Possibilities for Salsa Music in the Mainstream
An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer

by Lorraine M. Lopez

Judith Ortiz Cofer is the author of a novel, The Line of the Sun, a collection of essays and poetry, two books of poetry, Terms of Survival and Reaching for the Mainland, and The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry. Her work has appeared in Glamour, The Georgia Review, Kenyon Review and other journals. She has been anthologized in The Best American Essays, The Norton Book of WomenÕs Lives, the Pushcart Prize and the O. Henry Prize Stories. She is the recipient of numerous awards, ranging from fellowships from the NEA and the Witter Bynner Foundation for poetry to the Pura Belpre medal and the Paterson Book Prize. The Rockefeller Foundation recently awarded her a residency at the Bellagio, Italy Conference Center in 1999. A native of Puerto Rico, Judith Cofer now resides in Georgia and is a Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia.

What inspired you to become a writer?

I have always had a need for creativite expression. Even as a child I was always acting in little plays that I made up. For a long time, all of my energies were put into school. I was the ÒScholarship Kid.Ó I married young and had a child. After I accomplished my immediate goals of becoming a teacher and getting my graduate degree, I still felt a need that I could not identify at first. It was a vacuum that didn't get filled until I started to jot down notes and stories and made a few hesitant attempts at poetry. When I began to write everyday, I realized writing is something I need to do. But I didn't really start writing seriously until I had finished my education because I had so little time. I have an essay about this called "Five A.M." I had tried to do everything at once--get married have a child, go to school. I literally didn't have [enough] hours in the day. So I started making the time by waking up at five in the morning, which I still do whenever possible. Writing for two hours a day, minimum, has become an intrinsic part of my life.

Which writers have influenced your work most and how?

It's an eclectic list. People sometimes think because I have several labels attached to my name like Latina, woman writer -- that perhaps all of my influences should come from the Spanish-speaking world, should all be women. But I grew up in a place and time where woman writers were scarce, scarcely represented, I should say, in my syllabi and on the bookshelves. Virginia Woolf was practically the only one allowed on the graduate reading lists, so I had to depend on her to inspire me and talk to me as a woman. But I was also heavily influenced by the passionate male writers like Hawthorne and Blake and Byron. It wasnÕt until I was out in the real world (away from academia) that I started discovering there were woman writers writing about this world and this time, like Alice Walker, Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov.
I read what engages me. Recently I was totally under the spell of Frank McCourt's

Angela's Ashes. What a storyteller! He is as good as my grandmother! There are some voices that I return to again and again because they speak to me in a particularly intimate way. Those writers stay on my shelves forever. My reading in one night can encompass Sor Juana and The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker, and Teen Magazine. What[ever] engages me at the moment. But it has to be good writing about things that I find interesting and important. So, you see, my reading list is eclectic.

William Faulkner said the inspiration for The Sound and the Fury came to him from a single image. He had spied a young child in soiled underclothes climbing into a window from the branch of a tree, and the idea for the novel was triggered immediately by this sight. What are the sources of your inspiration? Images? Words? Dreams?

Poetry inspires me. I started out writing nothing but poetry. The first thing I do in the morning is turn to poetry. I either read it or write it. To me the music and the images [poetry evokes] is just like listening to a song. A lot of my essays in Silent Dancing are directly related to my poems.
In one essay, I write about my paternal grandmother, a woman who was oppressed, but who found ways of being rebellious. One of the things that I found very incongruous about this very shy and introverted Puerto Rican woman was that she always had a huge pack of cigarettes in her pocket. Her husband had never allowed her to smoke, even though he did. After he died, she smoked like a chimney, and she also displayed her vice. So out of that image of this shy little person with a huge pack of unfiltered cigarettes in her pocket grew an essay.
In another essay about my parents' marriage, I attribute [the inspiration] to their wedding picture. So images are very crucial in the genesis of poetry for me. But also sometimes, it's a musical phrase of some sort, something that I can't stop hearing, sometimes Spanish words hit me as in "El Olvido," that poem I have explained many times. I heard a conversation between my mother and a woman in which the phrase was used so dramatically. A', el olvido! It explained everything! I could not be free of it until I wrote a sort of dramatic definition of what that meant.
Sometimes I have to wait until the idea becomes totally sublimated, becomes part of my subconscious, and then I can create characters that are made out of the stuff of that idea, but they are not mere symbols of that idea. I don't want to write a sermon; I want to write a novel.

Which genre do you find most satisfying for the expression of your inspiration, your ideas?

I think poetry because it provides the satisfaction that I imagine a sculptor has after taking fifteen years to make a huge statue. But in two or three days, one can make a beautiful vase, maybe. For me, it's not that the poem doesn't take long; sometimes I'll work on a poem for years. But it takes shape before your eyes. It becomes. It starts looking like what it will be. It's a creation you can add to, but it's already there. Whereas the novel is this great, plastic thing, a huge thing filling the room of your life, and you're trying to deal with it and mold it. And you have no idea whether: a) you'll be able to do it, or: b) what shape it will be when it's finished, or: c) whether you'll even have the energy to do it. With a poem, there's this beautiful time when you are shaping it and you say, yes, it looks like a poem, it sounds like a poem. It is a poem! I

would never call it immediate gratification because I have poems I have been working on for years. In fact this morning, I printed out three poems. One had a date of 1995 on it! So I wouldn't exactly call it a quick process.

With a novel or even a short story, your labor may or may not turn into an identifiable story or novel. I have thrown out hundreds of pages after several years of work on something that refused to become a novel or story. I also think that poetry contains the whole spectrum of pleasure that language can offer. You can read a chapter in a beautifully written novel and say, "Ah, yes that was satisfying." But you read a poem and it fills you like good wine. I literally cannot stop myself from getting goose bumps if a poem touches me. It's hard to sustain goooosebumps through fifty pages of prose. It might become a permanent condition! I don't think that I am necessarily better at poetry, but for me, it is the most satisfying form.

When inspiration strikes you, how do you, as a multi-genre writer, know what form your idea will take?

That's a hard one to answer, but I think it has to do with the concentration, the level of concentration. In my mind, I think of it in the way one know if a substance is going to be juice or jelly. How do you know the consistency of it? It all depends on how much of the ingredients you choose to put into it.

When I need to write a poem, the image is so concentrated and the impulse is so strong that I want to immediately put it in its right container and shape it as such. For example, I have a very old poem in which I talk about my mother's hands, how she held my hand. The way she held my hand was like a Braille code telegraphing her fear and her anxiety. I suppose I could have written an essay about that, but it didn't feel like an essay. I didn't want that image of my mother's hands to have many tangents or to go off in many directions. I wanted it to be just about that image, to be concentrated and fully about that.

It's the difference between a close-up and panning. Do you want to show a scene of a funeral with everyone hunched over and crying or do you to focus the camera right on a tear falling down that child's face? To me, the essay or the short story is the camera moving further away and trying to take in a scene. If it's everything that led to that scene, then it's a novel. But if it's just that one close up, that one image that has to represent everything -- then it's a poem.

In addition to "genre-switching," you have written for juvenile as well as adult audiences. Your most recent book, The Year of Our Revolution, for example, is a young adult piece. Would you comment on this or other projects and your desire to write for a younger audience?

I didn't start out specifically aiming for a younger audience. What happened was that I found out that I had a lot of [young adult] readers. It's interesting because Arte Publico [my publisher] will list Silent Dancing as a young adult book, but they also list it in their regular catalog. The same with other books that I have. For example, a lot of stories from The Latin Deli are used in high schools, but they are also used in college courses. When an editor, Melanie Kroupa, asked me to try my hand writing specifically for young adults, the result was An Island Like You. The stories in it are being reprinted in textbooks, which I find very satisfying.

I don't want to limit myself to writing for young adults, though. I want to be able to write for and about any age group. In fact, the novel that I have been trying to finish for

years, that I now call Don Juan's Daughter, is told from an extremely old woman's point of view, looking back at her youth in Puerto Rico before World War ll up to the present. What I want to do with her life is to show a woman who has lived in two worlds for most of the century. Since I am not extremely old myself, I'm going to have to do some research.

Will you talk a bit about the experience of receiving so much recognition and so many awards for your work? It seems that almost every year, or every few months you win an award for your writing.

I think the prizes are wonderful. They get me a wider audience. People pay attention to prizes. Anything that brings new readers to my work [is great]. And it's particularly satisfying to know that my peers (the ones who give the prizes) think of my work in serious terms.
I want to be a literary artist. I want to create work that lasts. When something like the O'Henry or the Pushcart or the Pura Belpre comes along, it tells me that people are taking my work seriously. Even though I'm not a best-selling author, I'm rewarded by the honors given me by my peers, other writers. That's very, very important to me. And if a publisher sees that your book has won a prize, even if it doesn't sell thousands of copies, it's likelier to stay in print. So that's the practical side of it.

In your short story, "Barrio Man," the protagonist is clearly an individual resolutely lodged in his remembrances of the Island. I have heard you comment on the criticism writers receive for continually "plumbing the past" in their work. Will you discuss your comment and tell how "Barrio Man" as well as your popular poem, "El Olvido," address that particular criticism?

In "Barrio Man," I was aiming for a commentary on "political correctness." First, I witnessed a time when it was important for Puerto Ricans in New Jersey to call themselves Hispanos instead of Puerto Ricans because it was not cool to be Puerto Rican. Then in the last decade or so, there has been this recognition of multiculturalism. Everyone has joined the bandwagon. Sometimes to an unhealthy degree, we've placed emphasis on ethnicity. It comes from both directions. Some mainstream people feel oppressed by being told they have to recognize diversity. There are the Native Americans, the African-Americans, the Latinos and the Asians, and the white kids feel left out. On the other hand, more and more Latinos (I'm only going to speak about Puerto Ricans) have decided that they're going to take full advantage of this hot new interest in Latinos. You see it in the mass media with Hollywood out there beating the bushes for another Jennifer Lopez or Ricky Martin.
In "Barrio Man," I wrote about a man who had decided in his old age that he was going to be The Barrio Man. He was going to represent being a Puerto Riqueno, and that meant wearing the costume -- the guayabera -- of the Puerto Riqueno, talking like a Puerto Riqueno, taking cultural trips back to the island, instructing the young people on how to be Puerto Riquenos. It's about a woman who goes home and with her lover, and her lover is duly impressed by her Puerto Riqueno father while she's thinking, "Give me a break!" yet knowing that she loves this old man.
But it's [also] a commentary because I myself have suffered from suspicion that what I do is trendy [eventhough] I have been doing the same thing from the [beginning]. I've had stuff rejected by editors saying, "that is not Latino enough." And I say, "Well, what do you want me to do? Put more rice and beans in it?"

I write about the things I have known. So if I know the barrio in Paterson better than I know any other neighborhood I'm going to write about that. Did Faulkner write about the French Riviera? He wrote about Mississippi, right? This is what we do. I'm not comparing myself with him. But take Flannery O'Connor. Why is it okay for her to write about Milledgeville and not be accused of plumbing her life for her work, while I can't write about being a Puerto Rican without being accused of only writing about memory? Well, I'd like to set something in another planet, but science fiction is not my thing. So in this story I go in the other direction and comment on the people who feel it's "our time now." Since it's cool to be a Latino, let me be the ultimate Latino! "Barrio Man" is just a short piece, but it's a social satire on the weariness of this character going home to discover that her father might as well have an emblem on his chest with the words "Barrio Man" on it.

In another piece, "El Olvido," a poem, I'm not saying write only about the past. [Rather], to put on a different persona to suit the times -- whether it is the persona of the super Latina because it is now time to be that, or to sublimate that and write post-modern prose set in neutral zones like a supermarket would be phony. So the poem is not a directive to write about the past, but to write the truth. Be the truth.

What I am, for example, is not the super Latina. I happen to be a woman who is physically identifiable as being of Hispanic origin, but I am equal parts Puerto Rican from New Jersey, Southern woman and Island Puerto Riquena. I'm going to visit my mother in a couple of weeks. I'll have to speak nothing but Spanish there. People will laugh at my American accent and my American demeanor and my brash attitude. Then I'll return to Georgia, and people will ask me where I'm from, and when I say Louisville, Georgia, they'll laugh. They mean where am I from. I'm obviously not a Southern girl. So I am neither this nor that, but I am something else, and that something else happens to be the combination of all those things. When I write, I have to address that.

Those who are familiar with your work are aware that family figures prominently in your writing. How has your family dealt with the idea that they may, or, in some cases, they may not become subjects in your poetry and prose?

I have tried to be very well aware of their sensibilities. I dealt with that very directly when I wrote The Line of the Sun and was actually afraid that my mother might be offended by some of the things [in that novel] because she is recognizably in it. But she saw that my imagination took over. Though I based a lot of the characters on real people, I also departed significantly from them.

The other book that was more direct in its approach to the use of family as the basis for the work was Silent Dancing. I took care, first of all, to write a forward in which I discussed Virginia Woolf's theory that the past really belongs to the teller [who is] is basically a witness and a participant and not liable for getting everyone else's version of the past right. I wanted to express that this is how I absorbed the events around me. I did it in the form of creative non-fiction, which means I put at the core of each of the pieces real events in real time. I was accurate in my historical time, but I felt free to dramatize conversations that I remembered or recalled without claiming that they were word for word accurate. I also took care to change the names of the people and to make sure that their physical descriptions didnÕt match so closely that someone was backed into a corner. I was after a poetic truth.

In your novel, The Line of the Sun, you employ a multivocal narrative strategy in switching from the third person "floating" perspective to first person narration midway in the book. More and more, multicultural authors alternate perspectives, often engendering criticism for "unevenness" in narration. Finally, contemporary critics are beginning to understand the necessity of including a multiplicity of voices in a single work. Will you comment on the significance of shifting perspective in this novel?

When I did it, there wasn't much [perspective shifting] out there, but now there is. I'm not saying that I was innovative; I'm just saying that I received some of the first criticism for changing perspective. I wanted the novel to have a narrator, but I also wanted The Line of the Sun to be a commentary on story-telling. If you are a great story-teller, you disappear and the story takes over. I saw that happening when my grandmother would start a story, and all of a sudden, my mind would be flooded with images that she was conjuring. And I forgot her. When she would finish, I felt like I was coming out of a state of hypnosis.

In The Line of the Sun, I wanted to play that "trick," to create what John Barnard calls "the continuing dream," to inject my reader with "the drug of forgetfulness." I wanted my reader to forget there was a narrator, but I wanted there to be a voice in the reader's head. So [the character] Marisol actually speaks to her uncle in the beginning, and then slowly her voice fades into the background, but she's still telling the story.

It's supposed to be made up of images that this girl has either heard or invented because that's the way it was in my family. Often I didn't know an uncle or aunt; I only knew the stories that were told about that person. Yet that relative would become a very real presence in my life. My mother can still say, "You know that aunt of yours, the one who ran away with a musician?" And even though I may not know the woman, I will know so many stories about her that she's a character just like any of those people that you've read and heard about so much that they take on a life.

I wanted Guzman to be a creation of Marisol so that when he shows up, the real Guzman, the little, skinny brown guy, he's nothing like the Puerto Rican Indiana Jones that she has imagined him to be. I wanted to redefine her childish, romantic idea of the hero to the real uncle who doesn't look like the Hollywood version of a hero, but who has a heart bigger than she can comprehend. That was the plan.

Anyone who has attended one of your readings knows you are a gifted and dramatic reader of your work. How does the idea that you will in all likelihood perform a piece at some time influence your vision and revision of your work?

It doesn't because I consider the reading separate from the writing. There are some things that I never read aloud because they work best in the eloquent silence between the writer and the reader. There are some pieces that I fortunately have found to be quite readable. They're usually infused with humor and drama. For example, "Advanced Biology" is funny and has a lot of dialogue, so I can read it and perform the parts. It works well.

But there are others that are very meditative, and they donÕt have the same effect on the audience. For example, "Silent Dancing," the essay, gets reprinted a lot, but because of its disjointed, non-sequential nature, if I try to read it aloud I lose people. In the essay, the movie [camera device] interrupts the narrative. You can see that on the page because it's in italics, and it's very obvious. But [when I'm reading] I can't say, "Now, you imagine the movie, here." It would be disruptive.

I consider the reading a different art form. I consider it a performance. It is my material, and I'm still giving it to the audience, but I'm not going to read just anything. I am going to read what works best with the human voice as opposed to something I would like people to read on their own.

In addition to writing, you teach through the Creative Writing Program at the University of Georgia. What are some observations you have made about Creative Writing Programs in general and what advice can you offer the student writer contemplating a career in writing?

A lot of people like to say that you can't teach someone to write. Well, that's true. You can't teach someone to be a parent or to fall in love either. But you can instruct them in what to avoid in being a parent and in how to get the person you fall in love with to notice you. Those sound like strange things, but some people assume that certain things just come to you. And writing is a destiny in some ways, but it also requires some direction and it requires a context.

There are people who would be very good writers, but they have not read enough. They assume that they're doing something new with their work when they're not. I've had students in my classes who are obviously very smart and very talented, but they're trying to become the new e. e. cummings or the new Beat poet. It takes me most of the term to convince them that it's okay if all they want to do is write their own version of Howl for the rest of their lives, but if they really want to make a difference, they're going to have to absorb that and then go on to do something new.

The Creative Writing program does what the parenting class or a little lesson in social graces do, which is to allow you to avoid the obvious mistakes in what seems natural, being a writer. And it gives you direction and also saves you time because the world out there is so full of information, so full of books. We need reading lists that give us a sense of where we are in literature. Like the poet, Stanley Kunitz says, "Tradition is a life-giving fountain, not a cistern full of toads!" I think that tradition prepares you to write in the way that studying music from the past prepares you to be a contemporary musician or composer.

Creative writing programs provide the resources for that, the cumulative experience of practicing writers sharing the pleasures and pitfalls of (I don't even want to call it a career) a chosen path because if you think you are going to make a living being a writer, I think that you need to take a good look around. Being a writer is a condition of existence, and if you feel that's what you want to be then you give yourself as much instruction as possible, but you also prepare yourself to supplement your living doing something else.

You also teach literature courses, most notably, multicultural American literature. How would you describe this category of literature, your place in this category and the experience of teaching it in the South?

When I started writing, I didn't think of myself as a multicultural writer. I just thought that I wanted to be a writer. [Multicultural literature] is just one of those categories that I have fallen into. I happen to be a multicultural or minority writer because I was born in Puerto Rico and I am classified -- for everyone's convenience -- that way. For my own self confidence, I don't want to think that my being Puerto Rican is responsible for the interest in my work.

If it has something to do with the interest in my work, it should be that people consider,

"Well, she writes well and she's a Puerto Rican writer, so when we're teaching multicultural literature, we'll use her." But if it's the other way around, then there's something awfully wrong. I don't think that there's any room for political correctness or affirmative action in art. I'm not going to put a picture on the wall just because it's painted by a particular minority artist and it's the right thing to do. I'm going to put it there because it satisfies my aesthetic sense, and I find it beautiful or satisfying in some other way.

I'd just like to be seen as a writer out there competing with all other writers. Everyone has something that they are called: feminist writer, Jewish-American writer, gay writer. In this country, we just have to assign tags to everybody and everything, and if that gets your work read and studied and kept in print, then that's fine. But if it's just going to be a flash in the pan, well, okay, and next year, we're onto Serbo-Croatian writers, no more Puerto Rican writers, then what good does that do me? I don't want to be a fashion trend.

How does teaching and creating literature -- in its various permutations -- inform your vision of what literature will be in this country in the next ten or twenty years? What changes do you foresee?

I foresee an opening up of literature. For the longest time, we seem to have been in a fortress called the Western canon. It was a wonderful fortress and very solid, but it did not allow much change. It was somewhat like [saying] we live in a palace, we don't have electricity, still we live in a palace. It's time to rewire the structure, to allow for different ways of seeing and speaking. I cannot believe that anyone can still claim we are not enriched by having Toni Morrison or Louise Erdrich or Rudolfo Anaya or any voices like these added to the so-called canon.

What I think will happen is that a new generation of people, who are multi-racial and multi-ethnic (they are already appearing), people who speak standard English, who have gone through the educational process, but come from a multitude of cultures, will be creating a literature that will represent the true diversity of this country, not just pockets. These young kids, like my daughter and your children are going to be working together and communicating easily with each other, but they will be very aware that they are different in some ways.

That's my idealized view of the new literature that encompasses an easier acceptance of the certitude of diversity in the United States, much like my daughter doesn't get up in the morning and think, "I'm half-white and half-Puerto Rican. What shall I wear today?" But many days I had to get up, feeling I didnt want to go to school, dreading things [at school] that I didn't understand. As times change, I foresee an easier acceptance of difference and thus art and literature are going to represent the vision that, for example, salsa music is possible in the mainstream.

(from http://www.english.uga.edu/%7Ejcofer/lopezinterview.html)