

## Coming of Age and the Transnational Subject in the Works of Judith Ortiz Cofer

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Judith Ortiz Cofer is a multi-genre writer. She has published poetry and novels, short stories, essays, and a personal narrative recounting her own childhood and adolescence. She has also written stories and a novel for young adult audiences. Her work represents an attempt to reconcile a location of nostalgic longing and family history with the reality of being a Puerto Rican woman in the mainland United States. One of the most striking aspects of her work is the coherence of her themes, in spite of the different forms in which they are presented. She tells certain events and representative moments repeatedly in slightly different ways and from varying perspectives.<sup>1</sup> For example, her memoir *Silent Dancing* (1990) and her first novel *The Line of the Sun* (1989) relate very similar stories although one is presented as fiction and the other as non-fiction. The same incidents, characters, and dilemmas appear in these parallel works and also in her short stories and poetry. Ortiz Cofer explained her incorporation of clearly autobiographical material into fictional works by saying, "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 could call it a rite of passage" ("MELUS Interview" 85). Biculturalism is the very core of her identity, the foundation upon which she starts before she builds her narratives. Her later works such as the short story collection *An Island like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995) and the novel *Call Me María* (2004) present the same themes and similar narratives to a young adult target audience.

Ortiz Cofer was born in Puerto Rico and was two years old when her family left the island for New Jersey. Her work documents the disparity between several competing versions of Puerto Rico in the experiences of adolescent girls and the experiences of these fictional girls mirror Ortiz Cofer's experiences. For these young women, their constructions

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that young adult literature is necessarily didactic or less complex than works intended for adults. However, Ortiz Cofer states in the introduction to *Riding Low on the Streets of Gold*, an anthology of short stories for young adults written by Latino authors "we find an authentic human voice speaking in an accent the reader will recognize as familiar, guiding us down a path of knowledge through shared experiences" (vii) in the stories. While the emphasis is on authenticity and experience, the works are still intended to guide the young reader "down a path of knowledge" (vii). In addition, Pat Mora, a Chicana author who writes both children's and adult fiction, discusses her awareness of her "responsibility" to represent Latinos positively given the scarcity of Latino writers and protagonists in literature for young people.

of Puerto Rico are formed through the often exaggerated, idyllic stories their mothers tell about the old days, the Puerto Rican society that they experience during sporadic visits to the island, the subculture they experience in their ethnic Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New Jersey, and the ancestral homeland and source of identity that lives in their own imaginations. For them, visits to the island are loaded with a combination of their parents' expectations and their own adolescent projections and desires.

The term *home* is always over-determined when discussing literature by migrants, exiles, and immigrants. Furthermore, the very category of immigrants is problematic when discussing Ortiz Cofer and other writers in similar generational positions. In many cases, we do not really talk about the immigrants themselves, but about their children who were born and raised in the United States and who are linked inescapably to their parents' culture. These children of immigrants may have grown up in Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, or New Jersey, but they are marked by their cultural and physical distance from the dominant or mainstream American culture. Other children may have been born outside of the United States but were raised there and, thus, identify primarily with mainstream Anglo culture. While Puerto Rico is legally a part of the United States, I suggest that Puerto Ricans experience mainland United States culture in much the same way as immigrants from any Spanish-speaking country. In an interview with Ortiz Cofer, fellow Puerto Rican Rafael Ocasio said, "because of our American citizenship, few people think of Puerto Ricans as foreigners going through the same process as any newcomer to this country. But we have different cultures, different language, and different religions. We do go through the same process" ("Puerto Rican Literature" 48). Ortiz Cofer replied that the "psychological exile of the Puerto Rican is just as draining as political or economic exile" (48). In fact, Puerto Ricans may not go through the "same process" as other Caribbean or Latino immigrants, but they do go through a similar one that is further complicated by their in-between status as colonized citizens.

Youth and generational positioning are important factors in Ortiz Cofer's coming of age tales because, as children, her characters do not *choose* their status vis-à-vis the island. Instead, their status is a decision that is imposed on them by their parents and that reflects their parents' attitudes and affiliations more than the girls' attitudes and affiliations. According to her memoir, Ortiz Cofer returned to Puerto Rico as a child about every six months. Whenever her Navy father was sent overseas, her mother's immediate response to her husband's departure was to return to the island that she had never psychologically left with her two children as ambivalent traveling companions. For the semi-autobiographical characters in Ortiz Cofer's fiction, the journey back to the island fulfills at least three goals for the parents: (1) it maintains links to family, (2) encourages the children to speak Spanish, and (3) teaches them appropriate behavior within their culture (particularly appropriate gender roles). Although they love their extended Puerto Rican families, the girls in Ortiz Cofer's stories generally prefer to stay on the mainland in the culture they are working so hard to fit in.

The short story "Bad Influence" from the collection *An Island like You* is emblematic of these parental goals. This story is intended for a young adult audience, and, perhaps for

that reason, its themes are explicit and lead to a clean resolution.<sup>2</sup> Rita, the protagonist, is sent to Puerto Rico to live with her grandparents for the summer because she was caught with a boy. She explains, “dating is not a concept adults in our barrio really ‘get.’ It’s supposed to be that a girl meets a guy from the neighborhood, and their parents went to school together, and everybody knows everybody’s business” (8). Rita has stepped outside of her parents’ approved confines for dating and, therefore, must be taught that Puerto Rican girls, even those who live in New Jersey, must abide by a set of rules. Her parents give her the choice of attending a Catholic girl’s school or going to her grandparents for the summer. Presumably, in her parents’ eyes, the two choices will lead to the same goal: the reinforcement of the appropriate female sexual role and behavior. Reluctantly, Rita heads off to Puerto Rico. Rita’s grandfather is a seer who assists others in the town with their amorous and spiritual imbalances. He immediately observes, “you were dreaming about your boyfriend. . . . It was not a pleasant dream. No, I do not think it was *muy bueno*” (3). Although Rita does not become convinced of his abilities until later in the story (a sign of her increased investment in her grandparents’ world), his insight indicates that Rita’s parents were correct in separating her from her boyfriend. We later learn that Joey, the boyfriend of Rita’s best friend, and Johnny, her own boyfriend, had conspired to get the girls to spend the night at Joey’s house while his parents were out of town. Ortiz Cofer highlights the fact that Joey, unlike the other three teens, is not Puerto Rican. He, and the forces that represent a threat to the insular Puerto Rican mores of the neighborhood, are the “bad influences” referred to in the story’s title.

Rita’s stay in Puerto Rico has her parents’ desired effect on her. By the end of the story, she concludes that Johnny was indeed a *mala influencia*, or bad influence and “the whole thing with him and Joey Molieri, and the mess with Meli’s and my parents, began to seem like a movie I had seen a long time ago” (*Island* 23). The other unstated goals of her trip to Puerto Rico also reach a happy conclusion. At the beginning of the story, Rita is overwhelmed by her family members asking her “a million questions” in Spanish, which, she says, is “not my best language” (2). However by the end of the story, Rita communicates in Spanish with ease. Likewise, she now accepts cultural practices that had seemed alien to her, such as her grandparents’ spiritism. At the end of the story, she not only believes in their abilities, but also takes “medium lessons” from them (25). Most importantly, the trip has somehow eased the fraught passage through adolescence. For example, the asthma that had plagued her has disappeared, a sign of her improving emotional health. In addition, her mother comments on her glow and her tan. Rita’s darker skin acts as a symbolic marker for her increasing comfort with her ethnicity and her acceptance of non-Anglo standards of beauty.

In *Rethinking the American Mainstream*, sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee describe transnationalism as “an almost seamless connection between workaday lives in

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<sup>2</sup> Carmen Faymonville points out that “in an era when multiple identities have become more widely accepted and theorized, . . . mutually exclusionary choices between national alternatives appear no longer necessary or desirable. Like other recent writers of contemporary migration experiences, Ortiz Cofer finds it difficult to speak of any particular ‘national identity’ among the transnational identity positions a female migrant may assume” (129). While Ortiz Cofer and others like her may not have to choose between mutually exclusive and singular national identities, the “hybrid” identity that Faymonville and others signal is not always easily or comfortably achieved.

America and the origin society through a web of border-spanning cultural, social, and economic ties" (7). This "seamless connection" empowers the transnational subject economically, eliminates the need to establish a self that is single, stable, and nationalized, and allows for an identity that flows between places and cultures. This sort of transnational subject, like Rita, would not be forced to reject his or her ties to the homeland but could utilize them in the construction of an identity that is both more balanced and more fluid. Rita seems to be the embodiment of transnationalism in its most optimistic incarnation. She represents an opening of national boundaries that permits social, economic, and cultural links between the country of residence and the country of origin.

Seldom is transnationalism so easy, however. Establishing a fluid, transnational identity is not a straightforward process. Most literary representations of the transnational subject, including others by Ortiz Cofer, reflect the difficulty in establishing seamless connections, particularly for second, third, and later generation immigrants. As other critics have made clear, many immigrants (particularly illegal ones and political refugees) do not have the ability to go "home again." Even those like Rita in "Bad Influence," who fall into the gap between cultures, find they belong to both cultures and to neither culture at the same time.

The notion of a transnational identity or a sort of global citizen is not as new or as salutary as its current popularity might lead one to believe. However, in recent decades, the ease and speed with which *some* immigrants and migrants can undertake this "free and mobile passage" has changed as well as increased public pressure within the mainstream to pay lip service to the idea of a pluralist, diverse, and multicultural population. In her 2006 book, *Alienhood: Citizenship, Exile, and the Logic of Difference*, Katarzyna Marciniak makes a strong case that "for many exiles coded as aliens, especially illegal aliens, transnational positionality is an unattainable space of privilege" (34). She takes issue with Leo R. Chavez's description of transnational immigrants as "people who maintain social linkages back in the home country; they are not bounded by national borders, and their multiple identities are situated in communities that cross nations" (qtd. in Marciniak 34). Marciniak makes the point that "social linkages" and "multiple identities" are not so readily accessible to many already marginalized immigrants. Even for those like Rita and Ortiz Cofer's other protagonists who enjoy a relatively privileged position (they are not illegal; their parents have sufficient economic resources to travel back and forth to Puerto Rico; they are fluent in English), the process of forging a transnational identity may not be as "seamless" as Rita's positive experience would lead us to believe.

The notions of multiculturalism and transnationalism may go in and out of acceptance. However, to a large degree, any widespread tolerance and appreciation of ethnic and cultural otherness is a myth, and immigrants face enormous demands to assimilate. The strain of adolescence (the overwhelming desire to fit in as well as the grinding burden of peer pressure and the media's glorification of a white ideal) magnify these demands. While adolescent boys face their own particular challenges, the pressures of body image, beauty, and sexuality are heightened for girls. In addition, the role of gender development is linked intimately to ethnicity and ethnic otherness is always sexually charged to some degree.

For example, in the introduction to *Passing Lines: Sexuality and Immigration*, the editors point out the "increasingly significant, if still relatively little studied, interplays of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and sexuality in migratory movements and national formations" (Epps, Valens, and Johnson González 6). They go on to discuss the particular legacy of

colonial racial and sexual projections for Caribbean and Latin American immigrants (8). The figure of the sexualized Latin woman holds a particular place in the mainstream psyche, a topic that Ortiz Cofer discusses in essays like “The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María” from the collection *The Latin Deli* (1993). She writes of “the Hispanic woman as the ‘Hot Tamale’ or sexual firebrand. It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote. In their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated ‘sizzling’ and ‘smoldering’ as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America” (150). This overly sexualized notion of the Latin or Caribbean woman presents what may be the biggest challenge for the girls in Ortiz Cofer’s works as they move back and forth between the island and the mainland, both literally and figuratively, and between the two or more versions of sexuality and gender that each represents.

If we return to the stated goals of (re-)connecting to Puerto Rico for the adolescent girl, other autobiographical and fictional works by Ortiz Cofer lack the neat resolution of “Bad Influence.” In adult fiction like *The Line of the Sun*, in her autobiographical essays in *The Latin Deli*, and in her memoir *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer expresses a much more ambivalent stance toward the transnational status of her characters and herself than in “Bad Influence.” For the young women in these works, the process of becoming a Puerto Rican-American woman is not seamless and fluid, but ambivalent and undecided.

In *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer describes regular childhood trips to her grandmother’s house in Puerto Rico contrasted with her “normal” life in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New Jersey. Her parents adopted opposing attitudes toward assimilation: her father was proud of his light skin, refused to talk about Puerto Rico, and was pleased when people mistook his accent for European. He insisted on sending the children to a school outside of the neighborhood and eventually moved the family out of the barrio. Her mother represented the opposite extreme: she longed for home continually, and tried to create a faux microcosm of Puerto Rico in their apartment. Ortiz Cofer wrote, “Mother lapsed into silence herself, suffering from *La Tristeza*, the sadness that only place induces and only place cures” (*Silent* 61). The children were caught between these poles, and, early on, learned to accommodate their mother’s nostalgia and their father’s upwardly mobile, assimilationist ambitions. Teresa Derrickson discusses the two worlds that Ortiz Cofer’s parents represent. Derrickson claims that, in Ortiz Cofer’s memoir, she does not find a way to mesh the competing strategies into a happy transnational whole. Instead, the dichotomies persist, and “the effect of this reality . . . is to disallow the occurrence of a middle ground, to preclude the possibility of a singular space where cultures might intersect and combine” (128). While I would say that Ortiz Cofer does find that space, however uneasily occupied it may be, I agree that its negotiation is intricate and never fully resolved.

Because of her mother’s homesickness, Ortiz Cofer’s family traveled to Puerto Rico whenever her father was away on duty in the Navy. As she grew older and more invested in American mainland culture, the adolescent Ortiz Cofer saw the trips as interruptions that took her away from her “real” life. She wrote in *Silent Dancing*, “At fifteen, resentful of having once again been yanked from my environment of Paterson, New Jersey—which I thought I was beginning to conquer with my growing mastery of its rules—I felt smothered by the familial press of Mamá’s house” (132).

Language is also a source of tension. As a young child, Ortiz Cofer found that she was not at home in either Spanish or English. She resisted going to school in Puerto Rico, claiming that her Spanish was not good enough, but then found the transition back to English no easier: "Though I had learned some English at home during my first years in Paterson, I had let it recede deep into my memory while learning Spanish in Puerto Rico. Once again I was the child in the cloud of silence, the one who had to be spoken to in sign language as if she were a deaf mute" (*Silent* 62). Even as an adult, she has said that Spanish is the language of family but English is the language of school and academic and literary discourse. Rather than a seamless connection, the two languages represent different spheres: mother/father, island/home, private/public. This dichotomy resonates particularly clearly because, as a writer, Ortiz Cofer must choose her language, and this choice cannot be without its political implications.

For Ortiz Cofer's girls who are perpetually in transit between Puerto Rico and the mainland, we see the opposition between the two cultures most clearly in issues of gender and sex roles. In fact, her characters contend with at least three competing versions of womanhood: mainstream United States as represented by the Anglo girls in her high school, Puerto Rican womanhood as learned on the island, and Puerto Rican womanhood as experienced in New Jersey. In the novel *The Line of the Sun*, Ortiz Cofer's adolescent protagonist, Marisol, fantasizes about an Edenic Puerto Rico from her family's stories. She then contrasts this idealized society with the less than paradisiacal Puerto Rican neighborhood where she lives in Paterson. Marisol's Puerto Rico and the island of family lore are very different. In the family's version, it is the tropical paradise that only a nostalgic longing can create. For Marisol it is a source of excitement, confusion, embarrassment, and ostracism. Puerto Rico is the land of her birth, but a land that she can remember only through the stories of others. The Puerto Ricans that she knows are not the peaceful, spiritual island dwellers of family legend, but they are the less than mythical neighbors in "El Building." Marisol does not feel at home in "El Building" for several reasons. First, her father's Navy job puts them in a higher socio-economic class than their neighbors. Second, she is a smart and studious girl who goes to a private school where she and her brother Gabriel are the only Puerto Ricans. Third, she is highly conscious of the stigma attached to being Puerto Rican once she is outside of the relative safety of the neighborhood. The only Puerto Ricans that Marisol has experienced are the very human relatives and family members who fail to live up to the idealized fantasy that she has created. *The Line of the Sun* is an attempt to reconcile these two Puerto Ricos.

Just as Ortiz Cofer describes her own parents in *Silent Dancing*, Marisol's mother and father represent conflicting approaches to assimilation. The fears and weaknesses of her parents contribute to Marisol's growing confusion about her place in the Puerto Rican society and the American one. Her mother, Ramona, wins the battle of the wills and the family stays in "El Building." However, they are never able to incorporate themselves fully into its social structure. Her father, Rafael, intent on separating himself from the other immigrants, shows an almost phobic disdain toward island traditions. While their neighbors all shop at the neighborhood *mercado*, Rafael insists on driving his family to a distant American grocery store. He buys enormous quantities of Christmas presents for the children, which he insists that they open on December 25 rather than on January 6. Their very excess embarrasses the other family members. Although Rafael showers his family

with gifts like a good materialistic American, Ramona hides her dresses and jewelry so as not to make her friends uncomfortable. The most significant distancing move that Rafael makes is his refusal to send his children to public school. Instead of sending Marisol and Gabriel to the local public school, he enrolls them at St. Jerome's, a Catholic school where they are the only Puerto Rican students. The walk to school is a daily trauma for the children.

Rafael "had escaped the brunt of racial prejudice only because of his fair skin and his textbook English, which sounded formal as a European's. His wife and daughter, both olive-skinned and black-haired, were a different matter altogether" (*Line* 170). They are branded as different by their skin color, by their very awareness of this difference, and by their resultant fear and enforced humility. Marisol describes her mother as "a human billboard advertising her paranoia in a foreign language" (174).

In the clash between the cultures of her birth and her residence, Marisol ends up feeling at home in neither. She does not fit in with the students at St. Jerome's because of her Puerto Rican background and the stigma attached to living in "El Building." At school, she pretends that she comes from a "normal home," but she knows that she does not. Her mother's loud clothing, wild hair, and inability to speak English embarrass her. She is also keenly aware that the Puerto Rican community does not completely accept her family. They are branded as different because of their relative economic security and because of Rafael's insistence on adopting American ways. Social class proves to be as divisive a marker as ethnicity when the family's middle class aspirations become a source of resentment in their working class neighborhood.

Both Marisol and Gabriel seek an escape from the conflict of their lives. While she describes the adults as existing in a state of "blithe schizophrenia" (*Line* 232), Marisol cannot dwell so easily in both worlds when she feels herself to be a part of neither. The children seek their outlet in learning. The nuns' darlings, they excel in school and spend their spare time escaping into the world of fiction. She says, "I went to school enveloped in the light of another world. There I was petted and praised by the nuns for my good grades and my humble demeanor, which was nothing more than fear of being exposed for the total alien I felt myself to be in that environment of discipline and order" (232).

In contrast to Rita in "Bad Influence," Marisol (like Ortiz Cofer herself) does not come to a comfortable resolution about her place in the Spanish language in *The Line of the Sun*. The question of language seems to be less problematic for Marisol than the question of sexuality and gender. Almost no Spanish appears in the novel, and Ortiz Cofer translates the few phrases that appear promptly. Little reference is made to the characters' use of Spanish versus English. Ortiz Cofer mentions that, while in Puerto Rico, Rafael learns English and, after coming to the United States, addresses the children in English. The children apparently feel more at home in the language of their adopted land. However, Ramona says, "I will never learn English, Rafael. It's too strange" (*Line* 167). She never does. Insulated by the Spanish-speaking community of "El Building" and with her husband and children to serve as interpreters, she does not have to learn the language. At the end of the novel, Marisol comes to a decision, realizing that she is more comfortable with the world of English, and the power that she feels in it. After a fire destroys "El Building," Marisol is forced to act as interpreter and mediator for her mother, a role that she resents but has become accustomed to serving. She realizes,

I learned something during those days: though I would always carry my Island heritage on my back like a snail, I belonged in the world of phones, offices, concrete buildings, and the English language. I felt truly victorious when I understood the hidden motives in my conversations with adults, when they suddenly saw that I understood. (273)

For Marisol, one of the most disturbing and confusing aspects of life in “El Building” is the sexual behavior of its residents. While “El Building” symbolizes the security of community for her mother, for Marisol it symbolizes intimidation and discomfort, particularly the “El Basement” where the men hold court. She finds their macho posturing intimidating and embarrassing, preferring instead to worship Italian boys at school from a safe distance. Not only does she find the men’s sexuality threatening, so is the women’s, particularly that of her mother. Her mother’s youth and beauty both embarrass and intrigue Marisol. She says, “She was what I would have looked like if I hadn’t worn my hair in a tight braid, if I had allowed myself to sway when I walked, and if I had worn loud colors and had spoken only Spanish” (*Line* 220).

The shame caused by Marisol’s mother’s loud clothing, wild hair, and sexy walk is echoed in Ortiz Cofer’s other works. In *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer describes her mother’s “Latin beauty, her thick black hair that hung to her waist, her voluptuous body that even winter clothes could not disguise” as a “hindrance” to her father’s attempts at assimilation (60). Her mother’s bright red dress and stiletto heels, out of place in the gray cold of New Jersey, served as a reminder of her sexuality and her inability to adapt to middle-class New Jersey social mores.

Even as an adult, Ortiz Cofer contrasts her own somber professional wardrobe to that of her mother: “she dresses in tropical colors—a red skirt and parakeet yellow blouse look good on her tanned skin, and she still has a good enough figure that she can wear a tight black cocktail dress to go dancing” (*Latin* 120). In Ortiz Cofer’s work, the exotic beauty and flashy clothing of their mothers are not a source of pride to the young girls. Striving to fit in, they are embarrassed by the attention their mothers attract for both their sexiness and their *difference*, which go hand in hand. Precisely how to define oneself as a Latina, in either New Jersey or Puerto Rico, is a source of continual confusion for these adolescents who are just becoming aware of sex and its powers. In *The Line of the Sun*, Marisol prefers not to identify as a Latin woman at all, opting to avoid sexuality through her studiousness. Other characters are drawn to their Puerto Rican heritage, but are wary of adopting it wholeheartedly. A large part of the confusion that Ortiz Cofer expresses about Latina identity is due to the very contradictions inherent in that concept. Should a girl believe the sexual messages of her mother’s red dress and swaying walk or her lessons about what “good girls” can and cannot do? Should she accept the mainstream stereotype of the earthy, sensual Latin beauty or the Catholic school nuns’ unyielding views on sexual purity?

As with the other lessons of Puerto Rico, the role of a Puerto Rican woman is handed down orally by the women in the family. In *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer writes of her mother, aunts, and grandmother, “teaching each other and my cousin and me what it was like to be a woman, more specifically, a Puerto Rican woman” (14). What it *was* like to be a Puerto Rican woman was simultaneously alluring and distasteful. Her grandmother’s stories told of women’s often-unseen power over their husbands, children, and communities. However, the older women also told her about constrained choices. For example, her mother taught

her that “if you did not get married, you became a nun, or you entered ‘la vida’ as a prostitute. Of course there were some professions a woman could practice—nurse, teacher—until you found a man to marry. The worse fate was to end up alone” (134).

For a teenager brought up in the United States, and particularly for one who excelled at academic pursuits, these limitations were difficult to accept. Perhaps even more difficult were the contradictions between what she saw as embarrassing displays of sexuality and the rigid control exercised over women’s actual sexuality: the distance between appearance and practice. In the poem “The Way My Mother Walked,” Ortiz Cofer refers to her mother’s walk as “the Morse code of her stiletto heels sending / their Mayday-but-do-not-approach into / darkened doorways where eyes hung like mobiles in the breeze” (*Silent* 94). In the story where she describes her mother’s tight black cocktail dress, she tells of the scolding that her mother gave her when she was caught kissing a boy in high school. “A cheap item,” her mother said, “a girl begins to look like one when she allows herself to be *handled* by men” (*Latin* 126). Therefore, a woman may *appear* sexy while actually being pure, but may not *be* sexy without crossing an invisible line.

Of course, it is an appealing idea that a woman is judged by what she actually does rather than what she looks like, but this is not the way of the larger world. Several of Ortiz Cofer’s stories tell of adolescent crushes on non-Latin boys that are nipped in the bud by the prejudices of the boys’ parents. Most disturbing is that this notion of exotic sensuality reduces the Latin woman to targets for Anglo men’s insults. These insults are usually disguised as flirtatiousness. For example, they call Ortiz Cofer “María,” regale her with off-key lines from “Evita,” and offer sexual innuendos that she believes they would never direct to an Anglo woman.

However, these men and the Anglo society at large do not seem to understand that the Catholic Church and centuries of tradition exert rigorous control over Latin women’s sexuality. The rules of the game are that appearance and behavior are two very different things. She writes:

. . . as a teenager I was instructed on how to behave as a proper señorita. But it was a conflicting message girls got, since the Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes our Anglo friends and their mothers found too ‘mature’ for our age. It was, and is, cultural, yet I always felt humiliated when I appeared at an American friend’s party wearing a dress more suitable to a semiformal than to a playroom birthday celebration. (*Latin* 149)

At least in her mother’s mind, interaction between the sexes is governed by a clear set of regulations: a woman may dress to be admired, and the men may express admiration through *piropos* and flirtatious comments, but the game stops there. There is a degree of safety in this implicit agreement between men and women since the women are free to express their sexuality without the fear of physical violence. Ortiz Cofer describes it as the ‘traditions, mores, and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality whose main rule was: *You may look at my sister, but if you touch her, I will kill you*’ (150).

Unfortunately, these rules do not apply in Paterson, New Jersey or in an Anglo society as a whole. Perhaps, they are another example of her mother’s overly nostalgic memories of the island. The young women that Ortiz Cofer creates suffer the worst of both worlds: the mainland culture views them as overly sexualized hothouse flowers while their strict

Puerto Rican families prohibit even seemingly innocent teen-aged relationships. As a result, her characters are confused about their sexuality and are unsure of how or whether to express it. They are not in Puerto Rico and so the old rules have been suspended, but they can never escape from being seen as Puerto Rican with all of its attendant stereotypes and prejudices.

The girls end up in a shakily negotiated space between these competing cultures. They are viewed as white girls when they are in Puerto Rico, but as Latin girls on the mainland. Ironically, each culture casts the other as more sexually permissive. As Ortiz Cofer said in an interview, “the kinds of things 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*” (“MELUS Interview” 89). Rather than being portrayed as something that they are not, her characters (and her autobiographical self) retreat into books, academic achievement, and safe, chaste crushes. In most of Ortiz Cofer’s stories, the neat resolution that we saw in the story “Bad Influence” does not come about. Instead, the young woman who returns to the United States after her visit to the island is not more comfortable with her identity as a Latina than when she went to the island. Instead, she finds she is now no longer comfortable in either society. As I mentioned earlier, this major difference between “Bad Influence” and Ortiz Cofer’s other works could be because of the intended audience. If young adult literature is intended to help guide adolescents through the minefield of the passage into adulthood, then a vision of healthy young woman who is comfortable with her dual cultural position seems more heartening than a vision of a young woman who is fragmentized, alienated, and confused.

One reason for the tension in these coming of age narratives is the fact that they are stories of children raised primarily in the United States. It seems logical that transnational ties are harder and harder to maintain the farther removed one is from the place of origin. Alba and Nee write that the second and third generations of immigrants “are far more enmeshed in the American environment than is the immigrant generation and, in most cases, lack the ‘thick’ connections to the places and people in the homeland that are necessary for transnationalism to be viable.” They go on to predict that this “mode of incorporation is likely to remain confined to modest portions of the United States-born generations, as was true for earlier European and Asian immigrants” (276).

The uneasy negotiation that we see in many of Ortiz Cofer’s works is consistent with Homi Bhabha’s descriptions of “double lives” and the anxiety of the in-between. Bhabha’s concept of “unhomeliness,” which descends from Freud’s uncanny, fits well with Ortiz Cofer’s discomfort.<sup>3</sup> The in-between, the hybrid, the strange, and the contingent describe the “place” that Ortiz Cofer constructs for herself through her writing. Precisely through her writing, she is able to accommodate the many evolving versions of Puerto Rican womanhood that she has experienced. Even as an adult, she says:

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

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<sup>3</sup> For Bhabha, the unhomely is “a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition” (13) that allows for moments of revelatory hybridity. In this mode, “private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy . . . that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed” (19).

island. . . . 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 world either. ("MELUS Interview" 91-92)

As an adult, she can make her own choices about where "home" is located and where to situate herself. She may be caught between often competing identifications but this does not have to be a paralyzing position.<sup>4</sup> For Ortiz Cofer, the "location of culture" is determined by the act of writing.<sup>5</sup> She writes in English, but in an English that is inflected with Spanish syntax and idioms. As a result, she has received some criticism from both sides of the linguistic divide: some Anglo critics have taken issue with her non-standard English while some Puerto Rican writers and critics have questioned her intended audience and authenticity. To these critics, Ortiz Cofer responded that the decision to write in Spanish-inflected English was a complex one dependent primarily on her own comfort in literary English as opposed to her more "familiar" Spanish (Faymonville 134). In another interview, she said, "if I could, I would write in Spanish" ("MELUS Interview" 90).<sup>6</sup>

Other Latino writers also struggle with the decision to write in English, a choice that personal factors and market pressures often necessitates. Junot Díaz opens his collection of short stories, *Drown*, with this epigraph from Gustavo Pérez Firmat:

The fact that I  
am writing to you in English  
already falsifies what I  
wanted to tell you.  
My subject:  
how to explain to you that I don't belong to English  
though I belong nowhere else. (1)

Díaz writes in English, as Pérez Firmat himself often does, with considerable reflection on the impact of that choice.<sup>7</sup> Frances R. Aparicio includes Ortiz Cofer in a group of Latino writers who write in English, but whose ideal reader is bilingual. Aparicio describes the language of these writers as "tropicalized," as Spanish erupts through their English in a

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<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to Carlos Fuentes, another bilingual writer, who titled his acceptance speech for the Cervantes Prize "My homeland is the Spanish language" (qtd. in Sefamí 8). Ortiz Cofer establishes her own "homeland" in a place that is neither clearly English nor Spanish.

<sup>5</sup> My use of the terms "location of culture" comes from Bhabha's book *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>6</sup> This position is echoed in the works of other Latino writers. For example, Lucía Suárez wrote of Julia Alvarez: "How can she speak as a *Dominicana* if the geographic position she has occupied most of her life is the United States and her writing is all in English? Even though the Dominican Republic claims Alvarez, as do the Latina/o communities in the United States, she is haunted in unexpected ways by the dilemma of which identity she really should embrace. This is the plight of being a hyphenated person: she is both, none, and sometimes one in the United States and another in the Dominican Republic" (126).

<sup>7</sup> In a 2008 interview, Pérez Firmat described some of the conflicts occasioned by his choice of language for a particular work: "I don't think of myself as a Cuban or American or Cuban-American writer, but rather as a Cuban who sometimes writes in English and, at other times, writes in Spanish. And it's always the language I'm not writing that is my home. I can't write in English without missing the Spanish that is missing. I can't write in Spanish without missing the English that is missing. . . . I think you'll agree that most one-and-a-halfers write mostly in English, for both practical and existential reasons. In fact, Latino literature has become an English-only zone. The use of Spanish in Latino fiction or poetry tends to be ornamental, a dash of spice or *un brochazo* [a brushstroke] of local color" (113).

linguistic cross-colonization (796). Spanish syntax, vocabulary, and idiom clearly influence their English and only a bilingual reader can truly appreciate the cross-references and cultural nuances.

In the interviews she has given and in her essays, Ortiz Cofer is open about her isolation from the larger Puerto Rican community, which is compounded by the facts that she writes in English and that her literary influences are more likely to come from the American South than from South America ("Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer" 5). She stated that, because her academic education was in English, "I did not have any models from my native language and generation, so I can't say that they influenced me. I had to invent myself as a Puerto Rican writer" (6). The "invention" of herself as a Puerto Rican writer who writes in English is an act that incorporates her past and her present and establishes her in a unique position. In another interview, she said, "an artist is always an outcast, anyway" ("MELUS Interview" 88). The community she consciously forges through literature counters her isolation as an artist, as a Hispanic woman who writes in English, and as a Puerto Rican living in rural Georgia. "I have shelves and shelves of books by writers who are as 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" ("Puerto Rican Literature" 47). Like her characters, the writer hid in books as an adolescent in order to avoid the challenges of her back- and forth- existence. As an adult, literature is not just a refuge but also is an intermediary and a means to connect with that very hybridity. Ortiz Cofer said, "because I've lived physically isolated from the Puerto Rican community, my poetry has kept me connected emotionally" ("Speaking in Puerto Rican" 144). She frequently invokes Virginia Woolf and *A Room of One's Own*. The gendered space of that physical and metaphorical room is the place where Ortiz Cofer establishes her own version of Puerto Ricanness. She links Woolf's creative space with her grandmother's in the essay "More Room" in *Silent Dancing*. She cites her barely literate grandmother as one of her literary influences because her grandmother's powerful storytelling forged many of her own images of family and of Puerto Rican culture. The linking of Woolf and her grandmother is an indication of situating herself in a place in-between, one that is bounded by words and creation, not by geographical space or time.

Ortiz Cofer's struggle to create an identity through the act of writing echoes the paths of many of her characters. They are often smart, bookish girls who cannot accept any of the versions of Latina womanhood that are thrust upon them. Instead, they craft an unsteady place for themselves through language, reading, and writing. The fact that different works by the same author illustrate opposing views of the transnational subject and the interplay between cultures demonstrates the enormous complexity and diversity of such positions, particularly when the strains of adolescent sexuality play a role. The transnational, hybrid self that we see in "Bad Influence" is fluid while those we see in *Silent Dancing* and *The Line of the Sun* are more fragmented. Neither is more real or true, but the tension between these two versions illustrates the fact that while travel and communication may have made transnational ties easier to maintain, they do not necessarily translate into an easy or seamless passage between cultures for immigrants or their children. An ongoing connection with the "homeland" through trips, relationships with family members, or the creation of stories might not result in a more fluid or more comfortable identity. In the case of Ortiz Cofer, though, it does lead to an understanding of herself as a Puerto Rican woman

and, more importantly, as a Puerto Rican woman writer who manages to combine past and present, here and there.

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