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Creating Cultural Consciousness in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*

Bilingualism and biculturalism are the key traits found in any developing cultural consciousness. *Silent Dancing* shows the dangers and unique opportunities of a dual society. In a transient culture that does not clearly identify with either cultural pole and has a constant back and forth motion, migratory flux develops. Men respond to a chaotic state by not fulfilling their economic duties and separating themselves from the superstructure. The desertion yields matriarchal dominance. The women ground themselves through communication. Their storytelling, their warnings about love, sex and marriage, establish social law which coupled with the lack of economic support from the men allows them to accept the state of flux as their foundation. The men eventually succumb to silence and are lost to the instability. The blatant "uncrowning" (Murfin 344) of patriarchal dominance is also an "uncrowning" of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory which supports the patriarchal dominance through "nom du p•re" (Murfin 290). Using Carnival principles to "uncrown" the masculine domination of the superstructure of Puerto Rican culture; *Silent Dancing* is more than a bildungsroman and a search for personal identity. It is a detailed exploration of the creation of a culture based on transience.

"Consciousness, without which such things as art cannot be produced, is not the source of social forms and economic conditions. It is rather, their most important product" (Wofford 335). The transient culture of Puerto Rico and its external economic dependence produces a unique western-based consciousness. The bicultural and bilingual aspects of the transient Puerto Rican-Americans are exemplified in *Silent Dancing* through Judith Ortiz Cofer's use of Spanish and English and the juxtaposition and alternation of prose and poetry. In her prose, Cofer artistically acknowledges the popular form of expression on the mainland, the novel, and expresses her search for identity telling stories she recalls through a medium more conducive to conversation and storytelling. Her use of the poetry is reflective of her island roots where there is a "sensuousness of allowing your heart to set its rhythms at its own pace; how love can be allowed to flower like a well-tended rose bush. It was a lyrical time" (Cofer 147). The lyricism of the island is represented by the poetry and the mainstream American culture is reflected in the flowing prose. The exotic feel of poetry intertwined with the prose gives the overall work a very poetic tone. The mingling of

the two genres manifests the interdependence of American and transient Puerto Rican culture. Both genres complete and support each other and are entirely codependent.

The transient Puerto Rican-American cultural consciousness is directly related to the strong matriarchal society fueled by the filtering out of men who go to the States attempting to improve Puerto Rican economic conditions and preserve their Puerto Rican identity. In so doing, they alienate themselves from their homeland and are never accepted as true Americans on the mainland, many times dragging their family into the state of migratory flux. This chaos is the foundation for a new Puerto Rican-American consciousness. Because of the artistic creations of artists like Judith Ortiz Cofer, this very rich, evolving culture realizes its own voice in the midst of chaos and will no longer explore the sounds of silence, but will experiment with a new bicultural American literature.

In a bicultural existence the most poignant influence is expression through language, "cold / hot, English / Spanish; that was our life" (Cofer 129). The mother's insistence upon a Spanish-only home is a Carnavalesque attitude employed to usurp the accepted dominance of both man and the economic base. The patriarchal infrastructure accepts English-only / men-only, and is represented by the husband's unsupported relocation away from a matriarchal culture and the government that employs him while accepting him only as a second-class puertorriqueño. The polarization of languages affects the children, hindering them developmentally so they have an incomplete knowledge of both English and Spanish necessary for survival in either world and imperative for survival in both. Thus the children are instilled with an inferiority complex. They are not American enough for the Americans nor are they Puerto Rican enough for the Puerto Ricans.

The positive aspect of bilingualism, one among many, is the heightened expressive and communicative ability. A general to extensive comprehension level of multiple languages enhances the ability to express more with fewer words or with better word choice. Each language has words with deep and complex connotative meanings. The ability to select from two languages facilitates poetic expression whether it is oral, prosaic or poetic. For example, in the preface "Journey to a Summer's Afternoon," Judith Ortiz Cofer makes a case for the choice of the more appropriate Spanish word "ensayo" over "essay". "Ensayo" may refer to an essay, rehearsal, exercise or practice, which more accurately describes her intent with an economy of words. Stylistically, the intertwining of Spanish words and phrases with an English background adds a unique flair creating a blend of words that recreates American writing by "uncrowning" (Murfin) the dominant use of

English and mixing it with a language of a lower class. If Spanish is to American English what French is to British English, then both Romantic languages give an exotic flavor to a heavier Germanic language proving the adaptiveness of English as a language open to adjustment.

Silent Dancing is a reflection of the real American culture that is most definitely not limited to one influence (i.e. English). U.S. history has been a conflict of cultures from Native American, French, British and Spanish occupation to the inundation of Central American / Caribbean Spanish speakers. The U.S. has never been a pure culture and to deny its "sincretismo" is to deny what is uniquely American. Judith Ortiz Cofer could be any migratory person in the U. S. writing in a common language flavored with "palabras Žtnicas" that, for her, happen to be in Spanish. The increase of students of Spanish in recent years incorporates the language into the broader culture as Americans accept the utterances of the barrios as an integral component of general culture. Cofer's work then becomes comprehensible to more mainstream readers, which allows the Puerto Rican voice to reach a greater audience, entertaining, educating and influencing its readers.

Duality produces instability and Judith Ortiz Cofer discusses both in her exploration for identity called Silent Dancing. As she returns to her "moments of being" she discovers a culture of people who are neither islanders nor mainlanders, but transient individuals who have taken bits and pieces from each momentary home to create a culture all their own. These "cultural chameleons" (Cofer 17) blend, somewhat awkwardly, into mainland American culture and island Puerto Rican culture.

In the ensayo entitled "Silent Dancing," the narrator shows the first signs of establishing her evolving culture. She presents herself as an object in unacknowledged equilibrium being pulled by two opposing forces of equal magnetism. Her mother longs for la isla, spending her time terraforming her own part of the world into a New Puerto Rico and governing it as la dictadura. She allows only Spanish spoken within her borders, shopping only at La Bodega to preserve the integrity of the meals, and forbidding fraternization with the American children. Her "perpetual nostalgia" (Cofer 128) directly opposes the father's method of assimilation. He wants nothing more than stability for his children which means relocation to the mainland to escape impending poverty on the island, good educational resources and a stable but Americanized home. He sees no benefit to living in Puerto Rico and he takes an honorable, well-paying job with the U.S. Navy to secure his children's futures. Unfortunately for him, love for his wife and a subconscious knowledge that he has trespassed upon a decidedly matriarchal

domain, la casa, demand that his desires are superseded to appease his wife. Thus he instigates an eternal migratory flux, moving his family back and forth from culture to culture, that will breed confusion and creation in his children.

"Eternal Return" is the idea that nothing is stable in life, there is an endless repetition, but time never alters (Kurrant). T.S. Eliot's "J. Alfred Prufrock" best demonstrates the idea of "eternal return". Written by an author who experienced migration around the time the poem was published, Eliot explores temporal instability through Prufrock's belief that "in a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (47-48). The sense of "eternal return" denies Prufrock any basis for self-identity effecting his self-image and shattering his confidence; therefore, he is unable to express the needs and desires of someone he does not know, and succumbs to silence.

The same idea is expressed in *Silent Dancing*. Removal of the stabilizing force of home drives the migratory flux of the narrator's life. Without the foundation, the narrator struggles, as a "cultural chameleon" (Cofer 17), with the creation of an identity and the expression of that identity. Unlike J. Alfred Prufrock, the narrator uses her version of "eternal return" or migratory flux, as her identity. Thus she becomes the voice for millions of Puerto Rican-Americans who coexist in this unique realm. By using the lack of a stable cultural foundation as an identity she conquers the "eternal return" / migratory flux by using it to her advantage, not allowing it to "undo" her as it did J. Alfred Prufrock and "others around her" (Cofer 124). The lack of stability is her true cultural identity and the strength of her female culture facilitates the expression of her autoconocimiento, or self-knowledge.

The narrator overcomes her chaotic state because she carries the strength of the women in her family. The women have generated a female culture that the narrator's mother fights to retain by remaking Puerto Rico in her apartment. She grounds herself through her strong family roots save her from the migratory flux. The men have a somewhat different story. They represent the economic base of the Puerto Rican culture that is conspicuously absent. The men leave the island to support their families desiring to make more money and rise in social status. By displacing themselves from the superstructure and severing ties, they lose their voices and are lost in the migratory flux, all varying representations of J. Alfred Prufrock. The narrator's great uncle has given in to alcohol and "in a few years he will retreat into silence and take a long, long time to die" (Cofer 98). Hernán, too, tried to alter the culture's economic base by leaving on a money making scheme to the

mainland. He returned then left again only to become an alcoholic and face humiliation in New Jersey. The narrator's own father "was a sensitive, intellectual man whose energies had to be entirely devoted to survival. And that is how many minds are wasted in the travails of immigrant life" (Cofer 129). The father eventually succumbs during the crisis in Cuba. The prejudice he must have endured, he never spoke of and soon lost his identity fighting Caribbeans alongside people who would never accept him as an American. The six months he was there, he was "unable to communicate with [his family]" (Cofer 121) ultimately driving him to silence. The next time they met, his identity was lost forever, he "returned a different man" (Cofer 121).

Cofer uncrowns the "law of the father" and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory by giving the women strong commands of language and relegating the men to silence. The female culture of storytelling emphasizes words and symbols to set down a common law. This, in essence, is the "uncrowning" of the order of "nom du p• re" which champions the father-son relationship of language. Cofer shows the women as the masters of communication especially in "Silent Dancing", expressing the many different methods of storytelling and "The Way My Mother Walked". In the poem, women communicate through language, touch, and listening, "the morse code of her stiletto heels sending / their Mayday-but-do-not-approach into / the darkened doorwaysÉ" (Cofer 99) and the "braille of her anxiety" (Cofer 99) contrast with the men who use visual clues and abuse language by using "piropos" whenever possible. Even when the women die they return "pressing their faces forward to say things about the past" (Cofer 98). The men do not have the same ability to speak. When the narrator's uncle has something to say, the narrator commands him to "move backÉI don't want to hear what you have to say" (Cofer 98).

Silent Dancing's narrator explores her "moments of being" (Cofer 11), her particularly poignant memories of a unique childhood. She is on a quest for "poetic truth" (Cofer 11) to determine who she is, where she comes from and what it means to be a woman. Unintentionally, she stumbles over an identification of a culture and becomes a voice not only for all the women who came before her, but for all the members of the transient Puerto Rican-American culture. By establishing her own foundation for identity on instability, she identifies herself and through her expression of that self identifies the social forms and economic conditions of a culture. In the ensayo "Silent Dancing" the narrator says "there is no music in my dream for the dancers" (Cofer 97). The identification of the infrastructure and superstructure creates the collective consciousness that will drive more

artists to create the music of a new culture.

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