

## From Silence to Song: Reading the Therapeutics of Expression

### in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Meaning of Consuelo*

By Paula Michelle Rawlins

As part of his reflection on Judith Ortiz Cofer's life, Rafael Ocasio, her close friend and Puerto Rican "fact checker," recalls the "many" times the two discussed "the healing power of literature" (Ocasio, "Judith")<sup>1</sup>. Most humanities scholars share a similar respect of art's ability to offer restorative solace, but in recent decades, an increasing number of scientists have also turned their attention to the connections between the arts and healing. As a result, a growing body of research confirms music's ability to aid trauma survivors in both their physical and emotional recovery. Already, at the The Louis Armstrong Center of Music and Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, music therapists such as Christine Vaskas Churba use womb-like sounds and steady drumbeats to help NICU babies separated from their mothers lower their heart rates after the trauma of birth (Greene). Elsewhere, music therapy allows a group of veterans, all survivors of Military Sexual Trauma, to reduce their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms once returning home (Story and Beck 93). A spokesperson for the American Music Therapy Association provides further confirmation of music's ability to promote healing in a wide array of survivors following devastating events: "Music therapists have worked with the Red Cross, with first responders, with kids from violent homes... We were at Katrina, we were at 9/11" (Bumanis qtd. in Greene). All of these real-world examples provide significant insight to often-overlooked scenes from Ortiz Cofer's 2003 novel *The Meaning of Consuelo*, in which members of a troubled family find themselves gravitating toward the arts in various ways— the youngest daughter drawing curious images, the concerned mother dancing to beloved records, and the worried father playing his forgotten guitar once more.

While these images of the Signe family seeking solace through art merit our attention, most existing scholarship on *The Meaning of Consuelo* focuses on issues of gender and nationalism. Susan C. Méndez, for example, offers a reading of the three leading female characters in the novel, each serving as an allegory for a different way to interpret Puerto Rico's identity: "as nation, commonwealth, or ethno-nation" (33). Meanwhile, in her book *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature*, Maya Socolovsky devotes a chapter to Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* and *The Meaning of Consuelo*, arguing these "texts disrupt U.S. national identity by showing the ambiguity of Puerto Rican presence on and off the island" (99). Yet another critic, Hilary Brewster, successfully argues for closer readings of queerness in the novel, proving that the titular character of Consuelo provides an example of what Gloria Anzaldúa terms the "*mestiza* consciousness... a perception of self and reality that blurs the lines of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and nationality" (Brewster 66). While such readings are valuable, I suggest the importance of reading for another theme that brings great import to the narrative of *The Meaning of Consuelo*—the therapeutics of self-expression in the face of trauma. Almost every review or article written about the novel mentions Mili, the title character's younger sister "tragically afflicted with schizophrenia," and yet little scholarship closely examines the portrayal of Mili's pained struggle to communicate with the world around her and her family's use of coping mechanisms as *la tragedia* unfolds (Benson 126).

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Therefore, I'd like to add a layer to the existing body of scholarship on *The Meaning of Consuelo* and argue that this work also demonstrates the complex healing nature of the expressive arts. Borrowing key words from chapter titles in the novel, I present my work in three sections. First, in *Tragedia*, I explore how trauma permeates the storyline of *The Meaning of Consuelo*, establishing both Mili and Consuelo as in need of therapeutic tools. Next, in *Silencio* I read Mami's, Mili's, and Consuelo's respective silences as examples of learned responses to patriarchal power dynamics. Finally, in *Consolar*, I illustrate how each of the Signe family members benefits from the expressive arts but fails to utilize them fully as means to greater mental health for Mili. When examined, musical imagery throughout the novel coalesces to create a message about the stunning but underappreciated powers of expressive art therapy. My reading invites us not only to consider cultural healing practices, but also Ortiz Cofer's status as one of contemporary literature's most perceptive and poignant writers in regards to the portrayal of survival practices.

### ***Tragedia: Trauma in The Meaning of Consuelo***

Only since the 1990s have neurologists managed to effectively create and study images of brain activity on a substantial scale. I argue this burgeoning field of neuroscience complements literary studies' insight to human behavior, including the realms of experiencing and healing from trauma. Trauma specialist and psychiatrist Dr. Bessel van der Kolk reports in his 2014 book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* that contemporary brain scans validate Freud and other early psychoanalysts' theories about trauma's impact on the human mind. The most basic definition of trauma offered by van der Kolk is an event that is "unbearable and intolerable," an idea influenced by Freud's original theory that traumatic events occur when threatening stimuli overload a person's response systems, leaving the victim unable to react effectively (1). Recent research proves that when a victim recalls traumatic events, the left side of the brain (largely responsible for language and logic) becomes paralyzed and unable to aid the right hemisphere (associated with the emotions and arts) with processing information (van der Kolk 44-45). These findings confirm the long-held psychological suspicion that trauma causes a change in the brain, leaving survivors unable to process logically events that have occurred or to talk effectively about what they have experienced. This understanding of the brain's impaired processing helps explain why so many victims of torture, rape, and other atrocities find it difficult to speak about the abuse or to feel safe even once threats have long abated. Meanwhile, a wide array of psychological and neurological studies shows that engaging in expressive art therapies—such as art, dance, or music therapy—stimulates the brain in beneficial ways, proving especially helpful for survivors of trauma. Such knowledge provides an innovative lens through which to examine the trauma depicted in Ortiz Cofer's novel characterized by themes of silence and language.

*The Meaning of Consuelo* contains multiple examples of traumatic events in the life of the narrator, Consuelo, and other members of her family. Consuelo, a young woman coming of age in 1950s Puerto Rico, turns a careful and discerning eye to both her sister and parents throughout the novel. By the end of the first chapter she tells us, "There was no way for any of us to know that Mili's talent for losing herself—as if inside her there was a hole she dove into, like Alice in Wonderland—was also the start of our family's spiraling toward what we would always call *la tragedia*, the events leading to the terrible day that changed everything for each of us, forever" (10). With the fantastical imagery of Mili falling down a rabbit hole within herself and the language of "spiraling toward," Ortiz Cofer creates a sense of urgency as she prefigures Mili's mental

deterioration due to schizophrenia and her final disappearance into the ocean. Such foreshadowing continues throughout the text, suspense and fear building as Consuelo experiences several different traumatic moments, each one a tragedy. While most critics who write about *The Meaning of Consuelo* focus on the allegorical nature of the novel's tragic moments, deciphering what they suggest about Puerto Rico's political status or women's prescribed roles, I examine these tragedies in a literal sense, asking what the responses of Consuelo and her family reveal about humankind's ability to cope with trauma and heal from its impact.

Repeatedly, Consuelo and Mili both bear witness to the rocky and sometimes violent relationship between their parents, an occurrence so prevalent in homes that many readers may fail to recognize such scenes as indicative of trauma. Upon coming home to see their father throwing a plate, "Mili grab[s] [Consuelo's] hand in terror" (58). Consuelo confesses, "My parents argued a lot, but it was usually Mami who broke things. When a man breaks something in anger, the next thing he grabs may be one of your limbs; we heard that said by women in our own house" (58). While this instance of thrown plates turns out to be only a show of the new Pyrex dishes' durability, Mili's reaction and Consuelo's commentary speaks to a truth van der Kolk acknowledges in his work: a great number of children grow up in homes punctuated by parents' violent quarrels and will continue to feel the chaos's impact throughout their lives (1). Sadly but not surprisingly, "more than half of the people who seek psychiatric care have been assaulted, abandoned, neglected or even raped as children, or have witnessed violence in their families" (van der Kolk 24). The impact of growing up in unharmonious homes should not be underestimated. As van der Kolk elaborates, these experiences can "leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems" (1). Though we never see Papi physically hurt Mami or one of his daughters, the loud confrontations clearly disturb Consuelo, as she mentions them on multiple occasions. "I heard [Mami and Papi] arguing fiercely behind their bedroom door," she tells us at one point, "fiercely" creating a sense that even verbal assaults can have a sharp physical impact (62). On another day Consuelo "hear[s] [her parents'] argument all the way in [her] room," suggesting an alarming volume and creating an image of her parents' discord invading what Consuelo rightfully expects to be a private and safe haven (94).

Most painful for Consuelo, though, seems to be her father's infidelity, likely the cause of many of her parents' fights. Through her cousin Patricio, Consuelo learns that her "father was seeing a woman at the Golden Palms;" afterward, she tells us, "I walked around with my chest and head heavy with the burden of my knowledge" (83). Here, Ortiz Cofer's chosen language not only describes the figurative weight Consuelo has taken upon herself, but also indicates the truth that bearing witness to parents' confrontations and transgressions leaves many children with genuine ailments. As Janie Sarrazin and Francine Cyr report in their overview of parental conflict's effect on children, witnessing parents fight can cause "increased cardiac rhythm, higher blood pressure, [and] lower body temperature" in children and teens (79). Consuelo and Mili stand to suffer both emotional and physical distress due to their parents' repeated fighting, resulting in a home life marred by pain.

Several traumatic events occur in front of the already chaotic backdrop of Mami and Papi's perpetual fighting. Consuelo's disappointment at losing her virginity to Wilhelm in something "like a painful wrestling match" and her ensuing fallen social status at school are certainly difficult trials (112-113). In addition, Mili's sudden butchering of a hen stands out for its violence, and Consuelo "vividly recall[s] the gory scene: [her] sister covered in blood, holding a huge knife in her hand" (90). Consuelo says the image "horrif[ies]" her, admitting she had momentarily forgotten her relentless job of looking after Mili (90). Here, Consuelo's failure to watch over her

sister causes her to witness an upsetting sight that will lead to yet another fight between Mami and Papi. Through shocking episodes such as these, Ortiz Cofer crafts a plot that moves quickly from one distressing scene to another.

While taking the knife from Mili's grasp, Consuelo cuts her own finger, and the resulting blood points to an earlier scene in the novel, the most indicative of trauma experienced by Consuelo and Mili alike. During a stay at Abuela's, the sisters and their cousins visit the annual fiesta with its music, candy, carnival rides, and unexpected danger. While enjoying her "new privilege" of riding the Ferris wheel, Consuelo loses track of Mili, whom she left below on the ground (33). Eventually, spotting her sister "on the way down past the dark area behind the rides" throws Consuelo into a panic (34). Readers, too, are troubled as they learn Mili is "sitting on Néstor's lap" (34). Néstor, introduced on the previous page as a neighborhood bully known for underage drinking and violence against his own mother, instantly appears as a threat (34). Portraying Mili with an ice-cream cone and Néstor with a cigarette, Ortiz Cofer accentuates Mili's frail innocence in comparison with Néstor's hardened demeanor (35). Consuelo even describes her sister as looking "like a large doll" on his lap, reinforcing Mili's vulnerability (35).

The shadowy and suspicious nature of the scene intensifies when Consuelo tells us that one of Néstor's hands is "hidden behind [Mili's] back" (35). The illicit connotations conjured by the obscurity of the scene, Néstor's possession of the phallic burning cigarette, and his handling Mili as if she were an inanimate object all support reading the scene as one of sexual misconduct. The most convincing signal of molestation, though, is Consuelo's misreading of her sister's dress. Mili "wave[s] back [to Consuelo] with her ice-cream cone, spilling the chocolate all over the front of her white dress" (34). "From where I was," Consuelo remembers, "it looked like a blood stain, and my head throbbed as I felt myself getting sick to my stomach" (34). Mili's stained white dress arouses connotations of lost purity, while Consuelo's mistaking the chocolate for blood speaks to her own lost innocence. The sexual activity suggested by a bloodstained dress would be lost on most children. For Consuelo, though, the chocolate mistaken for blood leads to a visceral reaction, indicating she detects an act significantly grimmer than a child's dress dirtied by ice cream. As a result, the carnival scene with Néstor documents a pivotal traumatic incident for both sisters.

Within the scene, Ortiz Cofer's stylistic choices suggest a writer familiar with the brain's struggle to interpret and respond to trauma. Consuelo fails to articulate exactly what she witnesses: "When I saw—or did I just think I saw?—what [Néstor] was doing to my sister, I yelled out her name as loud as I could. The girl next to me said harshly, '¿Estás loca? What are you doing? Do you want to get us killed?' But I kept on yelling Mili's name until finally she looked up" (34). Though Consuelo will tell us so many of her secrets—from her day spent skipping school to her first sexual encounter—in this passage she holds back. The interrupting dashes of "When I saw—or did I just think I saw?—what he was doing to my sister" create a sense of chaos since the punctuation marks are rarely used elsewhere in the narrative. Furthermore, Consuelo feels compelled to scream at full capacity, but only tells us Néstor holds Mili in his lap. The reader anticipates the coming sentences to be full of dreadful images, but no other description of Néstor's actions comes. Markedly different from her usually vivid details, Consuelo's lack of information does not suggest self-censorship. Instead, Ortiz Cofer uses Consuelo's silence to construct an accurate portrayal of experiencing trauma. Though witnessing her sister's molestation alone could be enough to cause Consuelo to enter a state of trauma, her location on the Ferris wheel also inhibits her ability to rescue Mili, making her brain and body even more likely to enter a state of shock due to her helplessness. Because the left side of the brain shuts down when entering a traumatized state, Consuelo is unable to access language to describe the scene she witnesses. As

van der Kolk and others report, this lack of language means trauma survivors are often unable to create linear narratives of what happened to them. Instead, they possess only sensory impressions and flashes of images. The neuroscience of trauma thus explains Consuelo's vivid memory of an otherwise mundane ice-cream stain and her ability to recall her fellow passenger's words but not the actual scene she has witnessed.

Most scholarship on *The Meaning of Consuelo* makes only passing references to Mili's schizophrenia and a few critics briefly mention the scene examined above. Méndez, for example, does refer to "this incident of sexual molestation," but her allegorical reading focuses on how the act "portrays the commonwealth [of Puerto Rico]'s vulnerability" while I would like to focus on the significance of the scene taken for what it depicts—a traumatic incident of physical transgression (40). I argue the trauma Mili and Consuelo experience at the fiesta is imperative to the novel as the event leaves both girls with a tragic secret, leading to a numbing or dissociative effect, which explains later scenes in which Mili fails to interact with the world around her. As past traumas go unaddressed, survivors often experience flashbacks, repeatedly reliving the sensations related to their trauma. This repetition means:

the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind [of survivors]. Ordinary, day-to-day events become less and less compelling. Not being able to deeply take in what is going on around them makes it impossible to feel fully alive. It becomes harder to feel the joys and aggravations of ordinary life, harder to concentrate on the tasks at hand. (van der Kolk 67)

Such symptoms of long-held trauma mirror the catatonic symptoms of schizophrenia, which Mili presents during her unresponsive states. Of course, we know Mili's psychiatrist believes the girl's catatonic episodes are symptoms of her schizophrenia. Though the medical community agrees genetics play a large role in the development of schizophrenia, the exact cause is still unknown and many researchers question the extent to which environmental factors play a role ("Schizophrenia" 524). Multiple studies report a higher incidence of childhood trauma, including sexual abuse, among patients with schizophrenia than among patients with other mental health disorders, suggesting the fictional Mili's experience represents the reality of certain survivors of abuse (Mørkved, N., et al and Mrizak, J., et al). Before the incident with Néstor, Mili's family has already noticed her unusual ability "of turning herself into a self-contained, fully automated doll," but Néstor's actions almost certainly help accelerate the progression of Mili's psychosis (Ortiz Cofer 10). As a result, Mili's story encourages us to remember the complex nature of mental health and the fact there is rarely one, clear cause of any mental illness. Instead, Mili's deterioration results from multiple forces, and I argue Néstor's predatory actions are a significant factor.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk shares the example of Tom, a Vietnam Marine veteran, who struggled to feel anything after returning from war. Tom "felt emotionally distant from everybody," including his wife and children (van der Kolk 14). A lawyer, he would "observe himself from a distance" when in the courtroom, unable to feel as if he was the one delivering the arguments he prepared (14). Riding his Harley was one of few activities Tom could enjoy in order to feel like himself again. Though van der Kolk suggests the vibrations of Tom's motorcycle were partly responsible for the bike's therapeutic impact, Tom also belongs to the group of patients van der Kolk mentions who engage in "highly dangerous situations" to feel some sense of control or connection to their bodies (67). Hence, Mili's slaughtering of a hen and disappearing into the ocean, as well as Consuelo's initiating unprotected sex with Wilhelm and offering her naked body

to her cousin Miguel, emerge as impulsive and risky behaviors meant to offer the girls some semblance of control over their respective bodies, emotions, and overall lives. These two characters so painfully afflicted by multiple forces—not just genetics but a childhood dotted with traumas—allow *The Meaning of Consuelo* to be read as a story not just of mental illness but also of the detrimental impact of unrestrained parental conflict and childhood sexual abuse—on both its victims and those who bear witness.

### ***Silencio: Lessons Learned***

Mili and Consuelo's silence in response to Néstor's molestation provides a portrayal of a common response to sexual assault and begs us to examine the text's theme of silence more closely. While many readers, including Ann Marie Smith and Keith H. Johnson recognize *The Meaning of Consuelo* as a story of a young woman who "must negotiate strict gender boundaries in 1950s Puerto Rican culture" (19), I explore how Mami's lessons in secrecy specifically serve as an example of the text portraying the damaging confines of a patriarchal society. Mili is by no means unique in her silence as a trauma survivor. However, her sexual molestation serves as only one of many secrets driving the narrative's plot. I suggest a close reading of silence throughout *The Meaning of Consuelo* unveils how Mili and Consuelo learn the complex survival tactic of silence through watching their mother's interactions with others, their father in particular.

My understanding of silence in the novel owes much to Terri B. Pantuso's "Reading Silence Actively: Recovering the Maternal Narrative in Contemporary Women's Novels," which argues for more nuanced readings of how women learn rhetorical choices from their mothers. Instead of viewing female silence as always a passive, negative result of oppressive patriarchal systems, Pantuso cites a body of work that increasingly views silence as an active and deliberate rhetorical choice which women, African American women in particular, have long utilized. With this framework in mind, Pantuso argues silence is "a feature of resistant language that demonstrates an intertextual matrilineal trajectory" across multiethnic, contemporary women's fiction (30). I apply Pantuso's understanding of silence to Ortiz Cofer's work in order to read Mami's, Mili's, and Consuelo's respective silences as examples of rhetorical choices with complicated and dangerous consequences. Most likely Pantuso would situate Consuelo at the beginning of her journey to create a new story for herself, which the ending of the novel supports with Consuelo's setting off to start a new life on the American mainland. Such a reading finds support in Maya Socolovsky's argument that Consuelo's writing of stories and letters allows her a form of silent transgression (123). Her letters to "Patty Swan," for example, allow her to continue correspondence with her outcast cousin, Patricio, without her parents' detection (Socolovsky 123). While I agree with Pantuso's and Socolovsky's respective arguments for silence as a means of resistance, I believe Consuelo's and Mili's stories serve as important reminders that silence can be a harmful practice in many narratives, especially those involving abuse.

Sexual assaults are popularly known for going unreported due to a number of factors, including social stigma and meager resources for complainants, but it is a mistake to think survivors of sexual abuse are the only trauma victims linked to silence. Many war veterans and survivors of other traumas find it difficult to come forward with their stories. As van der Kolk explains:

One of the hardest things for traumatized people is to confront their shame about the way they behaved during a traumatic episode .... deep down many traumatized people are ... haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did

not do under the circumstances. They despise themselves for how terrified, dependent, excited, or enraged they felt. (13)

Certainly, the guilt Consuelo feels over leaving Mili unsupervised as she rode the Ferris wheel partially explains her silence. Consuelo tells us, “Mili ran to get Mami and by the time they all got there Néstor had vanished—and so had my courage. I could not tell my mother about what I had allowed to happen” (35). Despite Néstor’s status as perpetrator and Consuelo’s as only a witness, the older sister takes the blame upon herself, a common trait among survivors of sexual assault who feel responsible for their victimization. Consuelo continues, “The *pueblo chiquito* system of adult supervision had failed. I had failed. I convinced myself that Néstor had just bought Mili a cone, and that he was Abuela’s neighbor, practically family. Mili seemed to have forgotten the incident; at least she didn’t say anything about it” (35). Here, Consuelo’s having to “convince” herself of the innocence of Néstor’s actions gives us final assurance that something nefarious did occur. Consuelo’s belief she has “failed” also provides evidence that she may be experiencing feelings of shame, an emotion that at least one recent study has tied to an increased rate of dissociation in trauma survivors (Platt et al.) Meanwhile, Consuelo’s believing her sister has “forgotten the incident” provides one of multiple readings of silence throughout the novel. The sharp contrast between Consuelo’s active inner monologue and quiet outward demeanor provides an unsettling but realistic depiction of the conflicted feelings many trauma survivors experience.

Consuelo’s mother, Angelica, serves as an example of conflicted feelings, as, despite her love of sound, she is consistently paired with silence. When Consuelo first introduces readers to her parents, she describes her father as a “silent, brooding” man and claims Papi’s “silences were the vacuum Mami abhorred, having grown up around laughter, shouts, and angry cries—noise meant life for her” (12). Consuelo describes Mami as a “vivacious young woman” who shows her happiness through dancing to mambo records, yet we repeatedly see her communicating with her daughters in clandestine ways (12, 22). “We had a silent agreement, [Mami] and I,” Consuelo confides to readers, “We humored Papi in exchange for other privileges we exacted from each other. Mili had not yet caught on to these tactics; she seemed impervious to the family negotiations that went on constantly as we circled one another trying to figure out how to gain the most territory without starting a war” (22). In the passage that follows, shared secrets act as a form of mother-child bonding:

“I’m trying to see if the cane is ready to eat,” Mami whispered, bending down to look us in the eyes. “There is nothing sweeter than *la caña* of this part of our *isla*, *hijas*. *Es pura azúcar*.” Then she crossed her lips with her finger for silence. I knew why she was speaking low. Papi did not allow us to eat anything that had not been “processed”—meaning either it bore a seal from some U.S. government inspector or he had examined the product for worms, decay, pits, bone, or fibers that would choke his little girls; of course that meant depriving us of much of the island’s bounty on which Mami had grown into the healthy woman he had married. (23)

Repeated references to the body—the eye contact between mother and daughters, Mami’s bent posture, and her finger on her lips, along with the reference to a growing female body—pair with the imposed secrecy to make for an intimate scene between mother and children. The following reference to the communal sharing of a “forbidden fruit” forms a clear allusion to Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden, implying Mami invites Consuelo and Mili into a history of matriarchs stretching

much further back than Consuelo's *abuela* (23). Consuelo consents to join the lineage of women but not without realizing its cost of secrecy: "accepting these indulgences meant I had to pay the price of keeping secrets—about this and other forbidden things, such as María Sereno's manicures" (23). With this final phrase, Consuelo reminds readers of the novel's opening scene and her being "sworn to secrecy about" the transgender woman's visits to her family's house while Papi is away (4). Mami's later insistence that there be no possibility of Consuelo's father seeing her bloody underwear, along with her mostly silent reactions to Papi's infidelity, Patricio's sexuality, and Mili's illness, further highlights Consuelo learning from her mother that furtiveness must accompany womanhood (127). If Consuelo truly believes that "noise mean[s] life" for her mother, then she must also recognize the lethal potential of the silence and whispers her mother practices (12).

Consuelo proves her indoctrination to a world of secrecy by, ironically, keeping the truth from her mother. When Mami asks Consuelo if she has seen anyone visiting Patricio, she lies, justifying the transgression by telling herself, "I had simply chosen not to tell about the person I thought I saw slipping into Patricio's house by the back door" (44). Consuelo's skipping school to visit Old San Juan and her veiled relationship with Wilhelm confirm her inheritance of secrecy. Though her parents would be angry with Consuelo for concealing these truths, her actions only prove she has been watching her mother and learning the art of purposeful silence and a woman's obligation to secrecy throughout her childhood. Even Consuelo's pointing out that "No one praised" her for being able to "hold" her vomit until the Ferris wheel stopped suggests an honoring of pushing the unsavory down, concealing one's pain or sickness (35). Ortiz Cofer's story of Mami's passing down silence as a survival skill creates an unsettling but realistic depiction of how women in patriarchal societies internalize misogynistic practices. Simply because silence manifests as an expected and even biologically based response to trauma does not make it a healthy or necessary one. Of course, we cannot know how Mili's and Consuelo's truths would have been received by the adults in their lives, and there are certainly many survivors who have faced increased pain due to speaking out about abuse. However, we cannot discount the benefits that speaking about one's trauma may afford. Perhaps if Consuelo had not been so well versed in the female code of secrecy, she and Mili would have been able to speak the truth of Néstor's abuse, creating the possibility for justice or at least a sense of agency, something traumatic events so brutally rob from victims.

### ***Consolar: Comfort through the Expressive Arts***

Understanding how Consuelo becomes entrenched in the habit of silence creates an important contrast to other scenes in which members of the Signe family respond to the tumultuous events unfolding around and between them, each member turning to their preferred mode of expression. Undoubtedly, most artists would readily agree to the belabored idea that the arts are therapeutic. However, dissatisfaction with pharmaceutical approaches and increased interest in holistic health, along with neurological insights, have led to a growth in expressive art therapies in the U.S. and around the world in recent decades. The number of accredited music therapists alone has risen steadily over past decades to reach a current estimate of 7,000 (Greene). The discovery discussed above—that the language center of the brain shuts down in response to trauma—necessitates development of healing practices beyond traditional talk therapy. In 1950, the American Music Therapy Association formed, and, thus, most sources point to the mid-twentieth century as when expressive art therapy became professionalized (Sonke et al. 108). In 2017,



professional training and organizations exist not just for music and art therapies, but also for “dance therapy, drama therapy, poetry therapy, and psychodrama” (van Westrhenen and Fritz 527). The amount of academic literature surrounding these fields grows each year, but a need for greater attention to scientific scholarship on expressive art therapy still exists. However, literature such as Ortiz Cofer’s already suggests that individuals and communities have long accessed the therapeutic benefits of the arts.

As Mili’s condition worsens, the Signe family increasingly turns to art for respite. During what Consuelo calls “the eye of the storm,” she tells us, “music returned to our house and my mother seemed to regain some of her sense of fun ... Mami turned on the radio again, as if to drown out any disturbing thoughts” (146). Mami, whom readers already know enjoys dancing to music when she is happy, instinctively turns to the radio during a time of distress. Papi, too, returns to an old pastime. Consuelo observes, “Papi brought out his old guitar and began playing it again at night. But there were no words to the melodies he played. I could hear them from my room, where I spent a lot of time reading, and the way he lingered over some chords, it seemed that he wanted the guitar to speak” (146). The intuitive Consuelo notices what music therapists would immediately recognize: creating music allows Papi to express emotions he cannot access through language. For example, music therapist Heidi Ahonen harnesses music to help clients recreate and express unspeakable emotions felt at the time of the traumatic event. After having clients improvise a musical piece—much like Papi might strum out a new tune—Ahonen helps her clients to analyze and verbalize the emotions portrayed. For Ahonen, verbal narration is not always necessary or even possible “because with music we are able to express more complicated feelings than through words” (281). Though readers do not gain access to Papi’s inner-world, we know enough about his strained relationships with his wife, homeland, and daughters to realize he must face emotional turmoil. Through the guitar, it seems, he finds a way to calm himself and connect with Mili, “whose eyes turn[...] up in that look of religious ecstasy” when he plays the guitar for her (146). Though Mami and Papi lack access to professional music therapists to help them verbalize and reflect on their emotions, both parents use music to help them achieve moments of relaxation amid a stressful time.

Consuelo also notices music coming from her sister’s room more often, and tells us she hears Mili “humming a popular merengue” one day (109, 161); however, Mili’s interest in the visual arts becomes most intriguing for Consuelo. Ortiz Cofer establishes Mili as an artistic child from the beginning. In the first chapter, Consuelo tells us Mili “want[s] to be a nail-painter like [their neighbor María],” builds mud homes for chameleons, and makes “herself costumes from assorted pieces of [the family’s] wardrobe” (5, 8, 10). Mili’s reputation as an imaginative child lends to Mami’s insistence that Mili’s odd speech only proves her penchant for creativity. Consuelo, on the other hand, labels Mili’s invented language as “alarming,” describing it as “tonal like Chinese and involv[ing] clicks of the tongue” (51-52). Mili’s incomprehensible speech proves to be symptomatic of her worsening schizophrenia that will eventually result in a trip to a psychiatrist. Though we do not learn much about Mili’s visit, we are told, “Her counselor had suggested that drawing might keep Mili focused and calm, and so Papi had bought her a sketch pad and pencils ... She sat on the floor drawing amazingly accurate pencil caricatures of us, never saying a word” (169). Here, art’s therapeutic abilities are explicitly stated, even though Mili’s counselor does not, to our knowledge, facilitate or engage with Mili’s creative process. Through Consuelo’s eyes, we can see how Mili utilizes her art: Mili “studied her drawings, like a psychologist reading her notes after a session with a patient, and then set them aside as soon as she made whatever discovery it was she was after” (169). Like Papi’s songs, Mili’s art allows her to

express emotions and explore ideas when words have failed her, aligning her with the growing numbers of trauma survivors who find hope through art therapy. A 2016 *The Arts in Psychotherapy* article discussing work with refugees concludes, “The combination of art therapy and mindfulness helped participants *cope* day to day and allowed participants to begin to get a sense of not only who they were and what they had lived through, but potentially who they could become” (emphasis in original, Kalmanowitz and Ho 64). As Amiin, a Somalian refugee, told researchers, “The pictures, show me the way, the way I feel at the moment and the way I feel about the present and the future and brings the story. The story that helps me” (qtd. in Kalmanowitz and Ho 62). Amiin and other refugees’ testimony supports psychologists’ theory that expressive arts can help clients access and understand their stories of survival sooner. We cannot know if or how Mili would respond to exercises with a professional art therapist, but Consuelo’s insightful observations testify to the calming benefits drawing affords Mili.

Whereas Papi and Consuelo encourage Mili’s art, Mami finds the sketches upsetting. Even though Abuela recommends that Mami encourage Mili to find a creative outlet, Angelica remains unenthusiastic about Mili’s art (89). “Mami could not stand to look at [the drawings],” telling Consuelo, “I don’t know what good it does her to make these silly doodlings” as Consuelo stops her from throwing one away (170). Consuelo explains, “It helps Mili to have something to do that she likes” (171). Consuelo “keep[s] the discarded pages in a folder,” sensing that “the drawings were another medium of communication for Mili, that she was learning something about people’s minds from her study of their exteriors. I envied her gift” (170). In sharp contrast to Mami, Consuelo finds valuable meaning in the artwork, seeing the same potential art therapists would for reflection and improved communication with the outside world. At least one study focused on art therapy offered to patients with schizophrenia found “engagement in the artistic process and...reflections on the painted images” helped patients by “boosting their self-esteem and thereby improving their social competences” (Teglbjaerg 314). Though Mami harbors the best of intentions, selflessly seeking help for Mili, her inability to see drawing as a therapeutic practice limits her chances of successful communication with her daughter.

Consuelo confesses envy of Mili’s drawing abilities, but the narrator has developed her own artistic gift. She reflects, “My own alternate life of plotting vengeance against my enemies was less lyrical than my parents’ retreat into their musical fantasies. It was the narrative poem of war I was composing, in the style of Homer, adding stanzas each day” (149). Consuelo practices scriptotherapy, a term coined by Suzette Henke for the therapeutic act of creating a sense of agency and resistance through storytelling. Within the novel, Consuelo trice interrupts her narration with stories from her family’s history: “The Angel of Death,” “A Cuento and the Serenade in Nine Innings,” “Cuentos for La Lucha” (25, 60, 84). The short narratives, with their respective titles and their italicization stand out from the rest of the text, making them feel as if Consuelo has shared an excerpt from her writer’s notebook with us. Once again, Ortiz Cofer chooses to give Consuelo great awareness of the therapeutic practices within the story: before leaving for New York, Consuelo acknowledges that her family may know how to help Mami heal, but insists she must “find other ways to survive” (184). By the end of the novel, Consuelo tells us, “I believe that language is more powerful than chemistry...And how you remember words, how you tell a story to yourself, makes *you* up. You tell yourself as you live your life” (181). Consuelo does not find her greatest talents in music or art, as her other family members do. Rather, as Judith Ortiz Cofer admitted of herself, she finds writing to be a most rewarding and healing act.

Though writing serves as Consuelo’s most helpful tool in reflecting on the world around her, the novel suggests Mami and Papi’s preferred medium of music as a more integral part of

Puerto Rican life. At one point, Consuelo asks the rhetorical question, “When had there ever been a Puerto Rican who did not enjoy music?” (144). Music, she asserts, “was in our national soul” (144). A native of Puerto Rico and Professor of Spanish, Ortiz Cofer’s friend Rafael Ocasio provides insight to this characteristic of the island: “because of the political restrictions that the Spaniards had over Puerto Ricans, including...[restriction] of the press...Puerto Ricans had to find other ways in which to produce creatively” (Ocasio, Personal interview). This knowledge illuminates the entire Signe family as symbolic of Puerto Ricans: silenced by various factors, they do not vocalize their pain via traditional means but turn to different art forms as a way to express their pain and access some sense of joy and agency.

One such example of unique Puerto Rican modes of expression serves as the center of a remarkable scene Consuelo describes to readers. When the neighborhood outcast, María Sereno, begins exchanging words with the *piraguero*, Consuelo tells us, “This kind of vulgar musical play...had always been around in Puerto Rico” (134). Consuelo further informs us that, as part of the tradition, participants aim to best their opponent by composing “*bombas* and *plenas*, off-color verses singsonged to the accompaniment of clapping or drumming on any available surface” (Ortiz Cofer 134). María, often disregarded by her neighbors, participates in this communal tradition as she calls out in response to the *piraguero*. Even “Doña Fifi, a seventy-year-old woman who still led the hymns at church with her powerful alto” joins the spectacle” (134). Yes, some lyrics mock María, but the tradition itself calls for playful jabs. Ocasio reports that the tradition acts “like a fight of the wittiest,” suggesting, “Whoever has the last word wins” (Personal interview). Consuelo tells us the “show went on for several weeks,” so her recounting of the scene only gives us a small portion of the dialogue exchanged. However, María sings the last verse Consuelo transcribes, marking her as the winner of the battle of wits, at least in the eyes of the narrator and readers. Though the neighborhood returns to ignoring María, for a few moments the island’s musical traditions allow her to become part of a chorus larger than herself. By unashamedly adding her own verses to the community’s playful song, María serves as a triumphant example for Consuelo as she writes her own story while still maintaining the expected submissive position of a young girl in Puerto Rico.

Music proves central to another pivotal scene near the close of the novel, one in which Consuelo herself will raise her voice in song. While visiting the town of La Perla with Miss Vélez, Consuelo once again takes note of the sounds surrounding her: “I heard several radios blasting out the same song, a merengue that kept urging, ‘Shake it, baby, shake it, ’cause the sugar is at the bottom.’ A heavy woman was sweeping piles of sand out of her *cuartel* and moving her large hips to the wild rhythms of the music” (164). The traditional Puerto Rican music accompanies playful, suggestive language and inspires physical movement, the multiple radios symbolizing a strong sense of community. Consuelo notes, “The music from doorways and windows blended into a sort of engine hum. I felt as though the entire barrio might rise like a giant spaceship and take off over the water” (166). Again, the town’s multiple radios are in unison, and the image of the town in flight suggests music possesses a transcendent power that will soon affect the narrator. Consuelo’s conversation with her classmate Lucila enables her to see a different side of Puerto Rican life, one far removed from the modern amenities of Consuelo’s home, though just as beautiful and possibly livelier. Consuelo recalls, “Lucila took my hand as we walked back to her house. She began singing a verse of ‘Verde Luz’ that I knew, and I joined her. Even in this place made ugly by poverty, our island could not stop being praised for its beauty” (168). Through her song choice, Ortiz Cofer, again signifies music’s ability to solidify communal bonds on a national level. As Ocasio reports, “‘Verde Luz’ is a highly patriotic song .... a song that any Puerto Rican regardless of political

preferences knows by heart” (Personal communication). The patriotic verses allow two teenage women from divergent socioeconomic backgrounds to share an intimate moment. Similar to María adding her voice to the neighborhood song, Consuelo now sings in praise of the island she prepares to leave. Her reflection on the ability to sing of the island’s beauty even in the most destitute of towns attests to music’s ability to lift the spirit, even if only momentarily, above its current struggles. Consuelo’s shared insight thus prompts us to note how throughout the novel expressive arts have allowed survival and healing to occur amid the normal pangs of adolescence and more violent incidents of trauma.

## **Conclusion**

Like most coming of age stories, *The Meaning of Consuelo* features its main character struggling to create an identity for herself. Though Consuelo seems to see her given name as a reminder that she must protect her sister at all times, for readers the name “Consuelo” invites us to consider how the narrator and others find consolation amid life’s toughest trials. Smith and Johnson read Consuelo’s leaving Puerto Rico for New York as her “reject[ing] the Catholic religion that seemed to provide both solace and limitation for her mother” (25). I agree that Consuelo’s move suggests her setting out to forge her own identity, even if it means living among the colonizer. It is also imperative to acknowledge that Consuelo’s narrative has already proven she sees the world differently from those around her when she carefully studies and preserves the art created by Mili.

Consuelo’s discernment suggests maturity beyond her years, and her preference for stories and songs over silence promises to serve as at least one way she may find closure after her sister’s disappearance, though the music of the island will always play in her memory. Ultimately, Ortiz Cofer’s insightful depiction of Mili and the rest of her family turning to the expressive arts during times of crisis provides evidence of phenomenon scientists are only now beginning to understand. Literature has long allowed us to question the extent of human suffering, but works such as Ortiz Cofer’s *The Meaning of Consuelo* also prove the human brain’s long tradition of enabling survival and healing through art.

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