

Puerto Rican Literature in Georgia? An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer by Rafael Ocasio

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INTRODUCTION

JUDITH Ortiz Cofer is among the increasing number of Hispanic authors resident in the United States who propose to document ethnic integration into American society. Like the work of Chicanos, Dominicans, and Nuyoricans (Puerto Ricans in New York City), her writing incorporates reflections of a personal struggle for psychological individuation as well as acculturation, illustrated by her memories of Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, where she was born February 24, 1952, and her remembrances of adolescent years as the child of a military father in Paterson, New Jersey. Now a resident of rural Louisville, Georgia, Ortiz Cofer recreates her Puerto Rico, or "la isla de mis sueños" ("the island of my dreams"), which she shares with her English-speaking readers.

Ortiz Cofer began her literary career as a poet. She has published three books of poems: *Reaching for the Mainland* (Bilingual Review Press, 1987), *Terms of Survival* (Arte Publico Press, 1987), and *Peregrina* (Riverstone Press, 1986), and a collection of essays: *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (Arte Publico Press, 1990). *The Line of the Sun* (University of Georgia Press, 1989), her first novel, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990. Her work regularly appears in distinguished journals like the *New Mexico Humanities Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and the *Kenyon Review*.

In the short stories published in this issue, "The Witch's Husband" and "Not for Sale," Ortiz Cofer explores her bicultural self and comments on her work as a Latina writer in the United States. This interview took place in Atlanta in November 1990, and again, via voice-recorded questionnaire, in March 1992.

RO: Would you comment on how English substituted for Spanish as your main language of expression?

JOC: I was born in Puerto Rico and the first language I heard was Spanish; it remained my home language all throughout my childhood into my early youth. I don't think it was ever replaced by English, only that I added English. Since most of my education was in English it became the language of my literary expression. It has become my functional language, that's why I write in English. It will be very difficult for me to write in Spanish since I have lost a lot of the intimacy with the language required to make metaphors and to do certain types of abstract thinking in that language. But, of course, I still speak Spanish with my relatives.

RO: Would you share some anecdotes about your coming to the United States and your own process of integration into American culture?

JOC: I came to the United States when I was two years old. My father was in the Navy which he joined for financial reasons. He was stationed in Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York, and because he had relatives in Paterson, New Jersey, he made that city our home base. I used most of my personal anecdotes from this period in my book of autobiographical essays, *Silent Dancing*. For example, you will find how I learned English under the section "Primary Lesson." 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 serious student of languages, a process that was literally and symbolically painful. I decided that my main weapon in life was communication. I had to learn the language of the place where I was living in order to survive.

RO: Can you describe your family?

JOC: My grandfather was a house builder and painter by trade, and a poet by nature. My grandmother was a homemaker and a feminist in a time when those terms did not co-exist. She was the mother of eight children and my model for strength and determination. In an interesting turn around of roles, my grandfather taught me poetry and my grandmother taught me survival. My father was part of a Navy fleet which went to Europe every six months or so. Every time he went to Europe my mother, my brother, and I went back to Hormigueros and stayed with her mother on the island. My father felt that our anchor in life was an education. To him I credit my love of books and my determined attitude about getting an education. My mother was also a homemaker, which was a very difficult job because she had to make a home for us in different places each time we moved for many years. My father died in a car accident shortly after he retired from the Navy in 1976, and my mother went back to the island where she lives now, close to her mother.

RO: What is the genesis of *Silent Dancing*?

JOC: It deals with culture and language, as well as climate. 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. The shifts were abrupt and always traumatic. Many of the stories in *Silent Dancing* have to do with the stories I heard those months on the island, which were so different from the months we spent in Paterson, an urban center that in the sixties was a location of much racial strife.

RO: Your writing style seems to have been influenced by your knowledge of Spanish prose.

JOC: Yes. I didn't study Spanish literature, but I did discover the Spanish section in the library when I was writing my thesis in English literature on Lillian Hellman. My mother was living with me and insisted on my bringing her books in Spanish. She is an avid reader and didn't care who wrote the books I brought. I started with the "A's" and went up through the alphabet. The only one she complained about was Miguel de Unamuno. She said, "This man is depressing me. Take him back to the library." When

she finished a book, she would tell me if it interested her. I read eclectically and without prejudice, almost anything. That is how I discovered Manuel Puig and Gabriel Garcia Marquez and several of the more famous Latin American writers. The first conference I went to was at Rutgers in 1983, "The Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Literature." I was amazed that there were so many Puerto Rican writers. I bought some books and started sending off for bibliographies. That's when I started a serious program of reading. I discovered several of the Nuyorican writers like Nicholasa Mohr, Sandra Maria Esteves, and Pedro Pietri, and women writers in Puerto Rico like Rosario Ferre. As an adult, and even after having written, I discovered my Puerto Rican literary heritage.

RO: Have you been influenced by any of the Nuyorican writers?

JOC: I continue reading them and supporting them. However, they do not exactly speak to me and for me in the sense that the Nuyorican school is specific to that area. Although I lived in Paterson, it is not the same as living in New York City, in the barrios, and in those large communities where there is support and confirmation of culture and literature. The Nuyorican writers have nourished me in the sense that it is good to know that they are completing the mosaic of Puerto Rican literature in the United States. There is not just one reality to being a Puerto Rican writer. I am putting together a different view. I am not just one isolated Puerto Rican writer in Louisville, Georgia, who writes about something that no one else has experienced. I am writing about any woman whose life takes her to many places and that's the way I'd like to think about it.

RO: Are you in personal or professional contact with Nuyorican writers?

JOC: No, not really. I am in professional contact with them in that I am often asked to be part of conferences and programs where other writers are involved. I am in contact with critics like yourself and Frances Aparicio at the University of Michigan and my fellow Hormiguerena, Edna Acosta Belen. I have known these two women for many years and they have helped me in my self-education in Puerto Rican literature. I am very grateful to them.

RO: What is the sense of community for a Puerto Rican writer living in Louisville, Georgia?

JOC: I have to smile because Louisville is a very rural community where my husband and I have a farm, and 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. I am not out of touch. I do not need to be in New York City or in Puerto Rico to write about being Puerto Rican. I am not making a political stand by being geographically where I am. This is my life and I work where I find myself.

RO: On the subject of Puerto Rican literature, I was impressed with your archetypal town of Salud in *The Line of the Sun*. Of course, my first impression was to think of Garcia Marquez's Macondo. Your Salud represents everything Puerto Rican. Would you say that you are trying to define puertorriquenidad in some way?

JOC: I'm not aware that I'm doing anything on a global scale. Salud is based on Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, my hometown. Hormigueros is where the Virgin of the Monserrate, the Black Virgin, appeared during colonial times. She appeared to a woodcutter on a hill. He was being charged by a bull and called on the Virgin. She appeared over a treetop, and the bull fell to his knees. One of the first images I have is of being taken to La Iglesia de la Monserrate. I was baptized there. My father was baptized there. His father was baptized there. The legend permeated my whole childhood. I wasn't so much thinking of Macondo, although I admit that Garcia Marquez is the master. Once you've read him, you can't avoid being influenced by him. I was literally drawing on the legend of the Virgen de la Monserrate. I decided to make that the surreal context of my novel. The fact that it's a shrine lends an atmosphere of the surreal that I didn't have to make up. In a way, I am defining being a Puerto Rican, because being a Puerto Rican is living in this dimension where the spiritual and the real are one. La Virgen is as real to my mother as this room is to us. She lives literally and figuratively under the shadow of the church. She lives in Hormigueros, and the church bell practically makes her walls shake. Not a day goes by when she doesn't light a candle to the Virgin. That is what being a Puerto Rican woman is. It's to have your feet on the ground and your soul in the church. Salud is like Macondo mainly in that it is a self-contained little universe where the people live by different rules.

RO: Are you experimenting with the African-Caribbean religious system of santeria-espiritualismo in *The Line of the Sun*?

JOC: My grandfather was a mesa blanca espiritista. He would say that he only worked through God, not witchcraft. There was a table in a corner of my grandparents' house that was covered with a white cloth, a Bible, a stick of mahogany, and candles. Nobody was allowed to go near it. When I was old enough to ask, my mother told me that is where my grandfather communicated with the dead, which scared me to death. I know that people visited Papa and that he counseled them. I knew that sometimes he would take his mahogany stick, which I called a magic wand, and put it under his arm and leave. My mother would say, "He's consulting." He was like the resident psychologist. He would go to people's houses, and they would sit and pray over a Bible. He would have visions and counsel them. It was accredited to his connections to the spirits. When I started to write, I felt that dimension was a necessary part of my portrayal of the Puerto Rican psyche. Spiritism permeates and even controls some lives. There are some people who will not go anywhere or do anything without consulting their espiritista. People on the island believe that espiritismo is the same as Catholicism. The Church has never been able to disprove that. My mother doesn't see any conflict between going to church and going to espiritistas. She does see a conflict, though, in attending anything that sounds like voodoo. I couldn't get any information about santeria from any of the people I knew there. Santeria frightens my mother because you're not supposed to deal with dark forces. It is very important, because santeria, much more than espiritismo, is an active escapism. People can actually escape from the realities of their lives when they go to a santero meeting.

RO: Your political declaration seems to concern the motif of civilization versus the uncivilized, as it occurred in Latin America in the nineteenth century, and even in the twentieth century. But in *The Line of the Sun*, the big city becomes savage and the small town becomes civilized.

JOC: You're right in assuming that I feel that the island contains evil. It contains evil but is benevolent. The introduction of evil does not make it an evil place. There was a snake in Eden. The city here represents decadence. El building was an attempt by these people to give form and meaning to their lives. The building itself was a trap. They were in an artificial environment, a vertical barrio. There is no such thing. It's not so much that the city was evil, but it was an environment that fostered evil. The people in el building did not understand the dual nature. They wanted the island in the city. They never resolved this dichotomy. The island is Eden, and hell is in the city. My father could never resolve the fact that he could only be happy on the island but needed to be in the United States to ensure that his children had a future. He died without resolving that. I've just brought the island with me.

RO: What you're describing also is the experience of the immigrant. Because of our American citizenship, few people think of Puerto Ricans as foreigners going through the same process as any other newcomer to this country. But we have different cultures, different language, and different religions. We do go through the same process.

JOC: The psychological exile of the Puerto Rican is just as draining as political or economic exile. I can see it in my own mother. All of those years, she practically refused to learn English. She kept the places we lived like little microcosms of the island. It was sad, because all she had to do was step outside the door to find herself in a different world. There was no reconciliation for her until she went back. She refused to assimilate. Yet, she brought me up and educated me in the United States.

RO: One of the most important leitmotifs in your work is the American city described as a devouring beast.

JOC: There are levels of hostility. The city not so much devours as absorbs. Some people are more absorbable than others. It has to do with a person's level of connection to the island. What I try to say in *The Line of the Sun* is that the mother and Guzman had to return to the island. As soon as they could cut their strings to the mainland, they returned. Basically, I do not see the American city as necessarily a devouring, destructive beast. Either you learn to live in it, or you go mad, or you go back to the island and face those problems there.

RO: I believe your novel reflects many qualities of a testimonial, similar to the work of some Cuban and Central American writers of today. It appears that the characters in *The Line of the Sun* confront situations that you have personally encountered. Can you think of specific experiences you have had in the United States that later contributed to your novel?

JOC: My father's Navy experience was in the novel mainly because that led to the phenomenon of the children as interpreters of the world. My father was gone most of the time and my mother refused to really be a full participant in the language and the culture. As early as ten years old, I was the translator and interpreter for my mother. When my father was home, of course, he did all that. The rest of the time, I did. I included that in the story, because it worked well with the idea of Marisol having to bridge the cultures. The Catholic school will appear in my work because the nuns were the people I saw every day. Being a Catholic will always be a part of me, because

Catholicism is all-encompassing. There are scenes in the novel that were recalled from my childhood. In almost all of the cases, there is definitely fictionalization.

RO: How does your poetry nourish your prose style?

JOC: It cross-pollinates all the time. 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. My novel was generated by a sense that I had a long story to tell and needed to give myself freedom to tell it without the constraints of language that poetry imposes.

RO: It is evident that the Puerto Rican oral tradition has had a major part in your work. "The Witch's Husband" has a strong element of folklore. Are you claiming your national background through folklore?

JOC: How can I separate my national background from my artistic impulse? I am a Puerto Rican woman possessing knowledge of that fact in a very intimate, personal, and intrinsic way. When I use a Puerto Rican tale, my story reflects that identity. I don't like to claim rhetoric or to tag my stories. I claim folklore because it belongs to all of us. The oral traditions of my grandmother's house, the folktales, family stories, gossip or myths often repeated to teach a lesson or make a point educated me and became intrinsic to my writing.

RO: What are your plans for the future?

JOC: I have a collection of mixed genres for consideration at the University of Georgia Press. It is a book that contains short fiction, essays, and poems dating back at least ten years. I mix fiction and nonfiction not to confuse, but because I feel that it is almost impossible in memory to separate what we have imagined from what actually took place. In writing *Silent Dancing* and even *The Line of the Sun*, I interviewed some of my relatives about their memories of things that I thought I remembered very accurately. I found out that memory is subject to revision according to gender, age, circumstances, and many other criteria. I would be interested in how my readers react to material presented in different ways.

I also have a novel in progress that I hesitate to talk about because I have become a little superstitious about talking about my work, not because I feel that I am going to jinx it, but because I am a storyteller and sometimes in telling a story I feel a similar sense of completion as when writing it. It deals with four Puerto Rican women of different ages who hold an intergenerational discourse. I know that the idea is not a new one but it is new to me, as I am exploring the possibilities of being the mother of an eighteen-year-old daughter myself.

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By RAFAEL OCASIO

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