

"Where is Today's Southern Writer?"

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Almost 10 years ago, in 2002, the SSSL co-organized a symposium at the University of Montevallo in Mexico, entitled "The U.S. South, Postcolonial Theory, and New World Studies." The main objective of the conference was to capitalize on an intellectual enterprise initiated by researchers Houston Baker and Dana Nelson a year before, and calling for a "new Southern studies." In 2004, the global conversation about the status and the stakes of the contemporary South was continued at a symposium at the University of Mississippi, entitled "The U.S. South in Global Contexts." Five years ago, in 2006, a collaborative article entitled "The U.S. South in Global Contexts: A Collection of Position Statements" was published in volume 78 of *American Literature*. This article included short "position statements" written by sixteen different scholars, each one offering a brief analysis of a particular topic relevant to the notion of South caught in the middle of a drastic and rapid evolution process. In her position statement, entitled "Who is a Southern Writer?" Suzanne W. Jones reacts to the difficulty of talking about Southern literature and classifying authors as Southern in the 21st century—especially without redefining the Southern writer :

Instead of worrying about who qualifies as a Southern writer or rigidly delimiting Southern literature, we might more fruitfully ask questions about who is writing about the U.S. South (no matter their birthplace or residence), what stories they are telling, what images they are conjuring up, and—most importantly—why.¹

Five years after, Jones's remark interestingly raises a lot of questions. In a Southern literary world where writers born in Puerto Rico become inducted into Georgia Writers Hall of Fame—I'm thinking about Judith Ortiz Cofer—and in where bilingual, Tennessee-born writers of Mexican and Spanish ascendancy earn multiple literary prizes—I'm thinking of Lorraine López who teaches here at Vanderbilt—we are more than ever confronted with the necessity of redefining what a Southern writer is. But as Jones questioned, are the birthplace and place of residence relevant when trying to consider *how* Southern an author can be? And, as Jones

¹ Suzanne B. Jones, "Who is a Southern Writer?" in Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer ed. "The U.S. South in Global Contexts: A Collection of Position Statements," *American Literature* 78:4, Dec. 2006, 725.

seems prone to defend, should Southern writing be writing *about* the South? You will notice I have entitled this paper *where* is today's southern writer, and not *who*, as Jones did. The reason behind this word choice is directly related to a major aspect defining the writers I want to talk about: their deep, usually complex and fascinating relationship with the notions of place, space, and motion.

As one of the aims of my current research is the uncovering of the "images" that contemporary Southern writers of latino descent conjure up in their works and the analysis of their modes of storytelling, I would like this presentation to be a consideration of a certain number of writers we might want to consider Southern—as they deal with topics and questions at stake in the region and willingly discuss their belonging to the category of Southern literature, and at the same time, they envision the region's borders, both political and literary, as widening and constantly evolving. I have been able to interview a number of authors who currently write on and/or in the South, or at least share a southern experience through their personal lives. Today I'd like to focus on four such writers.

An obvious name that would come to our mind when talking about contemporary southern literature is Judith Ortiz Cofer—in April 2010, the *Georgia Writers Hall of Fame* made an unexpected move by inducting Ortiz Cofer, giving her writing a sort of official "southern stamp." Ortiz Cofer, a University of Georgia professor who was born in Puerto Rico in 1952 and arrived in Georgia when she was 15, became all of a sudden a must-read of Southern literature, her portrait and bibliography featured along with those of Flannery O'Connor, Lillian Smith, and Alice Walker. Second in line would have to be Lorraine López. López was born in New-Mexico from a long line of immigrants from Spain, arrived in Georgia in 1993 for her graduate studies, and then moved to Tennessee to teach at Vanderbilt, before becoming a finalist of the 2010 Pen/Faulkner prize for her collection of short stories *Homicide Survivor Picnic*. Then we have René Saldaña, who was born in South Texas in the 1970s, and graduated from different universities in South Carolina and Georgia, while writing and publishing in 2001 *The Jumping Tree*, a collection of short stories that quickly found its way into Booklist's "Top Ten Youth First Novels." Finally comes Sergio Troncoso, who grew up in Ysleta, Texas, the son of Mexican immigrants, who graduated from Harvard and Yale, and spent some time in Mexico. When he

came back to the US in New York City, he published *The Last Tortilla*, a collection of short stories that won both the Premio Aztlán and the Southwest Book Award.

What do we notice when talking to these people coming from very different backgrounds? The **first thing** that should be put forward is the fact they tend to know each other. Some of them even happen to be closely related: when López decided to come study in Georgia, it was to work with Judith Ortiz Cofer, whom she considers both as one her biggest inspirations, and as one of her closest advisors and friends. Ortiz Cofer is also quoted as an influence by Sergio Troncoso, who, even as he admits he hasn't read her latest works, considers that they share a similar approach to writing. We also discover that Troncoso has become good friends with René Saldaña, who himself counts Ortiz Cofer as one of the writers who allowed him to discover the existence of a "brown" literature in the region.

Second thing, they all, with no exception, declare having been influenced heavily by southern literature. If Ortiz Cofer gives Alice Walker and Toni Morrison as influences on her works; she also speaks at length about Flannery O'Connor, who was in her own words "an explosion in [her] head," as she "was a woman writing about her neighbors, but beyond that, she had this genius to know that you can make the particular universal." López, who "c[a]me to the South [...] with a great deal of respect for southern writers and for the southern narrative," also gives Flannery O'Connor as an influence, along with William Faulkner and Carson McCullers, writers whom she described as "illuminating" the south. Troncoso declares himself as being "deeply influenced by southern writing," mostly by the works of O'Connor and Faulkner, as he "likes the landscapes that they use" because the city where he was born, Ysleta, 'is like that. Ysleta is a spare desert, isolated, with its own peculiarities and characters"—not surprisingly, he organized all the stories of *The Last Tortilla* around Ysleta and its surroundings, admitting willingly that he was inspired by Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Saldaña, who discovered Southern literature during his studies through the works of Ralph Ellison, got attracted to Faulkner because of his tendency to "write about rural places."

Third, these four writers willingly identify in one way or another as southern writers. Even if Ortiz Cofer, the only "publicly acknowledged" Southern writer of the group, "think[s] the labels are not for the writers to self-assume," and says that "you can't just declare yourself as a

southern writer, you have to be considered as one,” she also adds that “in essence if you were to summarize what southern literature does, that is to say focus on family, place, interest in history and its ramifications on the individual, this is very similar to what I do.” As for López, she declares that her consciousness of being a southern writer “came to [her] unexpectedly [as] suddenly, [she] was getting invitations to these Southern Women Writers Conferences, and to very southern writing things,” adding that it “was an honor, to be called a southern writer, because [she had] so long admired southern writers [and] was recognized by different people, as if [she] had graduated in southern writing.” Troncoso classifies himself “as a southern writer in the sense that [he] like[s] to write about rural areas and about people from the outside, people who may not necessarily belong, who question mainstream culture.” For Troncoso, being a Southern writer means redefining notions such as the sense of belonging and the constructedness of geographical and intellectual borders. Saldaña is the most interesting case, as our conversation prompted him to ask himself questions about his own literary position. When asked if he considered himself a southern writer, his answer showed his puzzlement, acknowledging at the same time that my choice to see him as such wasn’t that nonsensical, and he said:

You know, I never thought of [my works] as southern, until we began e-mailing back and forth. [...] Personally, I would say, yes, we’re in the southern half of the United-States. I would say, because I was in the South, that I’m not Southern per se, but all my education is from the South... I have no clue! It’s an excellent question, but I can’t really come up with anything!

The work I have done analyzing the works of these authors along with those of other contemporary Southern writers of Latin descent allows me to add that all these writers resort to images and themes related to family, food, religion, race, languages, and identity, and at the same time very strongly emphasize the notion of storytelling and the idea of freer literary forms that allow them to *explore* deeply their consciousness and those of their characters. This idea of exploration is very important, as it is directly related to what I see as the most common characteristics these writers share. They are all very strongly attached to the notion of place—but not place as an isolated, stable, unreachable spot on a two-dimensional map, but on the contrary, as a space defined through its inner and outer relationships, characterized by fluid and moving borders, that can only be mapped on a multidimensional plan. Apart from their

sometimes twisted origins, what these authors share in common is a strong impulse to draw a new and fresh map of the contemporary South, a South no more only Black and White, no more ruled by a dominant Anglo-Saxon culture and language, a South which is no more geographically delimited by the former borders of the Confederacy. I see this process as being organized in three main steps.

First, the writers redefine the Southern region through an attempt to give common properties to the different parts of this new South, from the Texas/Mexico border to Cuba and Puerto Rico, including all the traditional U.S. Southern states. For example, they acknowledge the existence of a common climate, usually hot and humid, that tends to reveal the violent and uncontrolled passions of the characters, putting them on the brink of insanity. The climate becomes a character in itself, becoming the initiator of a certain number of intrigues, and guilty of leading the narration to a tragic ending. There is also an emphasis put on the presence of similar creatures, mostly types of birds, frogs, and bats in the region. The writers often mention their migrations, unrestricted by political borders, across the different parts of the region, as a way to symbolize common characteristics of the Southern space.

Another similarity is the way the writers define this new southern space as having been strongly influenced by a history of colonization and slavery—indeed, from Mexico to Cuba, the region shows a common past through the “plantation experience” as some scholars name it. Even as all the works I studied feature stories taking place in a contemporary world, long after the official end of slavery, the writers very often give hints of the subsistence of a plantation world through the depiction of the figure of poor migrant worker that in some ways replaces the traditional image of the slave.

The **second** step in redefining the topography of this new southern space is through a clear, adamant refusal of isolationism, whether it is the usually assumed isolation of the Southern states—which was, as we know, based on a myth allowing the white elite to protect themselves against the “risks” of miscegenation, while at the same time the South had a developed relationship with the Caribbean²—or the isolation of the Caribbean islands

² “[A] byproduct of southern exceptionalism has been to isolate the *idea* of the South from the region just below it on the map—a result that ignores the long and indeed well-documented, as well as ongoing, history of interactions between Caribbean islands and southern states.” Jessica Adams, Michael P. Bibler, and Cecile Accilien, *Just Below*

themselves—as in the way they have generally been seen as exterior to the South, and their populations and culture eroticized to the point of alienation. Writers juxtapose an experience of exile and displacement with a developed awareness of both the history of the south—that was actually never as isolated as it is often believed to have been—and the recent demographical and cultural evolution of the region in the last 20 years. Through their works, these authors tend to give noninsular perspectives to the different locations of the South, placing them in a system of thought that could be seen as embracing Edouard Glissant's notion of archipel (archipelago): the different places, instead of being artificially turned inwards, claiming an essential "national" identity, become opened to the outside and turned outwards, creating a dense network of relationships which doesn't work according to a logic of center/periphery. Indeed the south is not an extended confederate South, which would "admit" peripheral zones in its definition—on the contrary, the southern space becomes a set of interrelated nodes, a three dimensional map of crossroads in constant motion.

Which leads me to the **third** step of this reconfiguration of southern space: the clear emphasis on the notions of active, almost constant motion of the fictional characters, and the reevaluation of the figure of the map. Stories tend to stage exiled, displaced, moving characters, whether it is geographically or psychologically, characters who actually attempt to re-create their identity through these constant moves—a characteristic that can also be found in the life and experiences of the writers themselves. In many cases, the narration shifts from place to place, from the Mexican-American border to Tennessee, or from Cuba to Florida and Georgia. Identities tend to be built around this refusal of immobility and fixedness, a fixedness that tended to define in some ways traditional southern literature. The usual "sense of place" becomes more of a "sense of process." It is a rebuttal of the unproductive thought that seeks to establish strict borders around the southern space and to essentialize the region through a set of pre-defined characteristics. This rejection of an essential, pure identity of both the region and the characters of the stories crystallizes in the way the figure of the map is used in the texts—while characters who rely on strict, two dimensional and fixed paper maps tend to find

themselves feeling either ill at ease, or alienated and/invisible, and sometimes even finish dead, those who decide to rely on human, three-dimensional maps find a way to bloom in the acceptance of their hybridized identity. Secrets and understanding of one's identity are never to be found on a traditional map—but they can be found through the attentive study of the symbolic map traced on a grandmother's face by her wrinkles, or through the exploration of a mysterious quilt that reveals new stories every time one of its corners is uncovered. The authoritarian lines of the map are no more relevant in a region that becomes, before anything else, defined by its fluidity and hybridity.

To come back to our main question, where do contemporary southern writers stand in a southern space that they themselves redefine as characterized by its fluidity and hybridity? My answer is that they stand both inside and outside this space, and deal with their situation in a very fluid way. They are in positions that might be seen at first glance as uncomfortable, but which is actually, considering their personal experiences, extremely productive. While usually *feeling* southern, they could be, by some observers, considered as not. When they're writing about the South, they like to do it as both *exterior* voices, who had to discover by themselves what was the life in the U.S. South, and as *interior* voices that reflect on everyday life in the cities and places in which they live in. When they're *not* writing about the South per se, and it happens, they still display a strong desire to reference the South in their stories and to put forward notions such as storytelling and the refusal of essential, fixed identities and boundaries. Several of them talk about an ability to "renegotiate" southern tropes. More than that, they have the ability to embody the actual meaning of what it could mean to a writer in the global world of the 21st century—a person that acknowledges the evolution of a region, of a culture, and of a literary tradition, a person who possesses a critical distance through a position that is subtly both internal and external to the region. What future for southern literature? In this age of digital media, I would like to finish this presentation with a quote by Serenity Gerbman, from her essay "After Eudora," available on her blog *Chapter 16: a Community of Tennessee Readers*:

[Writing] about where you come from and why that matters is not dead and never will be. There is a truly great contemporary Southern novel coming, and it may be written by someone from Mexico, or Laos, or India. Cultural diversity is the untold story of the modern South, and that silence is shameful. The South is still unique, still naturally beautiful, still special in its love of tradition. We are trying to hold on to the right

things. But there is room for new things, new voices. The as-yet-unheard and unwritten stories are our future.³

³ Serenity Gerbman, "After Eudora," *Chapter 16: a Community of Tennessee Readers*. 1 Apr. 2010. Available at: <http://www.chapter16.org/content/after-eudora>.

“Where is Today's Southern Writer?”



Judith Ortiz Cofer
Born 1952, Puerto Rico.

- Inducted to Georgia Writers Hall of Fame in 2010
- *The Meaning of Consuelo*, co-winner of 2003 American Award
- *The Latin Deli*, winner of the Anisfield Wolf Book Award



Lorraine López
Born late 1960s, New Mexico.

- *Call Me Henri*, Patterson prize for YA literature 2006
- *Homicide Survivors Picnic*, winner of the International Latino Book Award 2009, finalist of the Pen/Faulkner award 2009



René Saldaña
Born early 1970s, South Texas.

- *The Jumping Tree*, 10 best YA books by Booklist 2001
- *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*, Junior Library Guild Premier Selection 2007



Sergio Troncoso
Born late 1960s, Texas.

- Inducted to the Texas Institute of Letters in 2012
- *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*, winner of the 1999 Premio Aztlán Literary Prize

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