A Melus Interview: Judith Ortiz Cofer

by Edna Acost-Belen

from Melus, Fall 93, Vol. 18 Issue 3, pg. 84, 15 pgs.

The last few decades have witnessed literary historians and critics in the United States engaged in the formidable task of redefining the American literary experience to recognize the presence and integrate the multiple voices of vital but neglected minority cultures. Specific issues regarding the reconceptualization and opening of the traditional canon, critical approaches, curriculum content and pedagogical practices, the place of writings in languages other than English, and the intellectual and political implications of selecting certain works above others, characterize the ongoing debate and search for explanatory models to account for the distinctive cultural experiences of minority groups, and for a more faithful definition of what constitutes the total cultural practice of the United States. Within this process, feminist criticism, minority discourse theory, and the writings of women of color occupy a prominent and unique place insofar as they allow for a more multifaceted approach to understanding the dialectics of oppression and the articulation of various layers of marginality and subordination found in the cultural production of these groups.

The writings of Latina authors represent an excellent illustration of how issues of gender, race, culture, and class become intertwined, expanding the terms in which marginalized groups construe their identity in relation to the U.S. mainstream society. For ethnic/racial minorities, coming of age in America implies facing the internalization of stigmatized self-images based on racial and cultural differentiations that are ingrained in the fabric of the American mainstream. With a long history of racial segregation and discrimination, U.S. society is still striving to reconcile with its true multicultural character and the need to properly acknowledge the multiple presence and contributions of immigrant groups that have come and continue to arrive at its shores. Coming from cultures in which women are burdened by patriarchal traditions that struggle to perpetuate themselves in the face of the many pressures and changes implied in the immigrant experience, minority women writers juggle with the tensions arising from these cultural dualisms, from the compounding layer of gender subordination found within the same cultures they are trying to validate, and from the collective socioeconomic and racial survival struggles of their own groups within the context of U.S. society. This emerging consciousness of the multiple forms of oppression confronting women characterizes the work of Latina writers in recent decades and entails a process not entirely exempt from contradictions. While women writers attempt to demythify the cultural roles, values, and icons manufactured by a patriarchal ideology and subvert limiting cultural beliefs about family, sexuality, and moral behavior, they are also trying to reaffirm their marginalized cultural heritage as part of the wider ethnic revitalization movement among U.S. minorities.

As Latina writers are beginning to find increasing visibility and a wider audience, Judith Ortiz Cofer joins them in telling her visions about straddling between the Puerto Rican culture of her parents and ancestors and a U.S. culture often blinded by its own

prejudices and undiscerning capacity to acknowledge its own pluralistic nature. The author was born in 1952 in the small town of Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, a semi-urban municipality in which the religious fervor of being the custodians of the sanctuary of the famous Virgen de Monserrate, visited by thousands of devoted pilgrims every year, is mixed with the spontaneous, irreverent, passionate, and contradictory moralities of a small town. Growing up in the same town myself gives me a privileged advantage in capturing the resonance of a much too familiar world left behind and now being reclaimed and invoked from a distance by an engrossing literary imagination.

Both a prose fiction writer and poet, Ortiz Cofer's literary production has continuously expanded since she published her first chapbook, Peregrina, in 1985 and won the Riverstone International Poetry Competition. More recently, her critically acclaimed novel The Line of the Sun (1989) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. She is currently writing another novel with the working title of Star of the Caribbean and has a forthcoming book of prose and poetry, The Latin Deli (see Selected Bibliography). Ortiz Cofer combines her craft as a creative writer with other professional activities on the lecture circuit and teaching at various U.S. universities.

In this interview the author discusses the autobiographical background of her fictional works, her own cultural and personal struggles, what her work represents at an individual and collective level, and the publication perils and heightened visibility of Latino writers.

Interviewer. Among many minority writers in the United States, including Latinos, autobiography is a preferred genre. The "bildungsroman," that is, the novels of formation or of coming of age have become an essential part of this literature. So, why did you want to write a novel such as The Line of the Sun, a narrative that seems to be so personal?

Ortiz Cofer: Mainly because I felt that it was important to me to make my life as a bilingual person and a Puerto Rican woman the subject of a lengthy work. The reason I use so much autobiographical material in the novel is not so much that I think my life is important. I feel it is sort of an obligation. As a Puerto Rican immigrant my key experience was growing up bilingual and bicultural. Therefore I felt a need to share that with others, before I could go on. Perhaps you can call it a rite of passage or something similar. But I felt that I had to get that straight in my mind. In writing The Line of the Sun, I was recreating my past in a way that I could understand it myself. It was a kind of training for myself both as a thinking person and a writer to get my life straight. This is not to say that all of what I wrote is autobiographical, but it has this impetus. For example, I never lived in a tenement called "El Building." But an "El Building' was central to the Puerto Rican life of Paterson, New Jersey, so in order to better understand my life there I had to write about it. Does that make sense too you?

Interviewer: So you went from your individual experience to the collective by becoming the voice of the Puerto Rican community and other Latinos in Paterson?

Ortiz Cofer: Well, yes and no because "El Building" represented to me the Puerto Rican experience in the United States. However, I do not know any other Puerto Rican who grew up as a navy child in Paterson. That was unique to me. I guess that the answer is yes, in that I departed from my very particular experience, which molded my world

view. My father being in the navy put me at the center of my family's life since my mother did not know much English. Therefore I became the translator, the interpreter, the decision maker, very early in my life. In addition to my immigrant Puerto Rican experience, I was also a navy child. Yes, I went from that very unique individual experience, to being a Puerto Rican girl, to being part of a Puerto Rican community.

Interviewer: In analyzing minority literature, critics tend to stress the social and political nature of these writings in denouncing the discrimination and inequalities of U.S. society. Where are the politics in your own writing? I remember reading in the preface to your Silent Dancing, that you prefer to tracer politica viviendo la vida [to make politics by living life]. With all the cultural tensions and socieconomic hardships faced by Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the United States, how do you think that your writings will contribute to adelantar la causa [advance the cause]?

Ortiz Cofer: I feel very strongly that I am contributing in the only way I know how to contribute. If I were a musician and cared for my country, I would write music that exemplified that. I would not be a soldier, I would be a musician. I am a writer, I am not a political activist. When I wrote about those lives lived in poverty,those lives lived in naivete and fear in Paterson, what I was doing was presenting a picture of the difficulties of Puerto Rican life in that city. I was not standing on a soapbox and saying, it's damn hard being a Puerto Rican girl in Paterson, New Jersey. Because that is boring, that is, preaching, and that is sermonizing. And I am not political in that way. If I have any talent at all, it lies in the fact that I can tell a story. 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. Not to go on about a subject which I am passionate about, but 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. So that is the way in which I am political.

Interviewer: Getting back to The Line of the Sun and Silent Dancing, the voice in both of these works is a female voice of the younger generation; one who has inherited the art of story telling from the other women in the family, particularly the abuelita [grandmother]. This is a pattern commonly found in the narratives of other Latina authors in the United States. From your own perspective, why is it so important to you to emphasize the intergenerational links, the strong bond among the women of the family?

Ortiz Cofer: In my own case, because my literary heritage is nonintellectual in its beginnings. As I mentioned to you earlier, my mother does not have a college education. Her mother has the most basic understanding of letters. And yet as I was growing up, I learned from these women's very strong sense of imagination. For them storytelling 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. I remember hearing my first feminist story (that I now label feminist) in my grandmother's living room. It was about a woman named Graciela. Her possessive husband used to lock her in her bedroom and make her wave with a white glove as he went to work to make sure she was there. One day she put up the white glove on a stick like a flag,so it would wave while she ran away. with the gardener. 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, !que va! It's just a little story. So to her the story is not intellectual nor political, but of course it is both. 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.

Interviewer: One can see in your fiction the ways in which many of your women characters have developed certain survival strategies to get around the limitations that Puerto Rican culture imposes upon them because of their gender. This seems to be a major theme throughout all of your work. Even in your poetry collection, Terms of Survival, you often express a woman's desire to be released from rituals. Some of your female characters, not only in this book, but also in your other writings, seem to be facing the tensions between the demands placed on them by family, religion, and el que diran [what people would say], and what they would really like to be and do. Are these some of the tensions that you felt growing up as a woman sharing two very different and often contradictory sets of cultural norms?

Ortiz Cofer: Absolutely. 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 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, with candles in the bathtub, pictures of the Virgen and Jesus everywhere and I sort of felt (and I have a couple of ironic poems about this) that God was always watching. No matter what you did he always watched. My joke was that at least let's hope that he is bilingual, because I knew he didn't look like us. So I would come home from the "outside world," where I really had to practice street survival (Paterson is a tough town and I used to get harassed by other kids occasionally) into this apartment where I was supposed to be a proper senorita. You had to sit right, behave right, say your prayers before you went to bed at night. Out of the two worlds I shared, the one that made me feel the most frustrated was the one in the apartment because I could not express my feelings and I could not express my thoughts. As I was growing up I felt that if only I could get rid of all those rituals (that still make my grandmother make the sign of the cross when she passes in front of a church), that I would be free. But I am entering a new stage in my life where I realize that you can both be free of the rituals and use them in a different way. Now they enrich my writing, but I am no longer a prisoner of them. However, I feel that many Puerto Rican women are still prisoners of their rituals.

Interviewer: This appears to be a crucial aspect of your work insofar as to the cultural spaces you create and in which you place your characters. For example, life within the tenement of "El Building" or life in the small town of Salud back in Puerto Rico have,

for the female characters primarily, but often for the male characters, too, this sense of imprisonment, where people are bound to certain cultural forces that limit the ways they can live or express themselves.

Ortiz Cofer: That is why Rosa, in The Line of the Sun, has to leave town. If you remember the character of Rosa, la Cabra (the female goat), I picked that name which my mother tells me is very vulgar, because that is what you call a whore. However, I wanted her not to be a negative character. Here was a woman who was intelligent, sexual, and I believe that in another culture, in another country she would probably have been a psychologist. She had an instinctive knowledge of what people needed and wanted. But what could she be? The town whore, the fake medium. Her options were limited by her social class and society's moral expectations. She does not end up a winner. She ends up being run out of town, the victim of a witch-hunt. Some critics have said that the setting of the first part of the novel is idyllic. Sure its a tropical paradise, like an Eden. But you have the ladies of the Holy Rosary who stand in judgement of others and drive the independent woman out of town. What I really want to say is 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. For her, there is no better place in the world. So I feel that anyone who tried to break out of those boundaries, especially a woman, would have to pay a price. There is a woman, Melina, that I mentioned in the novel very briefly. She chose to throw her adulterous husband out and was suspected of having had an abortion. She was branded and shunned, but at least she pursued her own destiny. Without summarizing it into oblivion, what 1 am trying to say is that things may have changed now, but when I was growing up there was a distinct feeling that as a woman, if you did not stay on the straight and narrow you had two choices: to live as an outcast in the pueblo or leave the Island.

Interviewer: You seem very much attracted by the unconventional women characters. La cabra or la fulana [what's her name], the outcast woman who has no name, the woman who lives at the margin, sometimes because of a hypocritical sense of morality that prevailed in the town, other times because she belonged to the wrong social class or was the wrong color. You also have this attraction for the eccentrics of the pueblo [small town]. Coming from your same hometown of Hormigueros myself, I am acquainted with the local custom of attribute nicknames to those who Jo not fit the local norms of appropriate behavior; for example, characters like Franco, el Loco, Maria, la Local Why do you find these types of characters so fascinating?

Ortiz Cofer: I can only guess. I would have to be psychoanalyzed. In the story "Casa," included in Silent Dancing, the character of Maria--la Loca--attracted me because I have often felt like the oddball myself. You, for example, in the sense that your Spanish is perfect, you can go to Puerto Rico and immediately fit in and communicate with the people perfectly. When I go to Puerto Rico I am always reminded that I sound like a gringa (and you have heard my Spanish!). 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. The kinds of things that I experienced every time I went back to Puerto Rico, they left an impression on me, particularly as a young child. When you go to Puerto Rico, they call you la americanita. People did not mean to be cruel, but you know how it is with children and nicknames. I think that my own self-analysis, which may be way off the mark, is that these characters attracted me first, because I always felt like an outcast and second, because an artist is always an outcast, anyway. I was always the girl who had all

A's in school. Always the smart-ass kid, the scholarship kid. All of those things stay in your mind. It is not that it is humiliating to be smart, but you also want to be like the other kids. So being the brain, on top of everything else, did not help. It was not that I was a genius, but books were all I had. I was a bookworm. 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. 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!

Interviewer: Puerto Ricans from the Island tend to look at Puerto Rican writers in the United States, particularly those who write in English, as people who do not make an effort to get closer to their culture and language because they do not write in Spanish. And of course this is a wrong assumption. What I am interested in is knowing to what extent you have considered the possibility of writing in Spanish and what role, if any, does Spanish play in your writing ?

Ortiz Cofer: I really resent the prevalent attitude that if you really care about the Island you have to write in Spanish. It is not my fault that 95% of my education was in English in American schools. My parents brought me to this country and during the periods I was in Puerto Rico I went to El Colegio San Jose, a private school where the teachers were American nuns, so I could use my English. I went to the escuela publica (public school) for about six months; that is my total time in a school in Hormigueros. So, how can I write well in Spanish when Spanish is my second language?? When I say it is my second language it means that English is the language of my schooling. However, my home language was Spanish; I spoke only in Spanish with my mother; I dream in Spanish. I know because my husband tells me I say things in Spanish when I am asleep. I think this may sound romantic, but I think of Spanish as my subconscious language, my cultural language, my birth language. But I cannot write in Spanish because much of the grammar is alien to me. I would be making ridiculous elementary mistakes. I cannot write a poem in Spanish since I have lost my intimacy with the language and you have to be very fluent in a language to create metaphors. I can compare anything with anything in English but ask me to compare a rose to something in Spanish and I would probably say tomato soup because its the first red thing that I can think of. I feel very close to my heritage. Even if I cannot be geographically in the place where I was born, I consider myself a Puerto Rican the same way that anybody living on the Island is a Puerto Rican and if I could, I would write in Spanish.

Interviewer: Even though, technically, you write in English, there is some degree of code-switching into Spanish in your narratives. This is a common pattern in Latino literature. In poetry, for example, some critics have argued that this "interlingual" ability enhances artistic expression and communicative skills. That is, the connotative and denotative range of words in both languages is expanded. You told me on another occasion that one of the problems you faced while trying to publish your first book is that most of the publishers you approached thought it had too much Spanish in it. What functions do you think this "interlingual" phenomenon, this mixing of languages, serve in your own writing?

Ortiz Cofer: In my creative work, which often originates in a memory of my childhood (during which, as you know, I shuttled from the Island to the mainland on a regular basis), I try to connect with the experience through language. In my case, the two

languages are necessary to re-create or recall a particular image since bilingualism is an intrisic part of my personal experience. English is the main language of my education; Spanish--of my imagination and creativity. I do not write in English as a political act but as a necessity. I had no choice in the matter of where I was living or attending school as a child; and I do not state this defensively, but as a fact of my life. Spanish was the language I heard at home, which my mother taught me to read and write in order to communicate with my family and other individuals who made up my world as a child. It is from the personal experience (combined with imagination, of course) that I draw for my creative work. Spanish is therefore my link to my formative years. I use Spanish words and phrases almost as an incantation to lead me back to the images I need.

I have recently been asked to justify writing in English since I consider myself a Puerto Rican. I find this accusation, in view of the circumstances I just explained, a bit illogical. If I had been taken to Italy as a child by my Puerto Rican parents, I would probably be writing now in Italian about being a Puerto Rican woman. Language matters, but no one that I know refuses to read Dante in English or Spanish. I am not comparing myself to Dante, or Beatrice for that matter, it is just that my native language and my Puerto Rican heritage are the "stuff of life" in my work. English is the vehicle for my artistic expression. I think my poem, "El Olvido" (which literally means to sink into oblivion), expresses my views better than anything I can say.

Interviewer: In The Line of the Sun the protagonist, Marisol, has a navy father (like you did), who wants her to adopt the American way of life, while her mother is hopelessly attached to her Island roots. Having grown up commuting between Paterson, New Jersey, and Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, is this a reflection of the cultural tensions you experienced growing up between two different cultural worlds, and facing demands from each of your parents who would each want you to identify with a different culture? How did you ultimately reconcile these contradictions in your cultural identity?

Ortiz Cofer: I don't think that I have reconciled it. I really feel that I am still working through it and that that may be what my art does for me. Because as you pointed out, I write in English, yet I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience. And my books are divided into my Island poems and the American poems like those in Terms of Survival. The novel is divided into Island/City; Silent Dancing also includes both contexts. That is how my psyche works. I am a composite of two worlds. For example, I know I could never live in Puerto Rico full-time now. I am too culturally assimilated into the United States; the way of life, the language and all of that. And yet, I continually yearn for the island. I get hopelessly melancholic at certain times of the year, like Christmas. I talk to my mother all the time on the phone. So even though I am aware of this dichotomy, I know that it can never be resolved. I do not belong to that world anymore and yet, my mind does not completely accept this other world, either. My father loved the Island but he had to give up his dreams of a college education and because of economic pressures, he joined the army and then the navy. What he wanted for my brother and me, which he got at the expense of his own dreams, was an education. And he believed that the only way we were really going to get the education he wanted for us was to learn the English language and the American way of life. My mother, who is very earthy and attached to her Puerto Rican heritage and her language, felt that it was her duty as a wife to follow my father, but that did not mean that she had to feel the way he did. He would pressure us to study and get good grades and she

would pressure us not to forget where we came from, la casa. Her greatest joy was getting a telegram from him saying "I will be away for a while, you can go back to your mother's house." She would pack us up in a minute to go back to Puerto Rico and adjust to Island life immediately. She would be happy and feel lucky, living in a house full of people, eating rice and beans, and that sort of thing. The minute we would return to Paterson, she would get very sad. Yes, I lived with these conflictive expectations: the pressures from my father to become very well versed in the English language and the Anglo customs, and from my mother not to forget where we came from. That is something that I deal with in my work all the time.

Interviewer: In your preface to Silent Dancing you acknowledge Virginia Woolf as a literary mentor of sorts, in your act of reclaiming your memories of childhood. Woolf's belief that "a woman writing thinks back to her mothers" seems to have inspired this personal narrative. How do you find Woolf's words to apply to your own experience as a woman writer?

Ortiz Cofer: I feel what Virginia Woolf's words do is connect all of us women, not just Latinas, but Anglo women and all women as well, to the fact that women ordinarily live in a women's world, whether we want it or not, because our generation tended more to separate men and women. Once the boys could walk they were basically in a boy's world. The women spent time with the other women. When I came home from school in Puerto Rico it was to my mother, my aunts, and my grandmother. The boys were out in el parque [the park] playing or in el pueblo. So I feel that we become a different culture in a way through our mothers. So what Woolf meant was that even though her mother died while she was a young girl, her very first memory was of her mother. The smells of her mother. The first thing she remembers is a pattern on a dress when she laid down her head on her mother's lap. That is her very first memory. I feel that there is this invisible umbilical cord connecting us and in my case, it became a literary umbilical cord. I feel that the life of my imagination began with the women of my family.

Interviewer: When and why did you decide to become a writer?

Ortiz Cofer: I always knew that I needed a creative outlet. When I was a little girl I used to dream about being a dancer or a musician. Our lives prevented that because we were never in one place long enough for me to take lessons of any kind. But I always kept little journals, little notebooks. I used to make up games for my brother and me where I would transform myself into different characters. I would say that the writing has its roots there. However, I did not think of writing for publication until after graduate school. The main reason for that was that I always thought my main vocation was becoming a teacher. I was always preparing myself to be in a classroom. When I was in graduate school I started writing poems and that did it. I did not dare show them to anybody because I thought they were so much more inferior than what I was reading in my classes. Everything changed when I met Betty Owen, my first department chair, who was very encouraging. We were having lunch and she asked me: "Why don't you write some of these stories that you tell me? Why don't you write some poems?" I told her that actually I had written a few poems and after much cajoling from her I finally showed them to her, and she told me that with a few changes the poems could be mailed out for publication. I was totally astonished. Among them was "Latin Women Pray," one of the first poems I wrote as sort of a joke to myself. She told me to send it out and showed me potential publication sources. I did not know there were so many journals

out there publishing poetry. I sent it to the New Mexico Humanifies Review because it seemed to me that they would be interested in something Hispanic and I was right. They published it. That is how I got hooked. I would write poems, Betty would critique them, and then I would send them out. That was in 1977 or '78. I had only published something in a college journal before that. My official career as a writer began with this woman reassuring me that my work was publishable. I had no sense of that before when I was just writing for myself.

Interviewer: Most Latino writers in the United States have gotten their first works published by one of the small bilingual presses, such as Arte Publicio Press and the Billingual Review Press,and that has been the case with your books Reaching for the Mainland, Terms of Survival, and Silent Dancing. What are the reasons that led you to make that choice?

Ortiz Cofer: It was a number of things. When I started sending out my manuscripts, and you may have noticed that I published most of my early poems in mainstream journals but when it came to publishing a full-length book, I initially would send it to some of the bigger publishers and university presses and all I got was this collection of beautiful rejection letters stating basically that "we really like your work but it has so much Spanish in it and the material is so exotic that we do not think that we have a public for it." At the beginning, it was hard to accept that they were willing to publish my poems individually, but when it came to publishing a book that entailed a larger investment of money, my work became too exotic.

Interviewer: In other words, the book was not considered commercial enough?

Ortiz Cofer: It was more than not commercial enough. I sent my manuscript to a university press and the poetry editor replied that they had a small readership that was mostly not bilingual. I think that they were afraid to take a risk. Publishing books that contained a lot of Spanish was not as prevalent as it is now. Finally, I started going to Latino conferences. I remember a conference in Paris where I met Nicolas Kanellos, the Director of Arte Publico Press. I told him I had this manuscript that I had been sending around. He asked me to give him a copy and a few days later, he passed me a note saying that they were interested in publishing it. The same thing had happened in a conference in Newark about three years earlier where I had met Gary Keller of the Bilingual Review/Press. I had already published several of my poems in the Bilingual Review and they knew some of my work. So they accepted my collection of poems Reaching for the Mainland. But, it took them almost three years to publish it. By the time it came out I had my second book of poetry, Terms of Survival, ready for publication. All of these decisions happened as a result of the fact that the bilingual presses were the only publication outlets that did not have a problem with the fact that I occasionally use Spanish, and that most of my subject matter and themes have to do with being Puerto Rican.

Interviewer: What has been your experience with the billingual presses in terms of the publication process and the promotion of your work.

Ortiz Cofer: My experience has not been entirely positive. I told you about the delay in publishing my first poetry book. I have not seen many advertisements for it or much promotion. At the time I thought this was what happened to all poetry books. Since

then, I know it is common practice for most publishers to do some sort of advertising. I have to assume that the bilingual presses have a limited budget. I am grateful that these presses are so willing to take the risk with unknown writers. With Terms of Survival, I think Arte Publico did a very nice production job. And I think that Arte Publico did more advertising for Terms of Survival than I got for Reaching for the Mainland. But with poetry in this country you always expect very little. My experience with the first edition of Silent Dancing was also rather disappointing insofar as many of the essays had already been published in very good literary journals and I had high expectations for the book. One of the essays was featured in The Georgia Review women's issue that also included works by Eudora Welty and Joyce Carol Oates, who chose it for The Best American Essays 1991. Another won a Pushcart Prize, which is very prestigious. But, when the essays came out as a collection I felt that the production was not up to par. I found many errors in the book. Once again, I have to relegate that to the budgetary constraints faced by the small presses. Frankly, it is very disappointing to work on a book for as long as I worked on Silent Dancing and have it come out not looking as good as it should. Most of these problems, however, were corrected in the second edition and I have to credit the press for this effort. The small presses serve a big function; their work is very important; but the author should be allowed to have more control of the production. I think the small presses have to improve their proofreading and advertisement, so that they can become more competitive with university and other commercial presses. This is my pet peeve; maybe you have also heard it from other authors. We consider our books our babies and do not want them damaged at birth.

Interviewer: You write both poetry and fiction. Do you have a preference between these two genres?

Ortiz Cofer: No. I think poetry has made me more disciplined. It taught me how to write, because to write a poem takes so much skill. It requires a lot of self-discipline since poetry contains the essence of language. Every word weighs a ton. Every word counts. You cannot write a sloppy poem and get it published. I know from my experience that most of the literary journals that I submitted my work to receive over 20,000 manuscripts a year. It is a very competitive field. So you get weeded out early as a poet. Poetry taught me about economizing in language and about the power of language. So I will never stop writing poetry. When I get up in the morning I work on a poem, first. That fine-tunes my language ability. If I work on a poem and then switch to the novel, I am not going to have any flabby or loose language. I am transferring that need to economize to a different genre. That's why you may see some resemblance between my poetry and the novel.

Interviewer: You are writing another novel--after The Line of the Sun not only received good reviews, but was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. The fact that you have decided to concentrate in the writing of another novel, does that have anything to do with the success of The Line of the Sun? Do you feel now that you should further pursue that particular genre?

Ortiz Cofer: Not really. I feel that getting good reviews is somewhat inhibiting. It took me a whole year before I stopped making false starts. I am writing another novel because I have another story to tell. There is this character that I cannot explain to people without making them smile. It is an old lady named Estrella Luz, and she has been haunting me for a couple of years. It is a character that at first is going to seem like

a Helen of Troy, who uses her powers of seduction to gain her way. But what I intend to do is write a novel about the life of a woman artist who learns certain things about what you have to give up to have autonomy as you grow older. The fact that The Line of the Sun was so well received and nominated for prizes and all kinds of surprising things inhibited me a little. I kept hearing those voices in my head telling me that I should write another The Line of the Sun or something similar. You know when you get stroked you want to get stroked again. So I really had to force myself to write about somebody completely different from the characters of Guzman and Marisol, to even change the time frame to the 1940s and make this woman a dancer rather than a writer. I want to write another successful novel, but I want to write one that is completeIy different from the first.

Selected Bibliography

The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry. Forthcoming.
Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood. Houston: Arte Publico P, 1990. Essays and poetry.
The Line of the Sun. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989. Novel.
Reaching for the Mainland. Tempe: Bilingual Review P, 1987. Poetry.
Terms of Survival. Houston: Arte Publico P, 1987. Poetry.
Peregrina. Golden, CO: Riverstone P, 1986. Poetry.
Latin Women Pray (with Rolando Ortiz). Unpublished, 1984.
Selections from the author's works are included in the following anthologies:

Hispanics in the United States. Francisco Jimenez and Gary Keller, eds. Tempe: Bilingual Review P, 1982.
Woman of Her Word. Evangelina Vigil, ed. Houston: Arte Publico P, 1983.
The Heath Anthology of Modern American Literature. Boston: Heath, 1990.
Pushcart Prize XV Anthology. Bill Henderson, ed. Atlanta: Pushcart P, 1990.
Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the U.S.A. Faythe Turner, ed. New York: Open Hand Publishing, 1991.
Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1991
~~~~~~~~

By Edna Acosta-Belen, State University of New York, Albany

Source: MELUS, Fall93, Vol. 18 Issue 3, p84, 15p.
~~~~~~~~