

## A Tribute to Judith Ortiz Cofer

By Marilisa Jimenez

One of Judith Ortíz-Cofer's greatest contributions to Latinx literary studies is that she planted her voice and work in English letters. Continually, she reminded readers and scholars that she was a student of Flannery O'Connor and Pablo Neruda and that drawing from these literary heritages did not throw her status as a Puerto Rican writer into confusion. As a student of her work, I admired just how deeply she disrupted how Puerto Rican writing in the U.S. was often categorized. In "Are You a Latina Writer?" from *Woman in Front of the Sun* (2000), Ortíz-Cofer describes her writing as a "bridge of [her] own design and construction" that she, as a young Puerto Rican poet, used to "travel[] back and forth without fear and confusion as to where I belonged—I belong to both" (108). Ortíz-Cofer was born on the island and lived as a child in New Jersey. She began her work as writer and poet in Georgia, eventually establishing herself as professor at the University of Georgia in Athens. She was not "Nuyorican" although her work, such as *The Latin Deli* (1993), greatly contributes to the nuances of what is known as Nuyorican writing, and more importantly, the writings of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Ortíz-Cofer asks us to look beyond geographical spaces, whether the North, the South, or even the island itself, for affirming cultural and literary traditions. Her writing thrives in the between spaces where readers and writers can create something new, something which transcends all the categories that divide American, Latin American, and Caribbean literature.

I never read a book by a Puerto Rican author in school. My mother always found books and leyendas from Puerto Rico to show my sister and I. At age five, I was translated from Puerto Rico to New York, and then later to Florida, but my mother's persistence and example assured I never forgot that I came from the line of Hostos and Betances. I developed a love of writing, though not necessarily reading. I remember once telling an author who came to visit our local library that she should write a story about a little girl named Marilisa. Looking back, I see that I was asking for a book which reflected my history and culture in the context of my reading experiences in the U.S. It was only in my doctoral program at the University of Florida that I encountered books in English about Puerto Ricans and found names like Pura Belpré, Nicholasa Mohr, and Judith Ortíz-Cofer. However, Ortíz-Cofer showed me that I belonged not only to the line of Hostos and Betances, but also to the "House of English."

I am particularly drawn to the element of fairytale in "A Fable of Our Times" which conveys the story of perhaps the wickedest stepmother of all—"Stepmother English." In the story, also in *Women in Front of the Sun*, Ortíz-Cofer reflects on historical traumas through allegory, personifying "English" as a "beautiful and cruel" stepmother embarrassed by her "mongrel" children. However, in the tradition of Nicholasa Mohr, Ortíz-Cofer's fable condemns a system of U.S. and British literature which fails to recognize the rightful place for all of English's "stepchildren":

Once upon a time a young girl lived in the house of English. The girl loved English, although English was not her mother tongue; she was her stepmother tongue. Mother English was both beautiful and cruel and she preferred the company of men. (92)

Ortíz-Cofer distinguishes this fabled family line by language as opposed to race, ethnicity, or nationality, though sociolinguistics would certainly tell us those categories remain linked. She

challenges the notion of “native English” and the marginality of “non-native English.” Ortíz-Cofer highlights the rightful, though subjugated, place of these stepchildren within the house of English. English may wish to subdue or hide her stepchildren, but she can never succeed at denying their lineage.

English’s stepdaughter despaired when she discovered that her stepmother disdained not only women but also the foreign, the dark, the strange. The threat of spoiling her beauty by associating with mongrels send English into a panic, and because her stepdaughter was not acceptable by her standards, being an ugly child acquired through a politically motivated union, she locked her up in a room whose original use she had forgotten. But the girl continued to love English because she had been brought to her house at a tender age and knew nothing and no one as well as she knew English. (93)

Ortíz-Cofer allows readers to see the “ugly” child of a “politically motivated union” as representing English’s “fruits” of conquest, whether U.S., European, Caribbean, etc. The description also underlines the instability of English’s own identity, highlighting the various cultures and nations who could identify as “English” even without their stepmother’s approval. The image of English locking up her lovers and progeny highlights the impossibility of strict categorizations (English Literature, Caribbean Literature, American Literature, Spanish Caribbean, African-American Literature, Children’s Literature, etc.) within this family line.

As a graduate student and postdoc, I corresponded with Judith about my work and the possibility of visiting her in Georgia for research. As a doctoral student at the University of Florida, I wrote her a very formal letter in which I detailed my dissertation project—her writing encompassed a substantial amount of a key chapter. She responded, on University of Georgia stationary, which completely blew me away. As an English major, I was so used to writing about authors and movements who were long gone. Reading Judith’s words to me, in which she said she would be willing to work with me on a limited basis, as I was not a Georgia student, made me realize how alive the Puerto Rican diaspora, and the topic of Puerto Rican writing, truly was. My doctoral studies continued forward, and I decided it might be best not to include her until the project developed into a book, since I wanted space to think about how each writer fit with the greater story I was telling. To be honest, it worried me to think that a writer I wrote about would somehow not agree with my perspective on their work. Later, as a postdoc at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro), I wrote to Judith again, hoping to interview her for an oral history project they were conducting on Puerto Rican in the U.S. I reminded her I felt particularly affiliated with her experiences as someone who had also studied in the South. Judith immediately responded through email, and she offered to open up her home to me which she said was a great place to write because it was in “the piney woods.” Always in my correspondence with Judith, the idea of her writing as a Boricua woman from the woods of Georgia was somewhat badass and unsettling. To me, she articulated best the hope of a non-essentialist identity. Her “piney woods” seemed to say to me, “I can articulate my reality and life as a Boricua woman even in the most obscure out of the way places. I don’t need the traditional markers of Puerto Rican identity from the island or even New York.” In my travels and life in Florida and New York, and even studying current diasporas from the island to places such as Orlando, Florida and South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (where I teach today), I wonder how well we have understood the shifting face of Puerto Rican identity in the U.S. In one of her follow-up emails, she told me my visit would have to wait a while because she was sick. She began following me on Twitter and we exchanged messages on LinkedIn—messages which I don’t plan on ever deleting.

However, with all of our promises of meeting and collaborating, Judith and I never met in person. It is interesting to me because I have met many writers since completing my doctoral work including Sonia Manzano and Nicholasa Mohr. With Mohr, for example, I had the opportunity to interview her in her home in East Harlem and tell her about my work as a researcher at Centro. In that interview, I was able to see how, as scholars, we can still collaborate with authors and build narratives even if a writer doesn't see eye to eye with you on a given point. Yet, with Judith, the person whose writing I somehow felt most allied with, I was never able to tell her in person what her work, as a Boricua English professor and writer, meant to me. When I heard she passed, I was devastated. Ultimately, her legacy to me, through her writing and fable, taught me that even if English rejected the rights of children like me, English needed me in order to survive in a place which was in flux linguistically, racially, and culturally. Judith Ortíz-Cofer was the first writer I read who unapologetically claimed that English, just as much as Spanish, was her, and my, inheritance. And I could use it to advance into its camp and use it artfully.

**Works Cited**

- Ortíz-Cofer, Judith. *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- . *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000.