

Judith Ortiz Cofer's (Re)creations of Community in the Puerto Rican

Diaspora

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Introduction:

Judith Ortiz Cofer's narratives are filled with descriptions of the spaces in the small Puerto Rican town called Homigueros and also of the urban areas of Patterson, N.J. (which is a suburb of New York City). She spent her adolescence moving back and forth between the two places and in many of the stories included in the collections: *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, *The Latin Deli: Women from the Barrio*, and her novel, *The Line of the Sun*, she depicts young girls who exist in similar circumstances. Her detailed portrayals of these spaces show that despite this constant displacement during her childhood (or perhaps because of it), her sense of community is connected to these places.

This non-stop movement between the Island and the mainland is a significant part Puerto Rican life. Many Puerto Ricans live in both places for economic and social reasons and feel connected in some way to each one. Jorge Duany refers to this movement of people between Puerto Rico and other spaces as "la nación en vaivén" (the nation that comes and goes) or in his own translation a "nation on the move." Duany notes that Puerto Rican migration is best visualized as a transient and pendulous flow rather than as a permanent, irrevocable, one-way relocation of people" (2). However, he notes that, the Puerto Rican "sense of peoplehood has proven remarkably resilient" (3). Ortiz Cofer's "sense of peoplehood" is based on this concept of cultural similarities that maintain an idea of community and by (re)creating her experiences as a Puerto Rican girl

in the U.S. she connects to herself, to her family and in turn to the Puerto Rican community.

Because I've lived physically isolated from the Puerto Rican community, my poetry has kept me connected emotionally. Even though I live in rural Georgia, my husband is North American, and my daughter was born here, I feel connected to the island and to my heritage. [...] When the novel was published my mother said, "Everybody is amazed that you write as if you've been here all your life." In a sense I have been connected through my imagination. It's like having a child who is away. You don't stop loving them. My poetry is my emotional and intellectual connection to my heritage. (Ocasio 144)

Her stories about New Jersey link her to the Puerto Rican community in the diaspora. The descriptions of a tenement structure called *El building* and its Puerto Rican residents seem personal, although, she admits "I never lived in a tenement called "*El building*." But an "*El building* was central to the Puerto Rican life of Patterson, New Jersey, so in order to better understand my life there I had to write about it..." (Acosta Belen 90). She was part of a massive migration of Puerto Ricans to New York and the surrounding areas which marked the beginnings of a conceptualization of Puerto Rican identity existing outside the Island. As Ana Celia Zentella notes, "the community that grew from 60,000 in 1945 to 610,000 in 1960 shook up and reshaped Puerto Rico and New York and Spanish and English, creating strong but often disparaged blends of language and identity" (23). Ortiz Cofer's young narrator/protagonist often moves from

Puerto Rico and New Jersey and fails to assimilate to either place. She feels rejected by each community on some level and cannot be herself in any of the spaces.

By inscribing the Puerto Rican community's presence in the New Jersey neighborhoods, Ortiz Cofer (and other writers from these generations) challenges traditional definitions of nation and community. The spaces that she (re)creates exist outside traditional geographical delineations. As Benedict Anderson notes in his much quoted work *Imagined Communities*, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). He points out that imagination and creation are a significant part of community building. Ortiz Cofer focuses on the role of imagination and creativity in fashioning her stories. She classifies her works, which include poetry, short stories, essays and novels, as creative non-fiction and in the preface to *Silent Dancing*, she explains how she turns her memories into literature: "Much of my writing begins as a meditation of past events. But memory for me is the "jumping off" point. I am not in my poetry and fiction writing, a slave to memory [...] The past is mainly a creation of imagination also" (12).

As Marisol Moreno notes, in "More Room: Space, Woman and Nation in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*," Ortiz Cofer "addresses the complexities of this process and suggests that storytelling is the ultimate source of female empowerment" (444). This feminist approach to the concept of 'space' created by one's imagination is emphasized by Ortiz Cofer's frequent examples of the ways in which her mature protagonist and the grandmother share this space. By telling their *cuentos*, they create a space in which to escape from a dominant patriarchal society. Her grandmother tells stories about others in the *pueblo*, whereas many of Ortiz Cofer's stories have

autobiographical elements. However, the two styles are mixed together in “Tales Told Under the Mango Tree” and her grandmother’s tales becomes the basis for her own reflection.

In the four “physical” spaces in most of her stories, the family’s apartment, the apartment building (*el Building*), school, and *la Casa de Mamá* in Puerto Rico, the young protagonists find distinct cultural norms and learn the dynamics of being part of a “nation on the move.” These protagonists feel that they must adapt and behave in a distinct way in each of them and often find the conflicting cultural norms confusing. For instance, in the family’s apartment, the young protagonist is expected to be a traditional Puerto Rican *señorita* and speak Spanish; however, in the spaces of *el Building*, where Spanglish is spoken, the neighbors have a sense of community in exile and they embrace the idea of being part of two places. In school, the protagonist confronts traditional U.S. cultural norms (mainly performed by Irish, Italians, and Jewish students) and is often treated as an “Other.” The fourth space, Puerto Rico, is a mystical island filled with story-tellers, spiritists, and witches. The protagonists feel at home most of the time, but are occasionally made to feel alien because of their “gringo” accents and customs.

Casa: cultural schizophrenia

In the story entitled “The Looking Glass Shame,” the protagonist compares the doorstep of her apartment to a political border which separates the New Jerseyan and the Puerto Rican parts of her life. The apartment is the mother’s domain and it is the place where the narrator feels most confined and conflicted. The mother’s dominant presence is due to the father’s job in the U.S. Navy which results in his frequent deployment. The insular world her mother creates in the apartment forces the narrator to take on the role of

an old-fashioned Puerto Rican *señorita* and be more *humilde* (soft-spoken, non-confrontational): “At home my mother constantly reminded me that I was now a ‘señorita’ and needed to behave accordingly; but she never explained exactly what that entailed” (*Silent* 125). The mother tries to preserve the island customs for her daughter the same way she does for herself--- by maintaining minimal contact with the world outside. Her daughter, however, is too aware of U.S. culture to ignore her experiences and she does not share her mother’s longing to return to the island.

Her mother’s beliefs in more traditional ideas of “womanhood” and her refusal to make a life for herself in New Jersey are not difficult for her because she considers her time in the U.S. as a temporary interruption to her life in Puerto Rico.

My mother carried the island of Puerto Rico over her head like the mantilla she wore to church on Sundays. She was “doing time” in the U.S. She did not know how long her sentence would last, or why she was being punished with exile, but she was only doing it for her children. She kept herself “pure” for her eventual return to the island by denying herself a social life (which would have connected her too much with the place); by never learning but the most basic survival English; and by her ability to create an environment in our home that was a comfort to her, but a shock to my senses, and I suppose, to my younger brother’s, both of having to enter and exit this twilight zone of sights and smells that meant *casa* to her. (127)

Her mother makes a conscious decision to make sure that her daughter's life is similar to her own experiences of growing up. She is completely dedicated to "non-assimilation" and she follows her own mother's example of parenting.

Most of my mother's sentences began with *En Casa* ...: at her Mama's house things were done like this or like that. At any place other than her beloved *Isla* my mother would have been homesick: perpetual nostalgia, constant talk of return, that was my mother's chosen method of survival. (127-8).

In the small space of their apartment in Patterson the mother tries to create "a carefully constructed facsimile" of this casa where all of one's senses were bombarded with things related to Puerto Rico.

In our apartment we spoke Spanish, we ate rice and beans with meats prepared in adobo, that mouth-watering mixture of spices, and we listened to romantic ballads sung by Daniel Santos. She read letters from her family in Puerto Rico and from my father. (127)

The Puerto Rican singer, Daniel Santos, was a particularly significant figure for many exiles. His nostalgic songs such as "Despedida" and "El último adiós" reflect the lamentations of the people who long to return. Santos was a popular nationalist figure whose patriotic music and "life as a drug addict was the stuff of legend" (*Silent* 94).

Additionally, there are numerous descriptions of Puerto Rican food in these stories. In "Silent Dancing", the narrator notes that food is the one aspect of her life in which her mother does not succumb to her father's wishes. She obeys her husband's rules of not associating with the other Puerto Ricans of *El Building*, but she refuses to shop in

the large supermarket and insists that “she could cook only with products whose labels she could read”(91). They shop at *La Bodega* and buy the brands that can be found in Puerto Rico.

As the mature narrator of “Silent Dancing” watches a movie, she is reminded of the smells of the food that she associates with home, family and the holidays.

But what I remember most were the boiled *pasteles*- boiled until the plantain or yucca rectangles stuffed with corned beef or other meats, olives, and many other savory ingredients. All wrapped up in banana leaves. (*Silent* 91)

The movies bring back other memories and remind this narrator of how food is part of the memories that connect her to the Island and how real “sensory details such a gathering left imprinted on a child’s brain” (*Silent* 68) can seem.

However, even as an adolescent she realizes that her mother’s nostalgia causes her to attempt something impossible. She doesn’t want to be a *señorita* in Patterson, N.J. She feels the need to fit in with her classmates and it often seems that she is acting out a role and not allowed to be herself.

We [her brother] led a dual existence: speaking Spanish at home with her, acting out our parts in her traditional play, while also daily pretending assimilation in the classroom, where in the early sixties there was no such thing as bilingual education. (*Silent* 152)

It is not until she is grown up that she comprehends that she is being exposed to conflicting messages of culture. She is often confused by the ideas she sees on the

television and at school and realizes that adolescence is difficult even without the problems of living in more than one culture.

Even as I dealt with the trauma of leaving childhood, I saw that cultural schizophrenia” was undoing many others around me at different stages of their lives. Society gives you clues and provides rituals for the adolescent but withholds support. (*Silent* 124)

Being forced to adhere to her mother’s rules in the apartment adds to the typical anxieties of the experiences of growing up.

El Building: community and hybridity

In “Silent Dancing,” the protagonist knows that her father wants the family to have a new life in the U.S. and get away from the influences of the neighborhood, but they are part of the Puerto Rican community and are rejected by the “americanos.” Her father wants them to live in a quieter place but is told that he is not welcome. As a result, “It became my father’s obsession to get out of the barrio, and thus we were never permitted to form bonds with the place or with the people who lived there” (*Silent* 90). The mother however, is more comfortable in *El Building* because she is surrounded by Spanish-speaking people. Her father cannot prevent his children from being influenced by the other residents and his attempted isolation has little effect. The residents of *El building* are in a similar situation and there are too many communal spaces (such as the hallways and *el basement*) to avoid personal interaction. The narrator frequently points out that they were slightly better off than the factory workers, but the other residents of *El Building* become a part of their life and they join the community: “The only thing

money could not buy us was a place to live away from the barrio- his greatest wish and my mother's greatest fear" (*Silent* 92).

El building is a physical space where the shared experiences create bonds. For these exiled Puerto Ricans, the new spaces became their home. Puerto Rico becomes a place that they are linked to by ancestry and family connections, but not a place to which they necessarily aspire to return. Their daily experiences in the city spaces give meaning to their everyday life. For instance, when the character called Corazón in the story called "Corazón's Café" thinks about *el building* and its people, she realizes that for her it means something more than a concrete structure.

It had vida. It was filled with the life energies of generations of other Island people; the stairs sagged from the weight of their burdens, and the walls had absorbed the smells of their food. *El building* had become their country now. (*Latin* 93)

El building is a place that is both harmonious and chaotic and is the center of this exiled community.

At almost any hour of the day, *El building* was like a monstrous jukebox, blasting out salsas from open windows as the residents, mostly new immigrants just up from the island, tried to drown out whatever they were currently enduring with loud music. (*Latin* 7)

Ortiz Cofer's narratives about *El building* can be understood as participating in a dialogue that aims to construct a community held together by culture. The residents are joined by their links to Puerto Rico and their shared experiences in New Jersey.

This idea of the ownership of space and the ability to call the city neighborhoods home is not only a matter of economics, and politics but also of culture. In “One More Lesson”, the narrator refers to *El building* as a “Vertical Barrio”(63). The word barrio has many connotations and as Raúl Homero Villa points out in his study on Chicano spaces in Los Angeles, this kind of “barrio” experience is not always positive; it is a place where “poverty, crime, illness and despair”(5) exist, but according to his research on the culture in barrio spaces, “the cultural practices produced and exercised in the barrios have tended toward positive articulations of community consciousness, which contribute to a psychologically and material sustaining sense of ‘home’ location”(6). Writing about *El building* expresses this community consciousness and it is a place of positive communal affirmation.

El building is an example of Homi Bhabha’s concept of a liminal space or Gloria Anzaldúa’s ‘borderlands’ where hybrid identities are formed. In *el building*, Spanish (the language of the protagonist’s apartment) mixes with English (which comes from the outside) and the residents speak Spanglish. The younger generation listens to salsa, but music from The Beatles sometimes drowns out the Puerto Rican rhythms. In these walls, U.S. culture blends in with the older generation’s nostalgia. In all the stories which feature *el building*, the young narrator feels most at home in these spaces, even though, she is forbidden to become a part of it. In “One More Lesson,” the father eventually finds an apartment for the family outside *el building*, away from other Puerto Ricans, and this “new home was truly in exile” (*Silent* 65).

School: The “Other”

El building is the borderland that exists between the two separate spaces of the apartment and the school. In these two spaces, she remains connected to Puerto Rican culture, but school is the place where she experiences U.S culture. When the family first arrives from Puerto Rico the children are enrolled at the local public school (which is the school that most of the children from *El building* attend), but her parents later decide that their daughter needs to be put under the protection of the nuns at the Catholic school. She is the only Puerto Rican student and the rest are Irish and Italian.

In the school, the smells, sounds, and rules of behavior are different from the apartment and *El building*. The silence and order contrast with the noisy chaos (with its salsa music and the odors of cooking food) of *el building*. She mentions that in *El building* “Women seemed to cook rice and beans perpetually- the strong aroma of red kidney beans boiling permeated the hallways” (90), while school is a quiet place which smells like industrial cleaner and the rules of conduct are strictly enforced.

...[the] pine-scented parochial school where exquisitely proper behavior was the rule strictly enforced by the soft spoken nuns, who could, upon observing an infraction on their many rules, turn into despots- and never raise their voices- as they destroyed your peace of mind with threats of shameful exposure and/or expulsion. But there was order, quiet respect for logic, and there, also, I received the information I was hungry for. I liked reading books

and took immense pleasure in the praise of the teachers for my attentiveness and my good grades. (*Silent* 126)

She assimilates academically, but laments her alienation from the other students and her position as an outsider.

In this space, the narrator/protagonist positions herself as the Other. The Irish and Italian children and the nuns dominate the narrator's experiences in this space and she perceives them as part of a monolithic culture to which she does not belong. These Irish and Italian inhabitants are the only "americanos" that she knows and she describes them as if they were creatures from another planet or as if she were an anthropologist studying their habits without any hope of being a part of them.

After school I would see several of the "popular" girls walk down the corner out of sight from the school, and get into cars with public school boys. Many of the others went to the drugstore to have a soda and talk loudly and irreverently about the school and the nuns. Most of them were middle class Italian and Irish kids. I was the only Puerto Rican student, having gotten in after taking a rigorous academic test and after the priest visited our apartment to ascertain that we were a good Catholic family. (*Silent* 125)

The other girls that she watches from a distance are living what she imagines to be a more typical U.S. teenager's life and she is jealous of their freedom.

As she reflects on the experiences of the Italian, Jewish, and Irish people who are leaving the neighborhood, she imagines the space as a part of the situation of exile in which her family and neighbors find themselves. She comprehends the changing

neighborhood in a historical context: “Then the immigrants had come in droves, and the monstrosities [*el building* and other housing projects] had been raised for them—the Italians, the Irish, the Jews, and now us, the Puerto Ricans, and the blacks” (*Latin* 14). She realizes that the other immigrants such as the Irish have left evidence of their presence in the neighborhood and the Puerto Ricans have yet to claim ownership of the space.

I lived only a few blocks away from the church and the school
which had been built in the heart of the city by the original wave of
Irish Catholics- for their convenience. The Puerto Ricans had built
no churches. (126)

She also conceptualizes the arrival of the Puerto Ricans as part of a cycle of movement in the city and the first step in a passage toward social acceptance, yet notes that even the Jewish families, who "... had seen worse things happen than the influx of black and brown people that was scaring away the Italians and the Irish” (*Deli* 121) were beginning to leave.

III. Puerto Rico: La casa de Mamá

For those immigrants who never return, their homeland turns into an unreal paradise and a place only preserved in their memories. Ortiz Cofer’s family however, moved back and forth between the Island and New Jersey and the narrators of these stories which are also a part of this dynamic feel a connection to *la Isla* as real physical space. It is also a place where they learn about a spiritual world filled with magic and other inexplicable phenomena. They stay for months and fit into the routine of life on the island, yet are not completely at home in Puerto Rico either. In “One More Lesson,” she

talks about a Christmas they spent in Homigueros: “Everything about us set us apart, and I put away my dolls quickly when I discovered that my playmates would not be getting any gifts until *Los Reyes*” (62). She frequently suffers from reverse culture shock. She is not rejected by the people, but as a child she feels that it is painful to stand out.

However, the protagonist does not generally feel alienated in her maternal grandmother’s house (*la casa de Mamá*). The young girl enjoys sitting with the adults and listening to the stories that Mamá tells her children and grandchildren. She is captivated by this world which is filled with stories of flying witches (“The Witches Husband”) and people like her grandfather, who are “able to communicate with the spirit world” (*Silent* 30). In fact, the tales about the strange people in the pueblo are those that inspire her the most. As a mature woman she realizes that it is part of her heritage and is something special that she shares with her female relatives. For instance, in “Marina,” she walks through the *pueblo* with her mother and they talk about the story of the young man who had been dressed in girl’s clothing in order to satisfy his mother’s delusions. They both admire his daring escape and ability to find happiness. In “Casa,” she describes how after all the housework is done the women sit together in the living room drinking *café con leche* as Mamá tells the story of *María la loca*. María was left at the altar on the day of her wedding and consequently loses her sanity and beauty. The narrator realizes that her identification with these unusual characters is related to her experiences as an outsider.

María la Loca interested me, as did all the “crazies” of our pueblo.

I was constantly made to feel an oddball by my peers, who made fun of my two-way accent: a Spanish accent when I spoke English;

and, when I spoke Spanish, I was told that I sounded like a
“Gringa”. (17)

She understands that on some level these characters are simultaneously accepted and rejected by the people in the pueblo in the same way that she is.

Conclusion:

By sharing her experiences of living between cultures, Ortiz Cofer connects herself to both communities. Her narratives give a voice to the many people who became part of transnational community and the depictions of the ways that communities are formed and identities are blended to exemplify Duany’s idea of a “sense of peoplehood.” She articulates the physical niches where community is formed in the diaspora and her stories are part of the constant reinvention of Puerto Rican identity. The spaces in the story are a composite of memory and imagination. They are imagined and recreated by Ortiz Cofer, but they are not imaginary.

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