

**Introduction to special edition:
Cultural Vaivén: Celebrating the life and work of Judith Ortiz Cofer**

Melissa D. Birkhofer
Western Carolina University

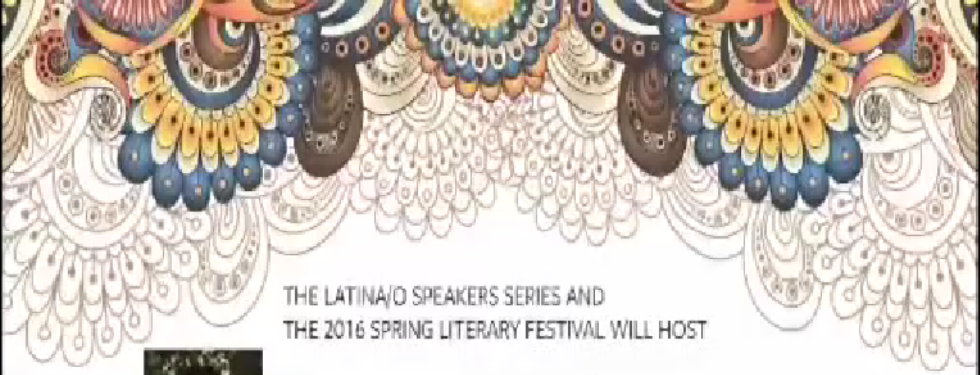
Dedicated to John and Eli

This special edition, *Cultural Vaivén: Celebrating the life and work of Judith Ortiz Cofer* (1952-2016), focuses on the ways in which Ortiz Cofer has shaped American letters as a Southern Latina American writer, scholar, and teacher. Judith Ortiz Cofer was an award-winning and nationally acclaimed U.S. Latina writer of fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and children's books. Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cofer moved with her parents to Paterson, New Jersey at the age of four. Spending extended amounts of time both on the island and the mainland, her literary works reflect the cultural conflicts of the constant movement in and out of cultures and languages.


She was a winner of the Pushcart Prize for her story "More Room" from *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, and she was the first Hispanic person to win the O. Henry Prize for "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica." Ortiz Cofer was distinguished Professor of English and Creative Writing at UGA for many years and received Regents Professor recognition in 2006. In 2010, she was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame and received the Georgia Governor's Award in the Humanities in 2011. Her works highlight many complex topics including migration, circulation, bilingualism, gender and gender discrimination, and notions of home and belonging.

I had the distinct pleasure of meeting Ortiz Cofer in April of 2016 when she came to Western Carolina University. Judith was the inaugural speaker of the newly formed Josefina Niggli Latinx Speakers Series, which aims to bring students, faculty, and the Western North Carolina community together with speakers to discuss pertinent, interdisciplinary issues in Latinx communities. The Speakers Series showcases the intersections of the global and local by focusing on the growing number of Latinx people in North Carolina and the U.S. South. I had hoped to have Judith as the first speaker in the series and she very graciously accepted my invitation. Over the few months before her visit I corresponded with her off and on and she mentioned she had been ill but was planning on coming to WCU to give her talk.

I was worried that her health might impact her talk and ability to meet with students, or that the time on campus would wear her out, but she dazzled and delighted everyone in attendance. Her talk, entitled, "We are our Stories: On Time, Place, and Distance" resonated with students especially (two students have reflection pieces in this edition about Ortiz Cofer's visit to WCU).




THE LATINA/O SPEAKERS SERIES AND
THE 2016 SPRING LITERARY FESTIVAL WILL HOST





Judith Ortiz Cofer
Tuesday, April 5, 2016, 7:30pm
UC Theater, WCU campus

Ortiz Cofer, a nationally acclaimed writer originally from Puerto Rico, will read from a selection of works including new stories! There will be books for purchase and Ortiz Cofer will sign your book!

 NORTH CAROLINA
HUMANITIES
COUNCIL
MANY STORIES, ONE PEOPLE

This event is sponsored in part by the UNC Latino/a Studies Program, the Office of Undergraduate Studies, and the Viking Scholars Fund at WCU. This project is made possible in part by funding from the North Carolina Humanities Council, a statewide non-profit, and a filip of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

 Western
Carolina
UNIVERSITY



Shortly after her visit to WCU, which was to be her last public talk and last classes she taught, her health waned as she battled a rare form of cancer. Judith Ortiz Cofer passed away on December 30, 2016.

It is with great pleasure that I was given the opportunity to collect the following pieces to honor the life and work of Judith Ortiz Cofer. You'll find in this special edition that Ortiz Cofer had the special ability to charm everyone she met. Collected here are remembrances and scholarly pieces from colleagues, friends, and students of Judith. The wide range of scholarship, creative essays, reflections, an interview, and pedagogical piece in this edition demonstrate Ortiz Cofer's impact as a Southern Latina American writer, scholar, and friend. She is gone too soon, but her memory and legacy live on.

En el estilo de Judith,

Abrazos Fuertes,

Melissa D. Birkhofer, editor
February, 2018
San Cristóbal de las Casas, México