

**An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer:
A Latina Writer in the Piney Woods of Georgia:
The Landscape Has Changed Us**

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The following interview took place in two sessions, on May 27, 2008, and on October 26, 2010 at the University of Georgia, in Athens, Georgia. I would like to thank Dr. Ricia A. Chansky Sancinito for her in-depth reading of an early draft and for her helpful suggestions, which resulted in a more focused interview. As it was our custom, I had provided Judith with a series of critical statements by scholars prompting her to react to them in her multiple roles as a writer, a scholar, and a teacher of creative writing courses. In these interviews I was particularly interested in having Judith consider her place as a Puerto Rican and as an American writer within the respective national literary canons. Judith's interest in exploring an emerging hybrid identity stemming from radical changes to the traditional socio-economic fabric of modern Southern societies would be her last literary project before her untimely death.

Rafael Ocasio: Were the creative non-fiction essays the result of your desire to produce your own critical reading of your literary production as a professor of English?

Judith Ortiz Cofer: I don't really think in terms of how people are going to interpret my work because I find it somehow paralyzing. I write essays to discover something, rather than to teach something. And by that I mean, in the essays in *Woman in Front of the Sun* I traced the genesis of some of my poems. Frankly that book came out of a series of assignments that I gave my grad students in my writing seminar in which I said, "What made you decide on this life? What makes you get up and write in the morning?" Almost all of us know that it is an obsession, but what led you to that obsession?

R.O. When you speak about discovery, is it a conscious effort on your part to explore specific experiences, or phases of your life, or is it unconscious?

J.O.C. It is both. I usually trace my need to work on poems from perhaps an image that I can't let go of. For example, in this new, lyric essay or prose poem, called "Georgia Apparition," I had read in an article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that most of the pedestrian deaths now in Atlanta are of Latinos. The reason they gave is that it is hard for illegal immigrants to get licenses, or they may be too poor to own a car. There was also an indication that people just don't see these people crossing the roads. It was a particularly tragic situation. A young Mexican mother with her two babies was crossing a road to get to a phone to call her mother, and she was struck and one of her boys was killed. I was just haunted by that image, not only so much about the facts, but also about the invisible person syndrome. We are all guilty of making others invisible, those who are not necessarily to be seen.

R.O. This is certainly a new literary avenue for you. Your Latino characters find a setting in Georgia.

J.O.C. I am now working on a book that is tentatively called “Peach Pit Corazón.” The title came from the fact that I heard a Southern woman say, “That man of mine has a peach pit heart,” and I said, “What does that mean?” She said, “Don’t you know, honey, the hardest thing next to a rock is a peach pit.” I wrote that down in my journal, and when I decided to write essays, stories, and poems about my time in the deep South, I said, I’d love to blend the cultures by calling the book “Peach Pit Corazón.” I am now working on various projects with that book in mind. “The Georgia Apparition” is one of them. I am also working on connecting the apparition of the Virgin in my hometown of Hormigueros, La Monserrate,¹ with the Conyers, Georgia, apparition.² I am talking about the different ways that cultures either accept or reject such apparitions.

R.O. It seems to me that you are currently looking at a metaphorical concept of the land. Are you looking at a connection between the Puerto Rican concept of tierra; [land] through your connection with the land of Georgia?

J.O.C. That is very interesting because I haven’t expressly gotten there yet. I sent you some of my poems and “The Sign,” a lyric essay that explores la Virgen de la Guadalupe in a field of cotton, which, of course, elicits memories of the slaves.

R.O. It seems to me that this project comes out of your ongoing interest in history.

J.O.C. I have become completely obsessed with history. For example, I am retracing Hernán de Soto’s trail, because I have heard, referring to Latino immigrants, “Why should they be allowed to speak Spanish in Georgia?” And it occurred to me that Spanish was the first non-native American language spoken in Georgia, because the Spaniards landed in Florida and De Soto came through Georgia, so they must have been speaking up a storm in Castilian. So it was not in 2008 that Spanish was spoken first in Georgia. I started exploring some dusty chronicles in deadly literary Spanish, and I found fascinating stuff, such as the fact that the first Spaniard captured by the Indians was named Juan Ortiz. In my essay I say, “these are the adventures of Juan Ortiz, my appropriated kinsman.” Therefore, my family has been in Georgia since 1536! It is funny, but also my way of saying, “Who are you to say we cannot speak Spanish in Georgia? Spanish was spoken in Georgia before any other European language.”

R.O. Professor Ricia A. Chansky Sancinino has suggested that your investigations of family members become a means of understanding the self through the exploration of another.

J.O.C. Yes. I called Juan Ortiz the first multi-cultural person in Georgia because he was the first who tried to live among the native people and I felt the same way when I moved to Georgia. There were only a few Latinos here. I didn’t have to give up my

customs, but I had to adapt fairly quickly to what was happening. It is an exploration of culture and, by extension, of oneself through history.

R.O. This is an exciting re-creation of history, it is your metaphorical claim to an ancestral Southern land.

J.O.C. Ortiz interested me because he was a foot soldier, someone who was oppressed and eventually killed by the greed of the conquistadors. What I was trying to find was a parallel between the conquered land of Puerto Rico and the Spaniards who intermarried with Indians and with Blacks and created the mestizo race. These are subjects that interest me: the conquered lands, slavery, the burden of history.

R.O. This seems to be a trend in your work. You have often placed yourself and your personal experiences within key American historical events.

J.O.C. I continue to write about my own experiences, as you can tell in the manuscript essay I gave you, entitled “First Class Back to the Summer of Love,” in which I write at the word “class” as I think about how, as a professor of English at a Southern university, I do have a different status when I am on the job. But as a woman who looks like a Latina and sounds like a Latina, and in the circumstances as they are now with the immigration issues, my status immediately changes when I leave the building. It is a very circular story. When I was very young, I was aware of my position in this society, and for one reason or another I have never been unaware. I can’t ever forget it, because if I forget it, I am reminded.

R.O. How important are geography and race in your work?

J.O.C. Because my early life was one of just movement, I would say that place, more than geography, just situating myself somewhere, has always been important. In the early part of my writing I concentrated on trying to find out how I was shaped with our frequent moves between Puerto Rico and New Jersey. Now I have been in Georgia most of my adult life, and I am just beginning in the last five years or so to see how this landscape is continuing to shape me. You are shaped by where you choose to live, you know that yourself; we are different here than we would have been in New Jersey, New York City or Florida. Basically, I think that that is what the writer does. It is not so much that I am writing about the plants of Georgia, I am not a nature writer, but so much of the human personality is shaped by place and the circumstances that that place forces on you, psychologically as well as physically. I have begun to explore how one may discover identity by exploring place.

R.O. The concept of landscape has always been key to Puerto Rican critics and writers. One of the first literary critics in Puerto Rico, Antonio S. Pedreira (1899-1939), who wrote *Insularismo* (1934), developed there the theory about the importance of the land for Puerto Rican writers. Speaking about the Puerto Rican landscape, he stated: “Our landscape possesses a temperate feeling and it is in harmony with geography and with ethnography. No violence, no ostentation or magnitude. The discreet decoration is low-

keyed, and it lends itself, like our dance, to delight and to trust. Its dominant note is lyrical: it is a tender landscape, delicate, soft, crystalline” (59).

J.O.C. That could have been so in 1934!

R.O. How do you see that modernist landscape now?

J.O.C. It is expressed in my novel *The Meaning of Consuelo*, which is set right after the Korean War, when the Puerto Rican landscape started to change and the autopista (highway) was built. My first encounter with it (which I only much later realized was a shock to my senses) was when we went from the town of Hormigueros, which was the typical Spanish-style town, built around a church, and everyone was “comadre y compadre”; [godmother and godfather], to Río Piedras, where my father was stationed in a nearby base, and everything was squares and everything was cement. I describe this in my novel—the landscape had changed totally and completely to the American point of view at that time. This lyrical landscape of Pedreira still existed, we could take the autopista and go to Hormigueros, but it did not remain like that for long. Every year that we went back there was change, and I have a catalog of it in my brain. Every year or every other year when my father left with the Navy we went back to Puerto Rico, and I heard things like, “Oh, I’ve got color t.v. now.” My grandmother’s house was slowly transformed from the place where we sat down telling stories when I was a child to the place where we sat down at noon to watch the gossip shows at lunch or the telenovelas; [soap operas] in the evenings.

R.O. However, you did mention the “lyricism of the Puerto Rican landscape,” and what comes across, particularly in your poetry, is the impact of colors.

J.O.C. Synesthesia is a very real phenomenon. When you leave a place, what you have is a blend of the senses that you bring with you, as I explore in my poem “To Understand el Azul.” When I visit my mother, even though she does not have access to “el Internet,” every time I go there, I have “to borrow” broadband from José across the street, (you know, I steal it); she has everything else, but her imagination is still deeply infused with the beauty of the island. Her way to try to heal me is to take me to the beach or to take me to the mountains. It has happened that when I come back, after fighting San Juan traffic, dealing with the multitudes, I am infused with the incredible beauty of my island, which is mine too. I carry it in my imagination. This summer we went to a little beach in Cabo Rojo, one that is considered one of the top 10 most beautiful beaches in the world, and it still stunned me. So, no, all is not lost. I bring it back with me, but I am not foolishly trying to preserve something that does not exist.

R.O. What kind of personal anecdotes affect you or inspire you most?

J.O.C. A significant amount of my work has been generated by my visits to Puerto Rico. My poem “To Understand el Azul” was directly generated by something my mother said, and when I told her that, she was shocked because she is not an intellectual. But she has no idea how much her humor, her hubris, and her incredible ability make me

see how arrogant I can be sometimes about what I know. About “El Azul,” I was asked to write a poem to be given at the convocation here, at the University of Georgia, for the entering freshman class. That year it was the most diverse class ever. Initially I said, “No, I can’t,” and left for my mother’s home in Hormigueros. But I knew I had to write that poem. My mother did what she always does, she sat across the kitchen table waiting for me to finish the poem, and said, “Vamos a refrescar la vista, salgamos un ratito” (“Let’s refreshen our vision, let’s go outside for a little while.”) So, she took me somewhere near Cabo Rojo where we could see the ocean, and it was one of those brilliant blue days, when the sky meets the ocean.³ I am not ethnocentric, but I have never seen another ocean like the Puerto Rican ocean, and I was moved to say, “Ay, mami, ese azul” (Oh, mother, that blue). And she looked at me and said, “mi cielo, mi mar” (my sky, my sea). And I said, “That’s it!,” because she was expressing what I was trying to figure out: how I had come to appreciate Georgia, being a Puerto Rican. And so, in that poem what I said, what I had to do, was somehow to find images that tell these kids that if you for a minute stop and see the beauty that other people see, then you are inhabiting their consciousness for a minute. If you can see beauty both in the Georgia red clay and in the blue of a Puerto Rican sky, then we can come together in a common ground.

R.O. Blue must be on your mind a lot because we spoke about “El Azul” last time we met. Just by chance, when I was doing research in Puerto Rico for this interview, I came across a reference about Lola Rodríguez de Tió (1843-1924), the greatest Puerto Rican modernist poet, born in San Germán, near your hometown of Hormigueros. Her favorite color was also blue.⁴ Is there an influence of Puerto Rican poets in your poetry?

J.O.C. Yes, but the ones who influenced me the most are the earliest ones, who used the vernacular rather than the literary Spanish of the academic poets.

R.O. Which early ones?

J.O.C. Julia de Burgos is so important to me that I have just written a children’s book called *The Poet Upstairs*, imagining a little girl, like me, who is sick, and a poet moves upstairs, and that poet is Julia. The little girl visits her and the poet teaches her how to imagine herself in a river, and the street becomes a river, the Río Grande de Loíza.

I have also been influenced by Luis Palés Matos, the music in his poetry inspired me tremendously.

R.O. What about more contemporary Puerto Rican writers? Whom have you read?

J.O.C. I have read Ana Lydia Vega (1946), Magali García Ramis (1946), and, of course, Rosario Ferré (1938). I admire them, and I wish I could have gotten to know them. Whenever I read interviews with Puerto Rican writers I am sometimes disappointed because we seem to be “los primos feos en los Estados Unidos”; [the ugly cousins in the United States]. All of them think that all of us speak in Spanglish. I have

several degrees in English; I speak in standard English. I don't think that this dispute is going to be resolved in my lifetime.

R.O. I like your image of the Puerto Ricans in the United States as “the ugly cousins.” The Puerto Rican master short-story writer Pedro Juan Soto, who lived in the United States and wrote about the Puerto Rican experience in New York City's barrios, used a similar image of Puerto Ricans in the United States as members of an “abandoned family”: “Puerto Ricans are like a family with two nuclei, one here and one there, who do not know each other. There is eagerness to scorn those on the other side, it's like saying to them, ‘now that you have broken away, you belong to another nucleus, you a cousin of mine, we see each other from time to time, or I know about you because someone tells me [...].’ There is something quite provincial in that. We have denied the extended family [...]. It's the people from the North, who are away from here” (Hernández 35-36).

J.O.C. So, there is no one like me to include? I left because my father was in the military; we were not destitute and we did not live in the ghetto. I got a good education and there are many Puerto Ricans like me. What happens to the ones who are not so “despicable”?

R.O. Speaking of Latino identity, an issue that is rarely examined is the fact that US-Puerto Rican culture has moved away from New York City or New Jersey to other non-Puerto Rican geographies, like GA. Since you and I live in GA, my question to you is two-fold. One, is this a new identity? and two, can we really talk about a Puerto Rican identity when the Puerto Rican colonial issue has not been resolved?

J.O.C. The sociological terms are a little vague to me because I consider identity such an individual issue. I have said again and again throughout my writing life that I did not stop being a Puerto Rican because I moved to GA. In fact, I may have preserved my sense of it more closely and guarded it more because I was not among thousands of people continuously confirmed by puertorriqueñidad. Just like my mother, who is a different Puerto Rican than I am. She preserved it intact so that she could go back to the island, and she never stopped being an island puertorriqueña. I hate to return to the concept of the island Puerto Ricans' thinking that you become “other” when you come here to the United States. My mother lived in the United States for over 25 years and she kept pristine her idea of herself as a puertorriqueña; and it took 20 seconds for her to become an island puertorriqueña. I am not kidding you!

R.O. What about the colonial condition of Puerto Rico. What is your opinion on this subject?

J.O.C. About this Puerto Rican post-colonialism part of your question, I don't think that even a shift in political status will change the mentality of Puerto Ricans for a long time, perhaps even several generations. There has to be a blind acceptance, like the humble Puerto Rican, “el puertorriqueño humilde,” like our parents, the acceptance of “lo que será será”; [what will be, will be.]

R.O. Yes. The Puerto Rican short story writer, novelist and playwright René Marqués (1919-1979) in his collection of essays *El puertorriqueño dócil* (1967) controversially proposed the term “dócil”; [docile] as a main characteristic of the Puerto Rican psychological profile of his generation.

J.O.C. And then there is “el puertorriqueño con furia;” the angry Puerto Rican, the intellectuals who feel like they have to even exclude us in order to maintain their idea of a Puerto Rican intact. I think there will have to be a third or fourth wave of people who make political changes either to stop accepting colonialism or to fight it.

R.O. Where would you place yourself in those opposite ends of a political spectrum?

J.O.C. I have to tell you, whether they believe it or not, I understand the struggle of the Puerto Rican writer because when you don’t know who you are in the world in terms of an artistic identity, that must be so hard. They are neither Latin Americans nor Americans, right? They find themselves in this sort of straddling situation. I understand that. I would side with them if it wasn’t so exclusive, but I can’t side with them because they don’t let me in.

I also understand that my mother came through World War II and hardships unimaginable to us and that the protection of the United States must have felt like you had been through a horrible trauma and then someone offered to protect you. I am not saying that it is right; it is paternalistic and it is sad.

R.O. You are referring to Operación Manos a la Obra; [Operation Bootstrap].

J.O.C. Yes, my mother is a child of Operation Bootstrap.

R.O. The Puerto Rican short-story writer Ana Lydia Vega has a political take on the imposition of Operation Bootstrap: “I [...] too was a postwar baby-boomer, one of those fat-cheeked Carnation babies of the ELA [Estado Libre Asociado, the Puerto Rican Commonwealth]. In the fifties, the decade of our primary schooling, the triumphal overture of Operation Bootstrap monopolized the ten first places of the island’s hit-parade. And everybody, rightly or wrongly, sang it, even if it was on playback, except, of course, those who had had to fly in the Stick [plane] in order to emigrate to New York or those with jaws clenched thanks to a gag” (23-24).

J.O.C. She says it in a meaner way than I do. I love Ana Lydia Vega for her wit and the absolute preciseness of the “puertorriqueño con furia.” I agree, because you are where destiny and need place you. Our parents’ generation, except those who had a lot of money, were grateful to have jobs in those factories that later closed down and are now eyesores on the island. I have to place myself as an outsider in that fight because, even though the future of the island interests and concerns me deeply, how can I say that I am involved in the day-to-day struggle in which intellectuals or working people are involved? I think it is a matter of time before the people that are now coming up refuse to accept this middle ground and will make a decision.

R.O. Did your parents consider themselves a success of the Operation Bootstrap?

J.O.C. My father came from a family that all found an escape through the military. He was much more, as you can tell from my books, adjusted to the fact that history had forced him out of the island. He was not going to stay there and be a laborer; he was going to move to the United States and accept the consequences. My mother is a different type of puertorriqueña. Her family were farmers. Some of her family members left the island for brief periods of time and then went right back. All of her siblings are back on the island. There are different types of island puertorriqueños, so my mother always felt that with the help of the American government the island could succeed. She is definitely not a nacionalista.⁵ Even to this day if you asked her, as hard as her life has been, she would tell you, “We’ve made it out, we survived, and I’ve got to come back.” So, yes, she would consider a success story the terms that her dream came through: She came, she educated us, gave us as good a life as they could, and now she is back on her beloved island. To her that is a success, even though she has very little money, few of the things that one would consider luxuries in the United States; but if you were to interview her now, she would not be bitter. She would say, “con la ayuda de Dios y el US Navy, yo tengo una vida Buena;” With the help of God and the U.S. Navy, I have a good life.” She had simple expectations and they were met.

R.O. What do you think? Was it a success story?

J.O.C. Not for my father. I have not written much about him; I just recently finished an essay called “A Spell against Sorrow.” My father was a man who wanted to have an education. He would have made a great teacher, but the military life was dreadful for him psychologically. He hated being away. By the end of his career he was clinically depressed, and he lasted only two years after his retirement. My mother saw him become not the man that she had married. We saw him more and more withdrawn and depressed. I think that if he had been able to make a life for himself on the island, surrounded by family.... During the Cuban Missiles crisis, I heard, and I can’t confirm, that my father was the only Spanish-speaking sailor on his ship and that he was sent ashore to pick up dead bodies. When he came back he was hospitalized with a nervous breakdown. It is too painful for me even to ask that many questions about it. This is a family story that one of his brothers told me before he died. I would have to go to Navy records to confirm it; I can confirm that he had a nervous breakdown. But I am not ready to find out more, because I have been too cowardly to find out, because some people suspect that his car accident may have not been accidental. I am not ready to speak about that, because I don’t know the truth and my mother would not confirm or deny.

R.O. Are there other subject matters or figures that you would like to explore?

J.O.C. Recently I was asked to write about family and I decided to address the absence of my father in my work. I wrote very painfully about the loss of my father to depression and, I think, to his failed dream of making something of himself.

R.O. Women characters often dominate your narrative and your poems deal with feelings and or/emotions that will appeal most to women readers. You spoke briefly about the essay that you wrote about your father. I am wondering if this is a new trend, to write about male characters, because most of your characters are women.

J.O.C. I am interested by your question because you say that my “perfect readers” are women, and I think that you are right. Women often come up to me and say, “Yes, that was my childhood,” whatever race or ethnicity they are. I don’t think it is so much a political or a feminist impulse, but rather the fact that I grew up around women. My father, being a military man, the male presence in the household was not felt in the same way. Basically, what I perceived of a woman’s life was from the woman’s perspective. I was very much aware of machismo, because even when my father was not physically present at the house, his word was the rule. I adored my father but had a conflict in terms of accepting his absolute rule. I have written from the male point of view. *The Line of the Sun* features my uncle. I chose him because to me he expressed the Puerto Rican *joie de vivre* better than any other member of the household. People still come up to me to tell me that they had fallen in love with that rascal—he is a picaresque character—tragic but full of life. But, still, you are right, the narrator is a young female. In that book there is exploration of machismo but with envy.

R.O. In the Introduction to *Sleeping with One Eye Open* your co-editor, Marilyn Kallet, writes that your essay “The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open, “...could provide an excellent beginning for a book that would be useful to other writers, particularly to women” (xvii). To that effect, your article was circulated among women, asking them to submit papers on their own struggles as women writers. How will you describe those essays?

J.O.C. Basically, the most interesting part of that project was that my essay has a particular focus and that the responses we got were very individual because the book was subtitled “On the Art of Survival.” We asked writers, “tell us what main impediments or obstacles they had in fulfilling the need to write or to become artists.” The range was really wide, from depression to childbearing to demanding jobs, mates. I feel that we gave each woman a way and a reason to communicate to others how to maintain her right to declare herself an artist no matter what was happening in her life. The comments I get from women as I travel are that they found an essay particularly helpful, “I suffer from depression, so this one article has helped me.” Even though these are women writers, I have also heard from men, who were told to read our book or discovered it, that it is not so different with men. These days men share most marriages, share the parenting, it is not that the man comes home and shuts himself up in the study. Men suffer from depression; men suffer from demanding jobs. I think what the book was addressing, first of all, were the hurdles, but also the excuses. It is basically a declaration of independence that you need to make: Whatever else I do, I am an artist.

R.O. In that volume the Cuban-American writer Aleida Rodríguez addresses the condition of Latino writers placed in the margins, restricted by mainstream publishing houses from speaking about issues other than ethnicity. She writes: “Why is it so hard to

believe that some of us can actually *enjoy* being alive and want to render *that* delight instead of obsessing about how oppressed we are?" (135). (Emphasis in the original). How do you balance the strong feminist activism in your work with other more "pleasurable" subject matters?

J.O.C. I think, from reading my work, that I add a lot of humor to it, even though I try to address very serious matters. I am not always writing about the political situation. In *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* there are poems basically about "the moment." For example, the title poem is like a little story about my being in San Juan, watching these two palomas (doves) come to my window. Then I looked down, and there is a romance going on between one of our voluptuous Puerto Rican women, on her high heels, and coming around the corner, a man pacing with his cigarette. So, it is not so much about politics, but about the artist's need to have a story. I did not know whether they were married or lovers. All I knew was they were doing the dance of love underneath my window, and that I felt the need to complete the story. The palomas flew away. I felt the need to attach the palomas to the couple and that is art. Art is always taking a situation and giving it form, much like painting. I think poetry is closer to painting than it is to anything else. What is within this frame and what can I make meaningful? That is pleasurable to me. Finding those connections is a joy. I would say that my work is evenly balanced between my discoveries and my observations and both are important to me.

R.O. Luis Felipe Díaz, a Puerto Rican critic, proposes that Puerto Rican writers of the late twentieth century and of the early twentieth-first century have continued a cultural project known as *puertorriqueñidad*, which he described as "disintegration of family, of nation and its changing ideological and aesthetic projects" (79).

J.O.C. I think that that is a very clinical and detached description of what we are doing. *Puertorriqueñidad* is not a project with me. It is a fact of my life, it is the essence of my being, not a project. I don't get up in the morning and say, "I think I am going to do another installment on my project of defining myself." I get up in the morning in the same way Ana Lydia Vega gets up and says, "I think I'll tell a good story," and, if it is good, it will reveal something about the human condition. It is not a project, any more than what they are doing is a project. I am not a sociologist; I am not trying to figure out what makes a *puertorriqueño* or a *puertorriqueña*. I happen to know what makes a *puertorriqueña* by being one. When I get up to write with the equal intensity and passion about the human experience, my human experience happens to arise out of my identity, still connected to my island birth, to migration.

R.O. You have sent me various "translations of Puerto Rican folk tales." What do you call them?

J.O.C. Adaptations of Puerto Rican folk tales.

R.O. What's the inspiration behind these adaptations?

J.O.C. I grew up in an oral tradition. I first heard the one about María Sabida from my grandmother, and she changed it over the years. Sometimes it was bloody, or other times sanitized depending on what point she was making. Of course, because of the Juan Bobo stories, someone will call you Juan Bobo or Juana Boba at some point of your life. I was really enamored and interested in how much these little stories reveal. I am also entertained, like the Cenicienta sin príncipe [Cinderella without a prince], and I am fascinated by the fact that this was probably told by a woman to a woman because there is a talking cabrita [a goat] and mondongo [tripe]. It is so puertorriqueño...the Cinderella story is transformed and now it has mondongo in it! Of course, that is from my feminist side. The hadas [fairy godmothers] have babies and call each other sisters; that I added. I wanted to make it a story so that little Puerto Rican or American girls read and say what I said when I went to the library in Paterson, “You can be Chinese and be Cinderella, African and be Cinderella.” You don’t even need to have a prince!

I also love refranes; old sayings. I have a young-adult novel coming out in May in which the abuela in Puerto Rico uses all these refranes. I want them to go on. I want kids in high school to read these refranes and say “el diablo sabe más por ser viejo que por ser diablo;” the devil knows more from being old than from being a devil. In my own way I am saying, we are rich, we have this entire culture that we can have access to.

R.O. Any new projects?

J.O.C. I spent the year finishing these two books. I have a contract with Farrar, Straus and Giroux for a follow-up book to *An Island Like You*, so I finished this novel called *If I Could Fly*. The mother always said, Ay, si tuviera alas; Oh, if I only had wings, and the protagonist is the daughter of two salsa singers. Her mother gets sick and goes back to the island and the daughter follows her to bring her back. There she meets with a cultural clash between a grandmother who speaks only in refranes and the island’s hip-hop culture. It also gave me chance to research salsa.

R.O. Why salsa?

J.O.C. Again, this is the thing that I want others to know, I love my culture and I don’t want to lose it. In every book I write I try to immerse myself in some aspect of what is beautiful in what I brought in my imaginary luggage from my culture. Even though I am musically challenged and can’t carry a tune, I researched salsa and bolero music to create my characters. It also gave me a chance to talk about how art, the pursuit of art can shape a life. It took me several years to finish this novel.

I have been talking to teachers across the country about bringing creativity into the classroom and teaching my stories as part of a regular curriculum, not ghettoizing them. I was asked by an editor to turn these lectures into essays. I have a collection of essays and poems, with critiques by educators, called *Lessons from a Writer’s Life*, which will be aimed at teachers and students.

R.O. What did it mean to you to be inducted into the Georgia Writers’ Hall?

J.O.C. It sounds silly, but it meant more to me than just that honor. I don't say it as a boast. It is astonishing because I am there with President Jimmy Carter, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and here is this puertorriqueña. Puerto Rico barely acknowledges my existence. I would give anything to have puertorriqueños on the island just notice me as a fellow writer, and here I am in the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. I am now acknowledged as someone who has contributed to the culture of the state of Georgia. And they know that I am contributing to the culture of the state even though I am writing mainly about Puerto Ricans. In Puerto Rico I am seen as writing "immigrant literature." Hey, at least I have been given a homeland. I don't have to be straddling the margins anywhere if I don't choose to!

R.O. What would you like your legacy to be known as a puertorriqueña writer in Georgia?

J.O.C. I have a little legacy, it may not be a major one, but I basically feel that wherever I go to do readings, someone says to me, "You wrote about my life." That means a lot to me. There are other people living lives, and they actually consider themselves Puerto Ricans, but they are not in Old San Juan, or in San Germán, or in Hormigueros. One Puerto Rican woman in Vermont was practically in tears because she basically can't go back culturally or any other way. How can you say, "No, you are writing just for immigrants. How can you be writing for Puerto Ricans in Vermont?"

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Notes

¹ The church dedicated to the Virgen de la Monserrate (today a minor basilica) was built in 1775, after an alleged apparition of the Virgin to a girl. Her feast on September 8th attracts thousands of visitors from all over Puerto Rico.

² A series of visions of the Virgin Mary to Nancy Fowler brought national attention to Conyers, a small town, some thirty miles from Atlanta. Her visions extended from October 13, 1990, to October 13, 1998. They drew large crowds, mainly Latinos, as many as eighty thousand at the peak of the visions.

³ Founded in 1874, Hormigueros, a small pueblo on the southwestern coast of the island, shares with Cabo Rojo outstanding views of the Caribbean Sea. Cabo Rojo is well known for impressive high cliffs of red sand that make a perfect setting for viewing the incredible blue sky and ocean that Ortiz Cofer fondly remembers here.

⁴ El azul ofrece mayor interés y originalidad. Pero no el azul de los modernistas, símbolo del arte de lo bello. En Lola lo azul, como señala Florit en las páginas citadas, es el recuerdo. En *Mis cantares*, es la ilusión. El veinticuatro de junio de 1924 escribió Lola una de sus últimas poesías en donde la galondrina y el azul se juntan. Todo no es ahora más que recuerdo (27). Margot Arce, "Nuevo verdor florece: Homenaje a Lola Rodríguez de Tió." *Figuración de Puerto Rico y otros estudios*. San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1958. 7-28.

⁵ Ortiz Cofer used broadly the term nacionalista, literally a Nationalist, to indicate a pro-independence Puerto Rican. It may also refer to a political trend, after the foundation of the Nationalist Puerto Rican Party in 1922, which promoted armed fight against the domination of Puerto Rico by the federal U.S. government. Some nacionalistas activists were also "puertorriqueños con furia," known for their physical aggressions in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Two notable examples are Pedro Albizu Campos (1893-1965), the head of the Puerto Rican Nationalist, and the brain behind the attack on the U.S. House of Representatives in 1954, in which a woman, Lolita Lebrón (1919-2010), served as a shooter.