

**From Cultural Citizenship to Negotiated Belonging in Judith Ortiz Cofer's
*The Line of the Sun***

by Elizabeth Garcia

Historians, political scientists, and citizenship theorists, among other scholars, have debated the various definitions of citizenship and belonging and how these impact everyday experiences of Latinx people in the United States.¹ For Puerto Ricans, citizenship and belonging are further complicated by the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, which follows Puerto Rican migrants when they move to the United States. As De Genova and Ramos-Zayas explain, American citizenship for Puerto Ricans was never meant to be a full citizenship protected by the laws of the land and the rights of the Constitution (13). Gender adds another complexity to understandings of citizenship and belonging. Puerto Rican women have experienced what Raymond Rocco calls “exclusionary inclusion,” where their belonging is “regulated and restricted” by colonizing, racialized, and gendered discourses (xxx).² For instance, Isabel Gonzalez was denied entry into the United States in 1902 because, as a

¹ See for example, Oboler *Latinos and Citizenship: The Dilemma of Belonging*; Rosaldo, “Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy”; Flores and Benmayor *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*; Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States”; Rocco, *Transforming Citizenship: Democracy, Membership, and Belonging in Latino Communities*.

² See Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*; and Toro-Morn, “Yo era muy arriesgada: An Historical Overview of the Work Experiences of Puerto Rican Women in Chicago.”

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

single, pregnant woman, she was considered “likely to become a public charge” (Erman 5). The racialized discourses on the culture of poverty and welfare dependency implicated Puerto Rican women as unfit, welfare-dependent mothers whose out-of-control reproduction required governmental intervention and surveillance. Most recently, Carmen Yulín Cruz, the mayor of San Juan in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, was depicted as “nasty” by President Trump, yet there are limited studies that explore citizenship and belonging through a feminist and gendered lens.³

Literary works present an opportunity to explore what some of these models of citizenship and belonging might look like as Latinx writers (re)imagine these experiences. In this article, I analyze two characters in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s novel *The Line of the Sun* for their representation of two different models of citizenship and belonging. I expand on Renato Rosaldo’s idea of cultural citizenship, focusing on how gender shapes this experience for Ramona, the mother in the text. I then explore how cultural citizenship transitions into a nuanced form of belonging through the daughter, Marisol. Given the context of racialized and gendered second-class citizenship, how do Puerto Rican women (re)imagine and (re)define citizenship and belonging for themselves?

³ Exceptions include Baez, *In Search of Belonging: Latinas, Media, and Citizenship*; Deeb-Sossa and Bickham Méndez, *Latinx Belonging: Community Building and Resilience in the United States*; and Coll, *Remaking Citizenship: Latina Immigrants and New American Politics*.

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

The gendered lens is informed by feminist frameworks such as bell hooks's idea of “talking back,” as both characters participate in challenging, through their bodies, behaviors, and speech, hegemonic definitions of gender roles, citizenship, and belonging. Emma Pérez's decolonial imagining of a third space feminism found “within and between dominant male discourses” (32) further informs my analysis of Ramona's practice of cultural citizenship and Marisol's nuanced form of belonging as challenges to male discourses on national belonging.

Colonized Gendered Citizenship

Experiencing unbelonging has been historically consistent for Puerto Ricans both on and off the island. From its inception, American citizenship for Puerto Ricans was constructed to be ambiguous and partial. Racialized nationalist discourse abounded in congressional debates on granting Puerto Ricans citizenship, leading up to the Jones Act of 1917. As De Genova and Ramos-Zayas explain, “All the conquered subjects of U.S. imperial power following the Spanish-American War were racialized as ‘alien’ peoples utterly ‘unfit for U.S. citizenship and self-government” (13). Beginning with the insular cases, a series of Supreme Court cases where the status of Puerto Rico and its people in relation to the United States as solidified, Puerto Rico was defined as an “unincorporated territory,” and as such, its people were unworthy of citizenship and constitutional rights. Through the Jones Act of 1917, “Congress collectively naturalized the residents of Puerto Rico without changing the territorial status of

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

Puerto Rico” (Venator-Santiago 66). In other words, this form of congressional naturalization did not constitute 14th Amendment citizenship, and therefore, constitutional rights did not automatically apply to Puerto Ricans living on the island. The status of the island would once again limit the meaning of American citizenship for Puerto Ricans after birthright citizenship was granted with the Nationality Act of 1940. The tenuousness of this citizenship lies in the “plenary power” of Congress, which can summarily and without the consent of the Puerto Rican people, decide to revoke American citizenship, just as it imposed it over 100 years ago. This form of colonial citizenship, where citizenship is granted without full constitutional rights, enables the continued discourse and consequent image of Puerto Ricans as unworthy of belonging to the nation.

This discourse of unbelonging followed Puerto Ricans as migrants increasingly moved to the U.S. mainland, fleeing the economic and political effects of U.S. colonialism and the modernization and industrialization project of Operation Bootstrap in the 1950s. Claims to citizenship rights and belonging would continue into the post-World War II period when racialized discourses on the culture of poverty and welfare dependency marked Puerto Rican migrants as a “public liability, implicitly signaling that they are incorrigibly inassimilable and fundamentally un-‘American’” (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas 7). Puerto Ricans have claimed rights through their organizing, participation in electoral politics, and

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

activist movements, as those represented by organizations like the Young Lords Party of the 1960s-1970s.

Puerto Rican women's gendered subjectivity was defined through colonial and racialized discourses of their sexuality and reproduction. Laura Briggs has discussed how colonial military discourse deemed the island a diseased tropical place, which posed a threat to U. S. soldiers via Puerto Rican prostitutes. This concern resulted in the regulation of prostitution, where local prostitutes were subjected to medical exams and segregation to protect the colonizing soldier, and by extension, his white American wife back home (*Reproducing Empire* 16). Following the end of World War I, the concerns over Puerto Rican sexuality shifted from prostitution to reproduction. Economic policymakers, when addressing poverty and large rates of unemployment on the island, used overpopulation as the constant explanation. As a result, Puerto Rican women were targeted for birth control and sterilization programs, ultimately resulting in one-third of the population of women being sterilized by 1970.

These ideas about Puerto Rican women's sexuality and over-reproduction followed them to the U.S. mainland and evolved during the 1940s and 1950s as their numbers radically increased in New York City. Newspapers and magazines in New York City depicted Puerto Rican neighborhoods as overcrowded, disease-ridden areas that posed a threat to the city. These depictions were also gendered, as seen in one *Life Magazine* feature where the once reviled European

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

immigrant men were now juxtaposed as examples of productive masculinity in contrast to the images of Puerto Ricans “with the drawn female faces, truant children, and physically diminutive men” (Findlay 178). Once social scientists were recruited to address what became labeled the “Puerto Rican problem,” women’s reproduction and fertility became the root cause of all the ills of the community. As Leo Chavez explains, “Reproduction, as an object of discourse, is an ideological concept that defines normative fertility levels (those of white women) and their opposite: the nonnormative, stigmatized, ‘high fertility’ of Latinas and the sexual behavior that produced it” (77). Latina fertility has become the cornerstone of debates against immigration, representing their supposed excessive reproduction as a demographic threat to the country. Their excessive fertility is further used as evidence of irresponsible motherhood, a breakdown of the family, and absent fathers. These narratives were used by social scientists in the 1950s, who sought ways to explain the root cause of Puerto Ricans’ inability to follow the linear path to upward mobility and assimilation into American culture. Using the concept of “culture of poverty,” which was “characterized by absent fathers, matriarchal families, women having children while still very young themselves, poor work habits, violence, and obsession with sex,” scholars such as Oscar Lewis argued that Puerto Ricans were plagued by these characteristics and were therefore unable to move beyond their state of poverty (Briggs “La Vida” 76). In this context of racialized and gendered second-class citizenship, how do

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

Puerto Ricans (re)imagine and (re)define citizenship and belonging for themselves? In Judith Ortiz Cofer's novel *The Line of the Sun*, we find potential models for reimagining and redefining belonging that disrupt the racialized and colonial definitions of their gendered citizenship.

Cultural Citizenship and Negotiated Belonging

Cultural citizenship refers to the everyday practices Latinx communities engage in to claim belonging in the nation regardless of legal status. It speaks to the rights of Latinx communities to belong not just despite their differences but also through those differences. Several scholars have studied the ways in which Latinx communities employ cultural citizenship through everyday cultural activities and expressions as processes through which to claim citizenship rights.⁴ Others have analyzed political movements and forms of solidarity enacted through collective claims to belonging.⁵ Responding to what Suzanne Oboler calls the "dilemmas of belonging" (9), practices of cultural citizenship provide Latinx (im)migrants with the tools to navigate the push and pull experienced between holding on to cultural traditions and acculturating into mainstream American culture.

⁴ See Flores & Benmayor, *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* and Moreno, "Lessons of Belonging and Citizenship Among Hijos/os de Inmigrantes Mexicanos."

⁵ See Deeb-Sossa and Bickham Mendez, *Latinx Belonging: Community Building and Resilience in the United States*.

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

In *Remaking Citizenship: Latina Immigrants and New American Politics*, Kathleen Coll demonstrates how Latina immigrant women in San Francisco were able to use their gendered roles as mothers to make citizenship claims for themselves and their children. When their children's rights to safety, education, and health care were threatened, these women used their roles as mothers as motivation and inspiration for participating in local political movements demanding citizenship rights through their advocacy for "their own, their children's, and other immigrants' interests with respect to health care, social services, the law, and education. This sense of motherhood included a claim not only of belonging in their adopted city, but also a claim that they and their children were entitled to certain rights and services and to respect" (Coll 10).

In her book *In Search of Belonging: Latinas, Media, and Citizenship*, Jillian Báez takes the gendered analysis of cultural citizenship further by analyzing forms of negotiated belonging expressed by Latinas consuming American media. She analyzes how Latina audiences engage with media representations of themselves, constructing a form of belonging that disrupts stereotypical representations. In their desire to see themselves represented in media, participants in her study engaged in nuanced interpretations of the media they consumed and found their consumption of media as a basis for belonging. When criticizing representations they found problematic, they did so through a lens of citizenship preoccupied that such negative images would mark them as unworthy

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

of belonging (Báez 5). She therefore discusses the Latina gaze as a “negotiated gaze” that “holds fruitful possibilities for complicating agency within spectatorship” (Báez 19). In a similar vein, Marisol in *The Line of the Sun*, demonstrates a negotiated form of belonging by navigating multiple cultural influences as well as gendered racialized experiences that also offer “fruitful possibilities” for belonging to the United States (Báez 19).⁶ As Darlene Pagán explains in her study of Judith Ortiz Cofer’s work, Marisol both “conform[s] to and belie[s] cultural constructs” (“Ethnicity, Feminism, and Semantic Shifts”). By navigating complex cultural spaces and gendered expectations she is, in the end, able to model possibilities for belonging that encompass multilayered and intersectional identities.

The women in Baez’s study are essentially engaging in the feminist decolonial practice of “talking back,” where they refuse to accept prescribed representations of themselves, but instead actively respond to ensure more accurate representations of their lived experiences. In this respect, Latinas navigate within what Emma Perez calls an interstitial feminist space where they create decolonial narratives responding to their consistent silencing and erasure in both cultural representations and historical narratives (33).

⁶ For additional studies of gender and sexuality in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s work see: Carrasquillo, “Interrogating the Heteronormative Landscapes of Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* and *The Meaning of Consuelo*”; Fitts, *Coming of Age and the Transnational Subject in the Works of Judith Ortiz Cofer*; Pagán, *Ethnicity, Feminism, and Semantic Shifts in the Work of Judith Ortiz Cofer*.”

Gendered Cultural Citizenship

Ramona's model for belonging is steeped in her gendered role as wife and mother, similar to the women in Coll's study, and her responsibility to uphold and pass on Puerto Rican culture. She (re)creates island life in the concrete confines of El Building, the tenement building she and her family live in after migrating from the island. Ramona and the other women of El Building recreate the island in their surroundings, decorating their apartments with Puerto Rican cultural and religious artifacts (Ortiz Cofer 172). The women gathered around their kitchen tables to reminisce about Island life. In doing so, they created a community of women where, through storytelling and gossiping, they imparted wisdom and advice to one another as they used to do on the island. These conversations represent an "ethic of belonging through relational moments, including shared practices, *pláticas* (dialogues), and stories about critical and formative events that occur within families" (Moreno 54).⁷ Whereas on the island the women helped each other navigate their relationships with children and husbands, in El Building they also support each other in upholding their traditions while avoiding as much as possible the world outside of El Building. To Ramona, the outside world was

⁷ For further discussion on the use of *pláticas* as feminist practice see Delgado Bernal, "Learning and Living Pedagogies of the Home: The Mestiza Consciousness of Chicana Students."

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

one to endure until she could arrive to El Building, where upon entering, she “would close her eyes and breathe deeply; it was both a sigh of relief, for the city streets made her anxious, and a taking in of familiar smells” (Ortiz Cofer 171). As Carmen Faymonville explains, “For Ramona, cultural differences are absolute. Even after living in New Jersey for many years, she continues to find mainstream American culture impenetrable (“Motherland vs. Daughterland” 128). By creating this space of belonging within El Building, Ramona is participating in a form of cultural citizenship which Flores and Benmayor define as a “broad range of activities of everyday life through which Latinos and other groups claim space in society and eventually claim rights” (15). While Ramona does not transition to the eventual phase of claiming political rights, she still demonstrates agency in defending her right to live in her chosen community, as she consistently resists her husband’s efforts to move the family to suburbia (Ortiz Cofer 172). While Ramona endured weekend trips to the suburbs initiated by her husband with hopes of convincing her to move, to her these single-family homes appeared strange and vulnerable without the protection of the strength in numbers she found in El Building.

Ramona further demonstrates resistance to acculturation through her clothing and the way she carries her body, which unnerves her daughter, Marisol, who describes her as having “long black hair,” wearing spiked heels, who “carried herself not humbly, but as a woman who acknowledged her beauty” (Ortiz Cofer

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

173). To Marisol, her “gypsy mother” was an embarrassment “with her wild beauty. I wanted her to cut and spray her hair into a sculptured hairdo like the other ladies; I wanted her to wear tailored skirts and jacket like Jackie Kennedy...” (Ortiz Cofer 220). Ramona’s foreignness is both racial and sexual as she embodies the markers of the exotic Puerto Rican woman with her “wild beauty,” which is often perceived “to be in ‘excess’ of hegemonic constructions of womanhood, motherhood, and citizenship” (Mercado-López 1). Her resistance to changing her look to assuage others’ discomfort illustrates her gendered cultural agency asserting her right to belong regardless of her seemingly dissident style.

Resistance is also evident in the spiritist meeting the women organize as a response to the police surveillance the community is experiencing. Layoffs in the factory employing most of the men in El Building had increased. Talk of a potential labor strike and the restlessness of the unemployed men led Paterson police cars to “circle our block incessantly” (Ortiz Cofer 231), while plainclothes undercover agents warned the men at the local grocery store that “Big Hermano is watching” (Ortiz Cofer 244). El Building had been marked as an “other” racialized space, posing a threat to civility and security, and thus required consistent police surveillance. This response by the police and their overt warnings to the men, who were clearly perceived as criminals instead of as laborers with legitimate complaints, is indicative of the racialized citizenship this community is experiencing.

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

In response to the increasing tension in El Building, the women decide to have a spiritist meeting where spiritual mediums would gather with believers in hopes of finding some other-worldly guidance for their worldly troubles. The meeting only adds to the tension, as the labor organizers worry that the spiritist meeting will bring even more attention from the police and can further threaten their efforts. As Olivia Espín notes, however, the role of spiritual healer for Latina women “constitutes, for some, the expression of a sense of self that is strong and competent but cannot be fully communicated in all spheres of life without breaking cultural norms” (162). For Puerto Rican women, whose boundaries are limited by both gendered expectations and cultural alienation from the mainstream, the spiritist meeting represents a way of having some semblance of control over their lives. For these women, spiritualism “provides solace because it introduces a sense of historical continuity and a connection with a home” (Waldron 44). While the men see their actions as just a bunch of “hocus pocus” (Ortiz Cofer 246), the women are reclaiming their cultural rights and beliefs as just as legitimate as the men’s methods for claiming labor rights. In other words, they are evoking a decolonial imaginary challenging male discourses that dismiss their beliefs for countering hegemonic expectations of national behavior. While the men concern themselves with the outside world of work, the threats of the police, the women see their husbands as a threat to their gendered spaces within El Building they’d worked hard to create for themselves. In this sense, these

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

women are fighting for their “spatial rights.” Yuval-Davis defines “spatial rights” as “the right to enter a state or any other territory of a political community, and once inside, the right to remain there” (208). Ramona and her community of women are asserting their right to remain within the communal space they’ve created within El Building.

The men’s dismissive attitude towards the spiritist meeting and their concerns over bringing excessive attention to El Building by the police mimic Marisol’s expressed concerns over Ramona’s bodily excess becoming what Cindy Cruz calls “messy texts,” representing everyday bodily experiences that are often “dismissed, unread, and untheorized” (659). The spiritist meeting described in the novel represents Afro-Puerto Rican belief systems where African spirits or gods are called to become embodied through individual participants. The practice represents a combination of “Catholic symbols and ritual with ancient African rites to call forth spirits and to predict and heal” (Ortiz Cofer 238). As the organizer of the meeting, Ramona takes on a leadership role. Her apartment becomes a headquarters of sorts where the women come for instructions and to drop off their offerings. Elba, the leading santera of the meeting, would dress in the vestments of her orisha, Changó, a male aggressive deity. As the embodiment of Changó, Elba could perform masculine behaviors as seductress or warrior. These women are therefore evoking a power from within their brown bodies they believe can not only challenge the threats of the outside world, but also allow

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

them to transcend their prescribed gender roles. “In this sense, the brown body becomes agent, witness, and provocateur” (Cruz 660), precisely what their husbands fear.

While this form of belonging was certainly relevant to the women of the building, its limitations are evident in their resistance to the outside world, which violently enters their space when El Building is engulfed in flames. Forced to come out of the confines of El Building, the women find themselves abruptly thrust into the outside world. While for Ramona asserting her cultural citizenship within the space of El Building might’ve given her a semblance of control over her everyday life in an otherwise alien environment, it couldn’t protect her from the intrusions of the state. In this respect, Ortiz Cofer demonstrates the limitations of cultural citizenship as argued by Aihwa Ong, who asserts that the notion of cultural citizenship gives the erroneous impression that individuals can “escape the cultural inscription of state power and other forms of regulation that define the different modalities of belonging” (736). Not only do the police, as representatives of state power, threaten Ramona’s space of cultural citizenship, but, finding herself without the safety of El Building and thus forced to navigate the state bureaucracies to ensure her family’s safety, Ramona is unable to transfer her skills for claiming cultural and spatial rights into the outside world. Instead, her daughter Marisol, who’s been navigating both the internal cultural world of El

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

Building and the outside world represented by her Catholic school, takes over the project of claiming citizenship rights for the family.

Negotiated Belonging

As the second generation, Marisol represents another model of belonging, one that attempts to reconcile the tensions between the world represented within El Building and the outside American world that in her case is more prevalent in her all-white Catholic school. As Alexandra Fitts explains, for the children of Puerto Rican migrants their status in relationship to the island isn't a choice, it's a decision "imposed on them by their parents" and therefore "reflects their parents' attitudes and affiliations..." (59). We see this tension between parent and child attitudes around appropriate gender roles for women. Responding to the gendered constraints represented and imposed by her mother, Marisol searches for a form of belonging that transcends the gendered spaces of belonging as wife and mother, upheld by Ramona. Ramona had grown up in an environment on the island where women's proper behavior was dictated by the Catholic Church; women were expected to be homebodies following the model of the virgin Mary, as mother and martyr. Should she stray from these roles, the family's honor would be questioned. Ramona aims to uphold these traditional roles by increasing her surveillance of Marisol when she reaches puberty. Her mother becomes more vigilant over Marisol's behaviors, limiting the amount of time she spends outside, as that world not only threatens their cultural safety but also Marisol's virtue. Her

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

mother insists she now spend more time at home helping with household chores and preparation for the spiritist meeting.

Marisol initially resents El Building and the foreignness it represents. She spoke of “la mancha,” the markers that made Puerto Ricans appear different or as newcomers. For Marisol, her “mancha” was represented by her mother. “On the streets of Paterson my mother seemed an alien and a refugee, and as I grew to identify with the elements she feared, I dreaded walking with her, a human billboard advertising her paranoia in a foreign language” (Ortiz Cofer 174). In the same manner that the spiritist meeting is considered threatening by the men in El Building, Marisol feels threatened by her mother’s brown sexual body and how it might intervene in her assimilationist goals of not standing out as different.

Yet, Marisol also feels a nostalgic pull towards her island culture as she listens to her mother’s “constant rhapsodizing about that tropical paradise,” which made her feel deprived. “I should have grown up there. I should have been able to play in emerald-green pastures, to eat sweet bananas right off the trees, to learn about life from the women who were strong and wise...” (Ortiz Cofer 222). While critical of Ramona’s stories as romanticized retellings of island life where relatives appear as both mythical and heroic survivors, she nonetheless is drawn to the possibilities of belonging in a space where you are nourished not just by the land but by a community of strong and wise women, like her grandmother Mama Cielo.

***Label Me Latina/o*, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3**

Through her mother's stories, she also learns about La Cabra, the town whore, who was demonized on the island by women like her mother, who saw her as a threat to their normative gendered roles as wives and mothers. Marisol, however, is intrigued by this woman's transgressions that not only challenged the model of wife and mother represented by her mother, but also "functions in the novel as a specifically feminized symbol of anti-colonial resistance" (Faymonville "New Transnational" 140), by challenging the patriarchal colonial constructions of heteronormative Puerto Rican womanhood. By recognizing both traditional as well as transgressive forms of womanhood, Marisol demonstrates her ability for nuanced readings of her surroundings, skills that later allow her to activate her agency in a negotiated form of belonging.

While navigating through the complexities of womanhood, she is simultaneously questioning her cultural belonging. As a teenage girl, she seeks acceptance within the mainstream world of her school and peers. As she describes her experiences in school, "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" (Ortiz Cofer 232). The fear of exotic foreignness represented by her mother, whose body reminded her of what she "would have looked like if I had allowed myself to sway when I walked, and if I had worn loud colors and had spoken only Spanish" (Ortiz Cofer 220) results in her taking on the role of the

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

silent and compliant student ensuring she isn't perceived as a threat to American order and discipline prescribed by her teachers. As Fitts explains, "the pressures of body image, beauty, and sexuality" are significant for Puerto Rican adolescent girls in the United States (61). Yet no matter how much she tries to fit in, her inability to fully belong is made evident when she attends Christmas dinner at her white friends' home. While at dinner, her friend's mother stared at her because she'd been using a spoon to eat her dinner instead of a fork like everyone else. When she becomes ill, her friend's father, a doctor, drives her home, where his discomfort with her neighborhood is exacerbated when he is hit on the head by a snowball. She "wanted more than anything to believe that people like the Rosellis could accept me as one of their own" (Ortiz Cofer 189). But it was quite evident that no matter how much she tried to distance herself from her mother's world of El Building, she would never be "American" enough to fully fit into mainstream culture. As she comes to realize, "I was already very much aware of the fact that I fit into neither the white middle-class world of my classmates at Saint Jerome's nor the exclusive club of El Building's 'expatriates'" (Ortiz Cofer 177). Marisol, however, can overcome the binary options of unbelonging between El Building and St. Jerome's after the building fire forces her to develop a negotiated form of belonging where she's able to assert her agency.

As El Building is engulfed in flames, Marisol draws from the independence and resistance she'd learned all along from her mother and the many other

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

women she'd learned about through her mother's stories. Forced to deal with the outside bureaucratic world, Marisol took over the role of caretaker and protector of her family. She interpreted for her mother through phone calls and paperwork. "I told her where to sign and answered most questions without consulting her. 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 (Ortiz Cofer 273). She realizes that while she may never be able to experience her mother's nostalgic belonging to the island, nor be fully embraced by American culture, she can claim the skills and examples from both worlds, allowing her to advocate for her family. Marisol enters what Juan Flores calls the fourth moment of Puerto Ricans' cultural experience in the United States, which entails "this branching-out, the selective connection to and interaction with the surrounding North American society" (182). It involves a process of "retention and extension of the inherited cultures rather than their abandonment" (Flores 183). In other words, Marisol constructs a "resistant, oppositional, transformative, *diasporic* subjectivi[ty]" (Perez 33).

We see her employ these skills successfully when she encounters the Red Cross official insisting on asking her questions about the night of the fire, seeking to sway her towards incriminating the residents of the building.

There were dozens of people drinking and carrying on like they do in a tenement building where the walls are thin as paper, and you didn't hear

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

anything? You look like a smart girl to me. You know there's going to be a big investigation. Is there something you are hiding? Remember we are here to help you." (Ortiz Cofer 274)

Reminiscent of the social scientific discourse that blamed the community itself for its poverty, the Red Cross official attempts to persuade Marisol to be complicit in this discourse. Marisol, however, can see through the manipulation and veiled threats and "talks back" (hooks xi) to this authority figure. She uses the same passive-aggressive strategies used by Mrs. Pink to put the woman in her place while holding on to her agency when she responds:

I'm sorry, Mrs. Pink, but I have told you what I know. We are very grateful for your help, and when my father comes home, I will tell him to come to see you. I'm certain he will be able to answer your questions after he speaks with my mother." (Ortiz Cofer 275)

Flustered by her failure in persuading Marisol to bend to her will, Mrs. Pink responds, "There's no need to tell anyone about our conversation" (Ortiz Cofer 275). She didn't have the authority to be asking questions about the incident and had assumed she could manipulate Marisol into satisfying her "curiosity about us and El Building" (Ortiz Cofer 275). Marisol's ability to communicate in English as well as her experience with the outside mainstream world allow her to resist Mrs. Pink's intrusions and insinuations, refusing to fit into the narrative she'd already created about Puerto Ricans from El Building. In this sense, she was putting into

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

practice “what I had learned about dealing with the world through words, persuasions, politely phrased threats” (Ortiz Cofer 278). She’s not assimilating into mainstream culture and rejecting her Puerto Rican roots. Instead, she’s using the skills she’s learned from engaging with the world outside of El Building to protect and better represent her Puerto Rican culture and community through a nuanced gaze. As Faymonville asserts:

ethnic and national identification involve process of continuous invention that links past, present, and future. [For Marisol] identity is always a constant negotiation between [her] perceptions of culture, ethnic essentialism, competing national affiliations, and gender roles.” (“New Transnational” 132)

Like the participants in Báez’s study, Marisol employs a negotiated form of belonging that combines elements from her mother’s model of cultural citizenship, while transgressing the racialized and gendered norms expected of her.

This negotiated form of belonging is further evident when, following El Building’s demise, the family moves to the suburbs. While Ramona is away on a visit to Puerto Rico, Marisol, along with her father and brother, explore the “land of suburbia, first as tourists guided from house to house by cautious real estate agents who were obviously concerned about introducing the first Puerto Rican family into the middle-class Italian neighborhoods which they seemed to think

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

were the best compromise” (Ortiz Cofer 282). Their racialized citizenship does not end with the demise of El Building as they continue to be perceived as a threat to the racial homogeneity of the suburbs. However, Marisol had already learned “how to rebel...how not to fear anything or anyone” (Ortiz Cofer 233) and brings these newfound skills of resistance to their suburban space.

When they finally settle on a house, she uses her storytelling skills to claim the room in the attic, which she immediately determines will become “a room of her own,” evoking Virginia Woolf’s feminist essay. Some critics have read this moment as evidence of Ortiz Cofer’s affirmation of an Americanized individualist identity (Siebert Wadman 79). Others have read this moment as Ortiz Cofer suggesting that belonging is found through writing and language (Concannon 71). However, Marisol does not see their suburban home as a symbol of acquiring full citizenship or belonging in the United States. She describes this new stage in their lives as “our newest exile,” asserting that it will not only be her mother who finds this space alienating (Ortiz Cofer 286). “Suburbia thus functions both as a place of belonging and unbelonging” (Socolovsky 110). But unlike her mother’s experience, for whom the new house would be a “place that threatened to imprison her” (Ortiz Cofer 285), their suburban home becomes another opportunity for Marisol to hone her skills of negotiation.

By entering the suburban space, the family transgresses the expected locations for their subjectivity as those relegated to marginal spaces like El

***Label Me Latina/o*, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3**

Building. They claim their right to belong in the center of the nation. Yet this claim is not made at the expense of their cultural past. As Marisol describes, in their new suburban house, she joined her mother at their new kitchen table where her mother's stories of island life continue to be shared and embellished by both mother and daughter. The continued significance of stories, however, is not indicative that language and storytelling are the only places of belonging for Marisol. Instead, they are part of her arsenal of tools to maintain a bridge to her cultural past while carving a place for herself in the United States. Furthermore, Marisol's negotiated belonging also transcends gendered expectations, as she is now in a prominent role in the household where she is responsible for her mother's well-being. She also takes on the public responsibility for navigating the various external structures and institutions that potentially dictate her family's safety, transitioning from the internal aspects of cultural citizenship to public political claims to rights and belonging.

Conclusion

Puerto Ricans have always been denied national belonging given their long history as colonized and racialized subjects. Yet along with these experiences of unbelonging, and perhaps because of them, they have also always found nuanced ways to make claims to cultural and political rights. In the novel *The Line of the Sun*, Judith Ortiz Cofer offers two possibilities for asserting belonging in the United States through a gendered lens. Ramona and the community of El Building

Label Me Latina/o, Fall 2026 Vol.16.3

hold onto their gendered culture, keeping their traditions and memories alive, creating a sense of belonging engrained in a community of women that helps them “escape from the dreary cycle of factory work, tenement living, second-class citizenship” (Ortiz Cofer 10). Ramona asserts her agency by refusing her husband’s demands to move to the suburbs and by insisting on her own style of clothing and bodily expression. The spiritist meeting further challenges masculinist discourses of national belonging that require hegemonic expressions of both gender and culture. In this respect, Ramona asserts her cultural citizenship rights to belong regardless of her differences.

Through Marisol, we see the possibilities of belonging that go beyond the binary between Puerto Rican culture and American culture and instead use the skills garnered from both cultures while reconciling the tensions and the gaps between the two. She creates a nuanced form of belonging that, while never complete, still leaves her with a sense of agency over her narrative. She employs feminist decolonial methods by “talking back” against gender and cultural expectations, creating a negotiated form of belonging for herself. While Puerto Ricans continue to struggle for full citizenship, literary works of authors like Judith Ortiz Cofer can be the spaces where possibilities of belonging can be imagined, and perhaps from there made real.

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