



Jacqueline Doyle

Shuffling the Cards: I Think Back Through Judith Ortiz Cofer

In the opening essay in *Silent Dancing*, young Judith Ortiz crouches with her cousins at her grandmother's feet while Mamá tells the story of the woman left at the altar. Abandoned by her lover, the once beautiful María la Loca now lumbers through the village, sometimes hopping and skipping, humming a tune with no words. "You know that tune she is always humming?" Mamá says. "Well, that's the wedding march" (SD 20). Judith's aunt shifts uneasily, eyes averted. Her *novio* has left for *Los Nueva Yores*. She's bought her wedding dress. Will he return for her? Mamá has her own reasons for telling her tales, tailored for each audience as a seamstress fits a wedding dress to a prospective bride. Some wedding dresses will be discarded unused. Some will be worn, perhaps passed on to a daughter or granddaughter, who will alter them again to fit.

Judith's grandmothers, mother, and aunts tell stories to entertain, but also to teach "each other and my cousin and me what it was like to be a woman, more specifically, a Puerto Rican woman" (SD 14). Such stories are continually translated and altered for their audiences and by their audiences.

NOTECARD #1

"There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (16).

—Richard Shaull, "Foreword" to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

"Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to the practice of domination ..." (62).

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“We think back through our mothers if we are women,” Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One’s Own* (76). Our mothers may tell us stories that reinforce the status quo, or instead may tell stories that help us break free. Judith Ortiz Cofer is one of those literary foremothers, one who has been on my mind since she passed away on December 20, 2016 at the age of 64, a week after I turned 65. I teach *Silent Dancing* and *The Latin Deli* often, and have written several scholarly articles about her work. As I’ve largely turned my attention to creative writing and away from literary scholarship, I’ve been giving some thought to what kind of tribute I might write about her influence. I begin to imagine a narrative essay unfolding like Woolf’s in *A Room of One’s Own*.

NOTECARD #2

“I also bring the power of storytelling. ... Such a process respects long-standing practices in African-based cultures of theorizing in narrative form. As Barbara Christian says, we theorize ‘in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.’ The problem is that in order to construct new histories and theories such stories must be perceived not just as ‘simple stories’ to delight and entertain, but as vital layers of a transformative process” (35).

—Jacqueline Jones Royster “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own”

Clusters of students line the English department corridor, leaning against the walls talking, or sitting cross-legged on the dusty floor with their laptops. As usual, several of the fluorescent lights overhead are out or flickering. I stroll down the hall to ask my colleague Margaret Rustick about pedagogical scholarship, an area where I haven’t done much reading. I remember studying Paulo Freire’s populist critique of the “banking” model of education long ago, his idea that knowledge shouldn’t simply be deposited in the mind of the student, that the student engages in critical thinking and transforms what she learns. “Is there anyone that extends Freire?” I ask Margaret. “I’m looking for an overlap between

pedagogy and oral tradition, and for scholarship—if there is any—about the transmutations of stories passed on through successive generations.” We play with ideas and she gives me a list of names: Thomas Newkirk, Walter Ong, Shirley Brice Heath, Jacqueline Jones Royster, bell hooks.

Of course! Fresh out of grad school, I read a lot of hooks; I even used a quotation from hooks on the collective “I” in the title of my article on *The Latin Deli*. My education refolds back on itself.

NOTECARD #3:

“The hero of this story is narrative itself—how it comes to our aid as we sort out the welter of information that is available, as it undergirds our belief that our world is comprehensible, and meaningful, and one in which our actions have consequences. Narrative is there to help us ‘compose’ ourselves when we meet difficulty or loss. It is there to ground abstract ideas, to help us see the pattern in a set of numerical data, to illuminate the human consequences of political action” (5).

—Thomas Newkirk, *Minds Made for Stories*

Cal State East Bay, where I’ve taught for more than twenty years, has an extraordinarily diverse student population: 30% Latino, 24% Asian, 18% white, 10% African American, and many international students and students of mixed ethnicity. Many are older than traditional students elsewhere. Many are returning with renewed motivation after long gaps in their education. Many are low income. They are straight, gay, transgender.abled, disabled, coping with learning disabilities. It is, oddly enough, a place where I blend in with the students in the library, an older white woman in jeans, shouldering a backpack.

“Reading books empowered me,” Ortiz Cofer wrote in “The Paterson Public Library.” “A library is my sanctuary, and I am always at home in one” (*LD* 134). Our campus library is crowded today, a sight that always pleases me, even if they’re not all here for the books. Most of our students are commuters, and there aren’t many places on campus to gather. The library is one of them. I see more food than I used to, now that Starbucks has an entrance directly into the library on the ground floor. Two girls are

leaning close to one another, whispering in Spanish and laughing. Next to them a Muslim student wearing a hijab types on a laptop. Five students confer over business textbooks at a round table by the stairs. One is an Indian immigrant—I know him from my creative nonfiction class. The others are black, brown, white, male, female, young, old, middle-aged.

I wander around the stacks, gathering the books on my list, arrested by neighboring titles (a whole row of books by Freire!). It's something I still love, the sense of anticipation in the early phases of research. Any one of these books may unlock the answer to a question I haven't even formulated yet. I lug the stack of books to an empty carrel, sit down and start to read. Armed with a pack of blank note cards, I begin to copy quotations, shuffling and reshuffling them as my thoughts fall into a succession of kaleidoscopic patterns, as various as the voices around me.

NOTECARD #4:

"Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated role" (9).

—bell hooks, "Talking Back," *Talking Back*

We're halfway through the ten-week quarter. My upper-division literature class is sorting through their responses to *Silent Dancing*, the book they've liked the most so far. We've been reading memoirs and personal essays by writers of color: Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Amy Tan, as well as Sarah A. Chavez and Harrison Candelaria Fletcher in the newest issue of *Brevity*, guest edited by Joy Castro and Ira Sukrungruang. Still to come: essays by David Mura and Sherman Alexie, memoirs by John Edgar Wideman, Janet Campbell Hale, Jesmyn Ward.

They sit in a haphazard circle of mismatched, mostly old one-armed desks and lean forward to talk.

One of the most outspoken students in the group starts. “Ortiz Cofer knows where she’s from. She uses Spanish in her essays. Rodriguez didn’t use a word of Spanish.” Lots of students nod, including those who don’t speak Spanish.

“Well, she moved back and forth between Puerto Rico and New Jersey,” another student points out. “Rodriguez doesn’t mention visiting Mexico. It’s different.”

“He’s rejecting his roots,” a student says. In my writing workshop last quarter, she wrote creative nonfiction about inherited trauma in her family, immigrants from El Salvador.

“He doesn’t care about his family. She does,” a fourth-generation Chinese-American says, more interested in family than language or cultural ancestry. He’s objected before to other students’ assumptions about roots and the preservation of language and culture. “People are always asking what I am,” he said early in the quarter. “It really bothers me. I’m American. That’s what I am. I don’t speak Chinese. I’ve never even been to China.”

“I don’t know about language and roots,” says a fashionably-dressed Indian student who studied in Italy last year. “Am I supposed to be wearing a sari and speaking Punjabi? Hardly anyone speaks Punjabi. No, thanks.”

Many students rejected Rodriguez’s contentions in *Hunger of Memory*: that education alienates students from their families. A few asked, what of the self-conscious pathos of the closing scene between Rodriguez and his father? His contention that Spanish be sacrificed in order to master English and enter public discourse? What of Rodriguez’s fascination with the Spanish-speaking *braceros*? His intimacy with his Spanish-speaking grandmother? His contention that his education and class mean he is no longer Mexican. It’s not something they’ve experienced in the same way, these twenty-first century students, many living at home, or close to their extended families, many of them immigrants or first generation.

They object far less strenuously when we read *Brothers and Keepers* later in the quarter and Wideman addresses his family and neighborhood: “One measure of my success was the distance I’d put between us” (27). Perhaps they identify with his anger and mixed feelings. Some of them, those who’ve lost relatives or friends to violence, understand the awful necessity of escaping a neighborhood.

“Ortiz Cofer’s oppressed by her family sometimes,” someone suggests. We look at the close of the title essay, her fear of family judgments, of becoming *la Gringa* herself, of the dead who “keep pressing their faces forward to say things about the past,” expecting her to tell their stories (SD 98).

“It’s complicated,” the Chinese-American student says. “She belongs but she’s also an outsider. She says that she and her brother are ‘cultural chameleons’” (SD 16).

We agree that this is a useful concept, fluid and dynamic, an alternative to either/or thinking about culture and identity. So many of these students have grown up in mixed race or mixed ethnicity families, in multilingual families, in refugee as well as immigrant families, in families who have migrated from South to North, Midwest to West. Student body statistics don’t begin to tell their family stories. They have become cultural chameleons. Ortiz Cofer articulates the routine shifts they undergo in different settings every day.

NOTECARD #5:

“*Pedagogy of the Heart*, in the original Portuguese entitled ‘under the mango tree,’ ... considers, in the most positive sense, building bridges and pathways amid the smells and tastes of childhood, forming and transforming education, modern-world technological dynamics, economic injustice and absurdity, the search for political alternatives, and the personal commitment implied by that search, returning to the mango tree as the source of an identity that rediscovers and re-creates itself” (26).

—Ladislau Dowbor, “Preface” to Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*

In “Under the Mango Tree,” Judith and her cousins sit under the mango tree sucking sugar cane as Mamá tells the heroic tale of the woman with one eye open who manages to defeat her murderous husband. “Always alert and never a victim, [María Sabida] ... by implication contrasted to María La Loca, that poor girl who gave it all up for love, becoming a victim of her own foolish heart” (*SD* 76). As she grows older, Judith becomes conscious of the twofold messages behind the stories, the implicit policing of girls on the verge of womanhood by older women, but also their implicit critique of the status quo. “I was beginning to recognize the subtext of sexual innuendo, to detect the sarcasm, and to find the hidden clues to their true feelings of frustrations in their marriages and in their narrowly circumscribed lives as women in Puerto Rico” (*SD* 142). She learns to tell her own stories. “I embroidered my own fable, listening all the while to that inner voice which, when I was very young, sounded just like Mamá’s when she told her stories in the parlor or under the mango tree. And later, as I gained more confidence in my own ability, the voice telling the story became my own” (*SD* 85).

The reader of Ortiz Cofer’s *cuentos* and essays is also not passive, but makes the stories his or her own. Each creates a new story in the form of literary criticism or more poems and stories. Braiding together quotations and combinations of ideas as they reconstitute what they read, my literature students produce differing interpretations of Ortiz Cofer’s work. In my creative nonfiction workshops, sometimes we read Ortiz Cofer’s “The Story of My Body” and consider the bodily effects of racist micro-aggressions, sometimes we don’t. Either way, “Write the story of your body” is one of the most popular prompts. One scarred and tattooed student titled her essay “Skinventory.”

NOTECARD #6:

"Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body" (67). "In a literate culture verbatim memorization is commonly done from a text, to which the memorizer returns as often as necessary to perfect and test verbatim memory. ... Learning to read and write ... introduces into [the oral poet's] mind the concept of a text as controlling the narrative and thereby interferes with the oral composing processes, which have nothing to do with texts but are 'the remembrance of songs sung'" (57, 59). "The oral song (or other narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of songs sung" (146).

—Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

Woolf's line "we think back through our mothers if we are women" originally referred to literary genealogy and tradition, but for many U.S. writers the line evoked the inspiring if sometimes fraught influence of biological mothers on their daughters' creativity. Alice Walker situated "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" at the intersection between her own mother, the often anonymous creators who preceded her (whose creative expression took many forms), and her African-American literary foremothers. When Ortiz Cofer used Woolf's line as the epigraph to *Silent Dancing*, she gestured toward the oral tradition, "songs sung" by her grandmothers and mother. In "In Search of My Mentors' Gardens" and elsewhere she traced her literary descent lines from Walker, Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison, Rita Dove, Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, and Woolf herself (W 99, 112-13).

She quoted Woolf's line again in *The Cruel Country*, her recent memoir of her mother's death, as she meditated on the distance and intimacy between her "tiny mother" born in Puerto Rico and her own "tall daughter ... with a Ph.D. in mathematics" born in the U.S. (CC 57). "I do not believe in ghosts, and I do not understand quantum mechanics, but they, my mother and daughter, represent the *was* and *will be* of my timeline" (CC 58).

The "*was* and *will be*" of her timeline has many branches. Fully aware of class and ethnic and historical dissonances ("After all, what does a Puerto Rican woman have to do with a wealthy Victorian

Englishwoman like Virginia Woolf?” [Ocasio “Infinite” 732]), Ortiz Cofer nevertheless insisted on the “literary umbilical cord” connecting her to Woolf and an array of writers from different eras, different countries, and different U.S. ethnicities (Acosta-Bélen 93). Ortiz Cofer’s sisters and daughters include so many of us—students and readers and scholars and writers who have been touched by her work, and who in turn transform that work to carry it forward in their own teachings and writings, both inside and outside the academy.

When I post the news of Judith Ortiz Cofer’s death online, I hear from former students who are saddened by the loss. A number of them are teachers. Many are writers, facing the uphill climb of earning a living, caring for children and elderly parents, engaging in political activism, and keeping their artistic dreams alive. “Sleep with one eye open,” Ortiz Cofer counsels them, taking her cue from her “storytelling *comadre*” and “alter ego” María Sabida (W 90, 75). Make time. Get up at 5:00 a.m. if you must, she says, to find “a room of [your] own” in the “semidarkness” (LD 167). “Defend your artistic space” (W 88). Write. Read. Pass it down.

NOTECARD #7

“The earliest stories I heard were those told by the women of my family in Puerto Rico, some of the tales being versions of Spanish, European, and even ancient Greek and Roman myths that had been translated by time and by each generation’s needs into the *cuentos* that I heard. They taught me the power of the word. ... [María Sabida and others] have become the germinal point for not only my work as a creative artist but also my development as a free woman ...” (73).

—Judith Ortiz Cofer, “The Woman Who Slept With One Eye Open” (W)

My ideas have been gestating for several weeks. Tonight I’m at home in my dim, cluttered study, illuminated only by the glow of my computer screen, leafing through my drafts and the stack of notecards I’ve accumulated. I’ve been reworking the classroom scene, hoping I’ve done justice to my students’ ideas. Worrying that I haven’t. It’s dark outside. My husband went to bed an hour ago, and the

house is quiet. I shuffle the cards again like a medium about to tell a fortune, and lay them out in front of me. I pull eight cards and scrutinize them, realizing that if I number them, they almost tell a story.

Ortiz Cofer recalls being in graduate school and stealing time to scribble “a poem or an idea for a story on the flip side of an index card” while she did research for her thesis (*LD* 166). I feel fortunate to have flipped my index cards at this late stage in my career. I think my creative career began when I taught “The Story of My Body” in my Advanced Expository Writing class (included in Robert Scholes’ old textbook, *The Practice of Writing*), and then began to assign the personal essay (what Scholes described as “reflection,” “a looking *back* or looking again” [51]), and then began to engage in scholarship about memoir and the personal essay, and then claimed the freedom to write personal essays myself. It was a rebirth for me. I expanded my range, started to write narrative nonfiction and fiction, to publish, to teach creative writing, and now— now anything could happen. *Gracias*, Judith, for that new freedom, and the inspiration you have afforded me and so many others.

NOTECARD #8

“I put these *cuentos* in the context of my own life and I find almost always that they work. The story of María Sabida, I can assure you, was not intended for feminist audiences when it was first told. But the way my grandmother told it, it became for me a lesson about individuality and freedom and power and the way we use it as *puertorriqueñas*. ... I use that story to try to empower the next generation ... Young women who have never heard it before write me an email or write a paper in which they cite María Sabida. ... They’re passing it down, they’re passing it down” (33-34).

—Rafael Ocasio, “Words as Cultural Bridges [Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer],” *Rituals of Movement*

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