raced children, knowing that these children would be received by the Church, baptized, and labeled officially as white. This more complete view of the various strategies used by Afro-Cubans to shape the racial categories and the social statuses circumscribing their lives reveals not merely the basic fact of the enslaved population’s humanity but their astuteness as well.

As Morrison moves through Cuba’s colonial era to later periods, she bravely addresses the complexity of Cuban social life, avoiding idyllic visions of race and family life simply because slavery was coming to an end. For instance, even as she talks in Chapter 6 about a growing sense of racial pride among Afro-Cubans, she addresses the privileging of European cultural influence in Afro-Cuban life and the negative consequences of this privileging upon Afro-Cubans. In Chapter 7, while pointing to the ways in which the movement known as Afro-Cubanismo celebrated Afro-Cuban culture, freeing it from stereotypes, Morrison discusses the ways in which some in the movement often ignored im-

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portant social concerns such as Afro-Cuban equality. Her willingness to discuss this legacy and aftermath of slavery in Cuba reinforces the point that legal restrictions on slavery did not and has not eliminated the social impact of the institution.

In her Epilogue, Morrison says that Fidel Castro viewed Cuba as a bi-racial nation. He recognized the Spanish and African heritage of Cubans and saw racial difference as unassociated with hierarchy. In a 1959 speech, according to Morrison, Castro proclaimed that “nobody [in Cuba] can consider himself as being of pure, much less superior race” (247). Considering this, the later chapters of Morrison’s book would be strengthened by more discussion regarding the impact of a Fidel Castro-led Cuban government in shaping race and family, particularly considering that his regime led many Cubans to seek exile in the United States where they formed families with Americans or reshaped their existing families in an American context. Castro’s very large presence and impact suggests that family formation and race in contemporary Cuba cannot be examined only in terms of what has happened and is happening on the island nation. With so many Cubans living in the United States, race and family among Afro-Cubans must include such a discussion in an American context as well. This might serve as the focus of future work by Morrison, especially with the recent death of Castro. Such a discussion would allow Morrison to include the literary works of Cuban exiles living in the United States and to gain, therein, a different perspective or a more nuanced view of race and family development among Afro-Cubans.

Francine L. Allen

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The Encyclopedic Philosophy of Michel Serres: Writing the Modern World and Anticipating the Future. By Keith Moser. Hephzibah, GA: Anaphora Literary Press, 2016. 268 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

Keith Moser's *The Encyclopedic Philosophy of Michel Serres: Writing the Modern World and Anticipating the Future* is a thorough and relevant examination of the work of the acclaimed interdisciplinary philosopher and pacifist Michel Serre and of Serre as a sentient (someone who is able to perceive or feel things) who has a solid grasp of the human condition in today's interdependent global society, one that Moser so astutely explains is "increasingly defined by the incessant exchange of (mis-) information and an ecological calamity of epic proportions» (9). Moser prepares the reader for his analysis of Serre's work when he claims, in reference to his title chosen for his monograph, that the title:

reflects the philosopher's profound conviction that 'philosopher c'est anticiper' ("Philosophie Magazine" n.p.). Serre's conception of philosophy and its role in a given society is predicated upon a certain image of a philosopher. Serres contends that a philosopher is someone who possesses an extremely broad base of knowledge coupled with the uncanny ability to envision what might *transpire* based upon astute observations concerning phenomena that are already starting to unfold in front of his or her eyes (8).

It is thus that Moser asserts that Serres offers the reader the means to question what is happening around him/her and anticipate what the future may have in store for him/her.

In each of the volume's five chapters ("The Dawning of the Age of Information," "Anticipating the Deleterious Effects of our Parasitic Relationship with the Universe: Envisioning a more Ecocentric Way of Being in an Interdependent and Interconnected Biosphere," "The Inception of the Exo-Darwinian, *Hominescent* Epoch: Rethinking and Reshaping the Global Village," "(Re-)Envisioning Technology and Science to Imagine a Better World of Tomorrow," and "Espousing the Principles of global Citizenship and Interculturality to Foster Peace") that adeptly cover a diverse array of topics, Moser provides an analysis of a wide selection of Serre's writing from the 1960s to the present day so as to enable the reader to comprehend more fully Serre's point of view on both fundamental and practical issues as well as Serre's position in relation to other contemporary philosophers. In so doing, Moser helps the reader to reflect on how current society is becoming

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unrecognizable, especially given the on-going advances in technology and science. His rationale is that Serre's philosophical thinking was a precursor to understanding how current society is evolving (e.g. humans' relationships with one another in the wake of invasive technologies or with the environment) and how the individual is able to cope best with the rapid changes is well executed, whereby making it well received. For example, in Section III, "Probing the Origins of the Environmental Crisis," of Chapter Two, Moser offers:

As the philosopher muses in *Le Contrat Naturel*, "faut-il démontrer encore que notre raison fait violence au monde" (47). This is why Serres posits in *Hominescence* that engaging in philosophical reflection is more paramount than ever before. Given that our chimerical thought systems are the ideological foundation of the myopic, parasitic behavior that they continue to fuel in Western civilization, Serres unwaveringly maintains that the first step to finding potential solutions to the complex issue of anthropogenic climate change is to probe the scientifically erroneous logic still omnipresent in the modern world (73).

The reader is thus encouraged to consider carefully all that Serre's work has to offer as well as Serre's other works that are not treated in Moser's current analysis. In conclusion, the publisher has categorized *The Encyclopedic Philosophy of Michel Serres: Writing the Modern World and Anticipating the Future* as a textbook and as such, it could naturally be used in a French Studies or philosophy course but also in an interdisciplinary manner, such as, in a course on protecting the environment or sustainability. However, putting aside the fact that the publisher has categorized this book as a textbook, anyone that has an interest in Serre will find the book stimulating and enjoyable.

Eileen M. Angelini

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Shot on Location: Postwar American Cinema and the Exploration of Real Place. By R. Barton Palmer. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016. 290 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

In the postwar period, turning away from the enchantments of escapist Hollywood, filmmakers wished to promote a truth beyond what could be designed on a studio set. Not only did postwar audiences want a grittier representation of a physically and psychologically war-torn world; film-industry conditions were shifting, following the cataclysmic changes wrought by the Paramount decision. Forced to divest themselves of their theater holdings, Hollywood studios no longer held monopolistic control of the industry. Thus, R. Barton Palmer elegantly explains in *Shot on Location: Postwar American Cinema and the Exploration of Real Place*, aesthetic, historical, and industrial changes conspired to motivate filmmakers to leave sound stages and studio settings for the “signifying potential of real space” (51).

Newly independent filmmakers in postwar America sought efficiencies in location shooting. If my own interest in the directing work of independent filmmaker Ida Lupino is enlightened by Palmer’s vast delineation of postwar cinema, even our understanding of such canonical auteurs as Hitchcock is enhanced by Palmer’s discussion of the influence of changing aesthetic and industrial practices on the setting and locale of *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) and *Vertigo* (1958). The fact that these are hardly the first films that come to mind when thinking about postwar realism is a testament to the originality of *Shot on Location*, which offers a comprehensive analysis of the many forms of cinematic realism that developed in the postwar period.

The breadth of this volume is striking, as Palmer explores readier areas of analysis than the above, such as patriotic postwar films like *The Big Lift* (George Seaton, 1950) and *Twelve O’Clock High* (Henry King, 1949); the pictorial journalism in Louis de Rochemont’s *The March of Time* (1935-51) and *The Ramparts We Watch* (1940), the latter “part essay, part propaganda screed, part fictional dramatization” (125); and semi-documentaries and documentary-style fiction films that converge with film noir, such as *Call Northside 777* (Henry Hathaway, 1948) and *The Phenix City Story* (Phil Karlson, 1955). Other postwar realist forms such as the social-problem film are addressed, as well as the aesthetic and commercial effects of a modernist preoccupation with “the real” that Palmer links to the dramatic modernism of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, as well as the burgeoning work of film and television screenwriters and playwrights, such as Paddy Chayevsky and Rod Serling, the understated *Marty* (1955) serving as a prime example. Another modernist source of postwar realism, Palmer argues, can be

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seen in the psychological realism embedded in film noir's darkness, the "morally vexed interiority" (203) exemplified in the stunning dream sequence in Boris Ingster's film noir *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1941).

Palmer's method is often to juxtapose different kinds of postwar representational gestures. An interesting example appears late in the book in a discussion of *Gentleman's Agreement*, which Palmer deftly reads as a counterpoint to the semi-documentary films of the period. While Kazan's film was received as illustrative of the social-problem film's engagement with contemporary culture, Palmer makes clear that the film conforms to Hollywood conventions in casting and narrative; the film "doubtless makes a plea for tolerance in a fashion that is carefully calculated to neither threaten nor offend most filmgoer sensitivities" (230).

Further expanding our ideas about the plurality and limits of postwar cinematic realisms, Palmer includes a chapter on Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). If the latter was, as Palmer argues, a substantial achievement in using real geography as a foundation for western mythologies ("Ford's west is as real and unreal, as in time and out of time, as King Arthur's Britain" [87]), *Sunset Blvd.* offered its filmmakers an opportunity to explore a hybrid cinematic realism whose foundation was the known identity of Hollywood: "The complex and endlessly fascinating thereness of Hollywood is the cultural and geographical fact that made *Sunset Blvd.* possible" (78). Wilder's self-reflexivity in casting (Gloria Swanson, Erich von Stroheim, Cecil B. DeMille) and use of recognizable settings (Paramount Studios and Schwabs Pharmacy) constitute a realism that accentuates Wilder's satire of a deeply exploitative Hollywood. In another chapter, Palmer pairs films from different strains of film noir, Kazan's semi-documentary *Boomerang* with Henry Hathaway's color-infused *Niagara*, further establishing the breadth of meanings in postwar location shooting. The setting in *Niagara* demonstrates layers of realism that are psychological and physical: authentically photographed, Niagara Falls are also symbolic, an exteriorized or "projected" emanation of the despairing characters within the narrative.

Most impressive in this volume is its nimble linking of individual films and filmmakers with multiple historical, political, and aesthetic contexts that characterized an extended postwar American moment. The book's reliance on contexts, including a detailed understanding of the technical and industrial elements of location shooting, makes *Shot on Location* a veritable course of study in postwar American film. The book's analysis of European political and economic conditions, for example (the dialogue of U.S. cinema with currents outside of the nation's boundaries), inform our understanding of postwar Hollywood,

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especially a useful discussion of the critical fallacies that have surrounded arguments about the influence of Italian neo-realism on American film.

Shot on Location is as deeply informed and interesting to read as it is elegantly written. Rich with detail and insight, the book's grandly allusive style and deeply inclusive film history will delight and enlighten students, cineastes, and film scholars of all backgrounds.

Julie Grossman

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