

Gypsy Mothers or Decolonial Citizens? The Mother as “Other” in Judith

Ortiz Cofer’s *In the Line of the Sun*

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Immigration literature largely has been written from the voice of the immigrant father or the first or second-generation immigrant child. While the immigrant mother is most certainly spoken of and for, it is uncommon to find her speaking for herself. The immigrant mother’s strategies are often interpreted as backward and unprogressive, and her attempts to recoup her lost culture are misread as unreasonable defiance against assimilation. Consequently, the mother’s experience is marginalized and abjectified, seemingly lost in the translation of the father or child’s newfound nation. The immigrant mother, trapped in the nation’s binary of bad immigrant and good citizen, is what Gloria Anzaldúa would describe in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as both the “beak” that “blinds” and the “blind spot” (Anzaldúa 108). From her clothing and language to her food and religion, the immigrant mother is often perceived to be in “excess” of hegemonic constructions of womanhood, motherhood, and citizenship. However, it is these embodiments and performances of diasporic excess that can potentially force a reconceptualization of what it means to belong to a nation.

In her work *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan writes of narratives of migration, explaining:

Understandably, narratives that originate at border crossings cannot be bound by national borders, languages, and literary and critical traditions. Born of crisis and change, suffering alternately from amnesia and too much remembering, and precariously positioned at the interstices of different spaces, histories, and languages, they seek to...enter novel forms of inter/transcultural dialogue. (4)

Likewise, novels chronicling im/migration depict characters who cannot be bound by national borders and who live in the interstices between belonging and otherness. In much of im/migration literature, the immigrant mother is written as an embodiment of a border crossing. For the immigrant mother, the struggle of her existence lies in her negotiations of her native culture and new country’s perceptions of motherhood, womanhood, and nationhood. It is within this experience of lived and imagined transnationalism where identities become muddled, changed, or enforced. Much of the scholarship on Latina immigrant mothers focuses on experiences of transnational motherhood, specifically mothers’ experiences of parenting across borders. Mary Romero (2002; 2006) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (1997) have made important contributions to the scholarship on mothers who are pushed out of their economically-challenged countries to seek employment in various types of domestic work in the international market. Their works reveal the emotional work and psychological impact of mothering across borders, as well as the networks that are formed by mothers and extended kin to provide support to both the children and mother. In her work *Narratives of Mexican American Women: Emergent Identities of the Second Generation*, Alma García more closely examines immigration’s challenges to family dynamics and cultural identity, especially as those challenges are experienced within the context of mother-daughter relationships. Looking specifically at Mexican and Mexican American mothers and daughters, García’s work reveals that the second

generation Mexican American daughters in her book drew from the “ideational social capital” of their mothers as they worked to (re)construct and reconcile their multiple, and often conflicting, cultural identities (129). However, as is evidenced in the work of Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor and Mayra Y. Bámaca (2004), immigrant Latina mothers do not always share the same lived experiences of acculturation or motherhood; factors such as proximity of other family members, resources for learning about their culture, multicultural curricula in the schools, and exposure to Spanish and ethnic foods impact immigrant mothers’ ethnic socialization efforts and their children’s reception of such efforts.

Latina authors are among the most prolific writers of the transnational and immigrant experience, and Caribbean writers have made particularly important contributions to the literary mapping of immigrant literature. Julia Alvarez’s novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Cristina García’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), and Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1994), are among some of the more well-known works that vividly document and illustrate the lived realities of immigration, displacement, and identity construction for women and writers in the Caribbean, as well as the challenges that acculturation and cultural preservation pose to identity and relationships between family members as they all engage in varying experiences of socialization and acculturation. Because of their own embodiments of multiple nations (or at least multiple cultures), Latina authors write at the intersections of their identities, requiring that their readers reconsider their own ideas of citizenship and belonging. However, much of immigration literature has focused on experiences of immigrants who cannot return to their country of origin because they were exiled or displaced. Thus, how might Caribbean writers complicate our readings of the experiences of families from commonwealth territories, such as Puerto Rico, who migrate to the continental U.S.? How might the immigrant vs. citizen paradigm shape relations within Puerto Rican families who engage in varied experiences of acculturation? And importantly, as this study seeks to uncover, how do im/migrant mothers’ attempts to preserve culture and familial identity become lost in the translation of assimilation and U.S. citizenship?

Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* documents the struggle of a Puerto Rican family as they navigate U.S. culture while negotiating their Puerto Rican identities in a multicultural space. Author Judith Ortiz Cofer is a native of Puerto Rico and received her schooling on the U.S. mainland in Paterson, New Jersey. Because Cofer is from Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, she does not fit legal descriptions of an immigrant; a more appropriate term for Puerto Ricans who move to the U.S. mainland might be internal migrant. However, because Cofer, as well as other Puerto Rican writers such as Santiago, use “immigrant” and “immigration” in their writings, I will utilize this language, as well. Cofer’s novel *The Line of the Sun* is highly influenced by her own bicultural childhood, and is mostly narrated by Marisol, a Puerto Rican girl, who tells the story of her family’s immigrant experience. As Marisol attempts to negotiate her own identity as an “American,” it is evident in her narrative that her mother is the embodiment of Puerto Rico, and that she is unable to recognize her mother’s “un-American” clothes and spiritual practices as forms of coping, personal agency, and resistance to cultural erasure.

This essay examines the identity formation and performance of Ramona, the immigrant mother in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun*, and her daughter Marisol’s relationship with Ramona, particularly as it is shaped by Marisol’s framing of U.S. identity and citizenship. I approach Ramona’s clothing and practice of spiritism as transitional objects, vehicles of agency, which facilitate her transitions between her motherland and the U.S. mainland. Importantly, I examine how static notions of citizenship and belonging abjectify Ramona’s Puerto Rican

maternal identity, displacing her as her family's cultural bridge, and rendering her to the interstices of national and cultural citizenship.

My Gypsy Mother: The Use of Clothing as Transitional Objects

In the novel, young Marisol remembers her mother Ramona as a young, beautiful woman, often detailing her dark skin, long hair, and voluptuous body. She portrays her as wearing "loud" colors and heels, her hair loose, unlike the American women Marisol knew. Marisol describes, "Her long black hair loose and wild from the wind, she was wearing black spiked shoes and was wrapped in a red coat and black shawl... My gypsy mother embarrassed me with her wild beauty" (219). Referring to her as a "gypsy," Marisol exoticizes her mother, making it virtually impossible for her to see herself in her mother, to identify with her mother(land). Although Marisol uses the term "gypsy" in reference to her mother's style of dress, it is also useful to understand the political implications of this usage within the context of nationhood and the nation. Gypsies, or the Roma, are a stateless people who have been continuously displaced and used as political barter. They have virtually no standard language; do not trace their history linearly; have no nation to formally claim; are presumed to be thieves and drainers of social resources, and have been forced, violently, in most cases, to assimilate. The Roma's status as "stateless" marginalizes them in societies where nationality serves as the central element of identity. However, by actually performing their statelessness through language, historiography, and refusal to assimilate, the Roma directly expose the inadequacies of the nation-state and the limitations of citizenship. By identifying her mother as a "gypsy," Marisol displaces Ramona and her Puerto Rican identity from the United States, rendering her as stateless as a gypsy.

Marisol remains critical of her mother throughout the novel. Explaining that she wants her mother to "look like the other ladies," Marisol invokes images of the ideal American woman, Jackie Kennedy, as the "American" standard, further emphasizing her mother's foreignness. Marisol states, "She was what I would have looked like... if I had swayed when I walked, and if I had worn loud colors and had spoken only Spanish" (220). Marisol perceives Ramona's choice of dress as nothing other than a refusal to assimilate, a refusal to fall within the parameters of national identity despite Marisol's desires to fully belong. Carmen Faymonville interprets Ramona's attire as an "active resistance to assimilation," and claims that Marisol simply believes that "Ramona simply does not know how to dress" as what she perceives to be a "typical" U.S. citizen (Faymonville 129). Although Faymonville's critical interpretation grants more agency to Ramona, this explanation can be taken in another direction by reading Ramona through Julia Kristeva's appropriation of the psychoanalytic term "transitional object" in her articulation of cosmopolitanism.

A transitional object is a "device, such as a favorite blanket, that empowers one to separate from the mother[land] and eventually, in theory, move on to an independent – blanketless/postnationalist – existence" (Kristeva 63). Kristeva explains that cosmopolitanism "secures and is secured by affective relations to a series of sets – specifically: self, family, homeland, [the nation], and mankind – in which each set operates as a transitional object for the next" (Kristeva 63). In the novel, Ramona's clothes serve as transitional objects through which she enables herself to retain material and cultural ties to her former homeland while attempting to construct an identity as a resident of the United States. The use of Puerto Rican clothes as transitional objects, rather than using a national object (such as a flag for example) to incorporate

herself into society, ultimately decenters the nation and instead presents the possibility of working towards a more inclusive sense of citizenship. However, Kristeva's concept does have its limits. In Bonnie Honig's analysis of Kristeva, Honig summarizes Kristeva's ideas on French Muslim women wearing head scarves in France, explaining that the "'abstract' advantages of a French universalism may prove to be superior to the 'concrete' benefits of a Muslim scarf," and thereby renders the scarf an "[unhealthy] transitional object" (Honig 64). Offering a contrasting argument, Honig draws from the work of Leila Ahmed, who, as Honig explains, argues that the scarf "enables upwardly mobile women to move from the familiar settings of their rural homes" (Honig 64) into "sexually integrated" and "alien, uncomfortable social reality" (Ahmed qtd. in Honig 64). Honig then hinges upon Ahmed's ideas explaining that the scarf "provides the distance and insulation that enable women securely to enter the public realm" (Honig 64). Likewise, Ramona's clothes guide her through numerous states of transition between the private and public – between homeland and nation. Homeland, however, according to Kristeva's usage does not signify the native home, but is used rather abstractly to signify the found or constructed homeland, which is, in the novel, El Building.

Ramona's sense of safety is embodied by their apartment structure, El Building, and she forges her social inclusion in El Building through her style of dress – a style that is quintessential Puerto Rican. When Rafael sends her a kimono and jewelry she refuses to wear it, explaining that "it would embarrass her friends in El Building" (231). A hub of Puerto Rican culture, El Building is Ramona's closest connection to Puerto Rico. Because she depends on her fellow Puerto Rican tenants for rare foods and news from the island, Ramona risks further alienation in a country where she is an alien everywhere. For Ramona, the boundary between "here" and "there" lies outside of El Building, past the border where the land that lies beyond the neighborhood bodega begins.

El Building as Kristeva's (Reconstructed) Homeland

Ramona's activities within El Building are, in many ways, attempts to both recoup her native culture and position herself within a new one. Ramona practices spiritism, a form of spiritual healing that mixes traditional Catholic rituals with New Age spiritual practices, and is sometimes equated with Santería. Although she is not very good – she is gently told she needs to "develop her faculties" – Ramona insists on not only practicing, but being a spiritist leader. Ramona's spiritism can be read as a third space, decolonial practice (which is explained later), an attempt to reconcile two disparate cultures, a recognition of her own, newly-acquired mestizaje.

The more Ramona immerses herself into Santería, the more she is discouraged from practicing. Rafael, Ramona's husband, is the most active in discouraging her, warning her about the riots that are expected to occur as the result of the impending labor strikes. Usually one to defer to a patriarch, Ramona is insistent on maintaining her spiritist role despite threats of riots. On the surface, Ramona's insistence can be read as an intense desire to preserve the fragments of Puerto Rican culture she has found on the U.S. mainland. However, within frameworks of nationhood and nationality, Rafael, a member of the United States military, functions as the embodiment of the patriarchal nation desiring to regulate the activity and identity of the immigrant, or the foreigner, Ramona. Just as the riots threaten to destabilize the stability of the factories, Ramona's practice of spiritism unsettles her accepted Puerto Rican identity. Within the context of the nation-state, the riots and spiritism exemplify the shaking up and unsettling of

national hegemony that occurs as internal migrants/immigrants integrate themselves into the fabric of their host country.

Although Ramona grants herself the agency to deflect her husband's wishes, it is evident that she feels her identity is inhibited by the world that lies beyond her bodega. While she does not fear Marisol going to the bodega by herself, Ramona herself will not go to Marisol's school, unless she is attending the Spanish mass, clearly illustrating the effects of her sense of safety and belonging on her choices as a mother. One day Marisol does not arrive at her home at the expected time. Forced to go to the school to retrieve her, Marisol explains that her mother was "a human billboard advertising her paranoia in a foreign language" (174), an observation of both her mother's fear and the juxtaposition of Ramona's clothes with her surroundings. Ramona's presence further reminded Marisol that for her, school was "another world" (232) where "[t]hey all understood that Marisol was different" (222). Through Ramona's transgression—her overstepping of ethnic and place boundaries—both Ramona and Marisol were made hyperaware of the limits of Ramona's mothering.

The limitations of immigrant identity-formation and performance within the nation-state are also exemplified in the final scenes in the novel in which Rafael and Marisol decorate their new house in the suburbs during Ramona's visit to the island. Decorating the home in neutral, modern "American" colors, so unlike the bright colors the mother loves, the father's and daughter's reimagining of the American home erases maternal island memory and creates a space that resists transnational Puerto Rican-U.S. identity. When they are done, Marisol finally recognizes the maternal absence, realizing that her mother's saints do not have a place, *cannot* occupy a space in their American imagination. As Faymonville explains, "Father and daughter thus collide in Ramona's isolation in a country that remains foreign to her now also in her close family circle" (Faymonville 132). When Ramona enters the home, freshly tanned in a dress sewn by her mother, her body stands in stark contrast to her family and her home, further accentuating her foreignness—a visual and symbolic collision. Marisol's disappointment that Ramona "had given herself back to the island" reflects Marisol's inability to imagine the possibility of performing a Puerto Rican identity in the United States without being stigmatized as a foreigner (284). The father's removal of Ramona from El Building for the sake of her safety, ironically, results in a *loss* of sense of safety for Ramona. Because safety was found within the walls of El Building and within the community of island women, Ramona feels "[imprisoned]" (284), unable to face the dangers that lie outside her new home. When Marisol offers to take her mother anywhere to relieve her depression, Ramona asks, "do you think there will ever be a bridge across the water to my Island?" (284).

In her chapter "The Foreigner as Immigrant," Honig outlines Eric Santer's conditions that must be met in order for transitional objects to ensure a successful separation from the country or place of origin--Ramona's Puerto Rico. She explains: "First the separation must not be traumatic; it must be temporary. Second, there must be a healthy environment conducive to transitional object play. And third, that play must have an intersubjective dimension" (Honig 67). The conditions that accompany Ramona's departure are not traumatic, however, her new environment, her "American" home, is not conducive to her use of transitional objects. As Marisol points out, there is no place for her mother's saints, and Ramona's new dress clashes with the interior of the home. The home's inability to provide space for Ramona's religious figures and reflect her Puerto Rican dress prevents Ramona from experiencing an easy transition. In addition, Ramona lacks the third condition, the intersubjective dimension, which requires that "[transitional objects] be witnessed periodically by the figure whose temporary absences are

being borne” (Honig 67). If the “figure” is Puerto Rico, or Puerto Ricans, this condition cannot be met, for Ramona cannot visit the island that often, and her family actively works to erase any memory of the Puerto Rico that she knows and is attempting to preserve.

Decolonial Reimaginings of Maternal Agency

The proverbial bridge Ramona speaks of when she asks if there will ever be a bridge that will take her back to her island harkens back to Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Cherrie Moraga’s *This Bridge I Call my Back* and Anzaldúa’s theorizations in Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keatin’s *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. In the introduction to *this bridge we call home*, Anzaldúa writes, “Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are pathways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives” (1). Ramona has the potential to be a bridge for her family between the island and the U.S. Ramona is not merely asking for a way back home, but for the freedom to move between cultural spheres while preserving her spiritual, cultural, and maternal identities, for both herself and her family.

The image of Anzaldúa’s bridge also stands as a metaphor for the postmodern discourse of nationality in the novel that “[breaks] with the modernist nationalist imagination in which separate nations stand completely apart from each other” (Faymonville 150). Cofer’s novel simultaneously speaks to the complexities of and dismantles essentialist notions of nationhood and identity, namely through exposing the limitations of modern nationalism and invoking the possibility of a post-national, cosmopolitan re-imagining of national citizenship and global belonging. Through the mother, Ramona, concepts of nation, culture, and citizenship are pressured, broadened, and even asked to be re-imagined.

Scholarship on immigrant mothers, such as the work of Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor and Mayra Y. Bámaca, clearly indicates that mothers play key roles in preserving culture and family histories, and generally instilling a sense of ethnic identity, especially when institutions, such as schools, fail to nurture ethnic socialization. However, in *The Line of the Sun*, the family does not share the mother’s nostalgia for Puerto Rico. Unlike many other immigrants, as “voluntary exiles” (229) the family is free to return to their home in Puerto Rico without the same struggles as other immigrants desiring to return to their homelands, which may explain Marisol’s lack of anxiety over a waning identification with Puerto Rico. Further, though she attempts to maintain her island ways, unlike many of the mothers in sociological immigration literature, Ramona does not actively work to define or instill a Puerto Rican identity for her children. Rather than perceiving her mother as a failed immigrant with no social capital, how might reimagining Ramona as a strategic and resilient cultural negotiator change both Marisol’s relationship with Ramona and Ramona’s sense of maternal agency?

Third space feminist approaches to agency are useful for rethinking what agency looks like, and how immigrant mothers can be conceptually transformed from symbols of the “old world” to those of a new kind of citizenry. In her monumental work *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Emma Pérez “[tracks] discursive formations of feminism during a nationalist movement,” and articulates a “third space feminism” that is found “within and between dominant male discourses” (Pérez 32). In *The Line of the Sun*, Ramona’s movement, choices, and performance as a mother are “within and between” dominant articulations of motherhood, immigration, and U.S. identity. As she struggles to raise bicultural children and maintain her marriage with her assimilated husband who serves in the Navy, Ramona

unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile the hegemonic ideologies that define U.S. and Puerto Rican cultural identification and live a transnational life. Pérez's concept of a "decolonial imaginary" can provide a space in which Puerto Ricans can transcend the binaries of identification. In the case of Ramona and Marisol, employing a decolonial imagination can enable Marisol to imagine Ramona as an agent of her own reconceptualization of identity, rather than a failed immigrant.

Pérez explains, "the decolonial imaginary embodies the buried desires of the unconscious living and breathing in between that which is colonist and that which is colonized. Within that interstitial space, desire rubs against colonial repressions to construct resistant, oppositional, transformative, *diasporic* subjectivities that erupt and move into decolonial desires" (emphasis mine, Pérez 110). Importantly, the decolonial imaginary becomes a space in which "the silent gain their agency" (Pérez 33), wherein boundaries of the nation-state are pressured and diasporic subjects are recognized.

At the end of the last chapter, Marisol sits with a deflated Ramona who is in silent mourning over her island as she attempts to accept her new American home. In the final chapter before the epilogue, Marisol asks, "Mother, will you tell me what happened with Guzmán and Mamá Cielo when you got there?" Following her question Marisol continues, "She took a deep breath and began her story" (*Line* 285). It is not until the end of the story—the epilogue, in fact—that Ramona is given voice and a space to exercise her agency in the writing of the Puerto Rican diaspora.

At the end of the epilogue, Marisol "conclude[s] that the only way to understand a life is to write it as a story, to fill in the blanks left by circumstance, lapses of memory, and failed communication," and to continue writing her family's story, some of which is created in her "imagination" (290). Ramona, once again, is the silent mother, left out of the end of the story of her own migration. Marisol's desire for a "complete" story reflects a Western desire for linearity. Ramona's own existence and memory is one that is rooted in movement and migration. Reading Ramona through a third space decolonial imaginary enables us to reimagine Ramona, and all mothers of the Puerto Rican diaspora, as agents of their own identities and chroniclers of their own family histories.

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