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April 1st, 2017. Lost Southern Voices Conference, Atlanta, GA.

“A Living Southern Voice: Honoring the memory of Judith Ortiz Cofer”

Volar: To Fly

I have always known
that you will visit my grave.
I see myself as a small brown bird;
perhaps a sparrow, watching you
from a low branch as you pray
in front of my name.

I will hear you
sound out my epitaph: *Aquí decansa
una mujer que quiso volar.*
You will recall telling me
that you once dreamed in Spanish,
and felt the words
lift you into flight.

The sound of wings
will startle you when you say “volar,”
and you will understand.

From “Some Spanish Verbs,” in *The Latin Deli* (1993)

My intellectual and emotional relationship with Judith Cofer began in 2010. I had recently arrived to the United States and was still struggling to define my dissertation’s exact focus. I knew I wanted to write about those Southern writers who were often considered “off the map,” most of them immigrants or foreigners living in the South. I had a list of potential candidates to constitute a literary corpus—Cofer was there already, but she wasn’t my focus at the time. Then one day, Pearl McHaney who was soon to become one of my dissertation

advisors told me with her characteristic smile that Cofer had just been inducted to the *Georgia Writers Hall of Fame*. The news obviously came as a shock: most Southern Lit conferences that I had attended spoke only very timidly of writers born outside of the traditional South. As the first brown woman to be officially acknowledged as belonging to the great family of Southern literature, her institutional validation demonstrated a change in the way intellectual institutions were starting to perceive the region. I sensed that there was something to be written on the topic and embarked on a literary adventure that kept me busy for two more years.

Cofer was born in 1952 in the small town of Hormigueros, located in western Puerto Rico. In 1956, her parents moved to Paterson, New Jersey. In 1967, the whole family moved to Georgia—a place where she lived until her death. Cofer spent most of her adult life working as a faculty of the University of Georgia in Athens. By her retirement in 2013, Cofer was Regents' and Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing with more than twenty books of prose and poetry.

At the occasion of this conference, and following Cofer's death a few months ago, I have decided to speak about a writer who, while not yet forgotten, might face the risk of disappearing from the intellectual radars of American literature in general and Southern literature in particular. This presentation aims at reaffirming her relevance in the literary landscape—today more than ever.

THE IDENTITY OF THE MIGRANT

In a 2012 article, Daniel Morris aimed at comparing the types of citizenships in two poems: “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus and in “The Latin Deli” by Cofer. I won't go through his whole analysis here, but I want to underline a few of Morris' key conclusions. He writes that “Cofer replaces the “active/passive” model Lazarus sets up between her speaking subject and the silent immigrants about whom she speaks in her address to another nation [...] with a multilingual and dialogic conversation” (Morris 68). Throughout her poem (and I would personally add, throughout her whole literary work), Cofer rejects simple dual models of citizenship and belonging. She deconstructs notions such as integration and belonging.

Migrants and foreigners are not either integrated and belonging or not—their social and emotional status now depends on many more variables, including their relationship to languages, their racial construction, and their posture towards the region in which they live.

Morris adds: “If Lazarus writes from the perspective of active belonging, Ortiz Cofer gives the voices of her poem over to the Immigrant Others—including Lady Liberty herself—who now reside uneasily within the national border of the United States as a kind of Other Within. This Other-Within-the-Nation in Ortiz Cofer represents the inassimilable remnants of a contemporary immigrant experience that Lazarus understood as only available to the state of becoming American by excising visible signs of difference.” (Morris 72)

As early as 1993, Cofer was telling Marilyn Kallet how difficult her relationship was with the notion of assimilation itself: “Many people of my parents’ generation felt that if we assimilated, if we learned to live within the culture, it would be easier for us. I can see that as an economic survival technique, but as an artist I discovered that assimilation is exactly what destroys the artistic—to blend so well that you forget what makes you unique.” (Kallet 68) Cofer often defined the identity of her characters and poetic voices as characterized by movement, an attitude that goes against the idea of an allegiance that should be given to only one place or one nation. As written in the poem “The Habit of Movement,” “As we approached but did not touch others, / our habit of movement kept us safe / like a train in motion— / nothing could touch us.” (*RfM*, 59)

Her characters and her writing appear extremely relevant and refreshing in the current social and political climate of the United States and European Union. To the idea of enforcing barriers and glorifying a so-called national identity, Cofer answers with the defense of movement as a cultural definer. Going against the tide of seeing the other as the enemy, Cofer invites us to acknowledge our differences and celebrate them. Instead of a “this or that” posture, she shows that a “this AND that” one is always a healthier alternative.

BELONGING

Cofer has been writing extensively about the topic of belonging. As a Puerto Rican woman living in Georgia, she was very often asked the question of who or what she felt she

was. She ended up writing a sort of Frequently Asked Questions entitled “And Are You a Latina Writer?” in her 2000 book *Women in Front of the Sun*:

She asked: *Isn't the barrio what you write about? Don't you need a sense of place and community for your art? What are you doing in Georgia?*

And she answered: These are the questions I'm often asked by people who cannot imagine what a *puertorriqueña* is doing in the Deep South. [...] Because my literary universe exists within me, and although admitting the need for “community” where the free exchange of ideas can be stimulating, I write in isolation and anywhere that I can find a room of my own. (*WFS* 107)

When asked about her main inspirations, Cofer always plainly stated her lack of connection with other Latino writers, mostly due to a generational rift existing between her and most of the younger writers. Interestingly, Cofer's posture on writing “in isolation” was in some ways challenged by her institutional acknowledgement as a Southern writer. As Cofer told me herself:

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. And basically, the concept of how you relate to the others despite artificial boundaries such as color or languages, I could say I fit within that, although it would have to be the critic who makes the case for it. (Brulley)

My dissertation work helped me challenge Cofer's supposed isolation, relating her work and her writing interests to what was done by other Latino writers with a strong connection to the South such as Lorraine López, René Saldaña, or Carmen Agra Deedy. Throughout my research, I came to realize that notions of relation, crossing, route, and trace play a role in the constitution of a southern space around interconnected hubs, directly depending on the experiences of the individuals and characters living in that space. The southern space is at the same time amplified and reinforced by contemporary Southern writers of Latino origins.

Like other writers of my study, Cofer's first literary loves were Faulkner, Welty, O'Connor, “the Southern writers who used language with such delight” and “ignited something in [her] own storytelling impulse.” (Kallet 73) When talking about one of the first literary epiphanies of her life, Cofer liked to rave about O'Connor:

Frankly, it wasn't until I took a course, considered very odd [at the time], entitled 'Southern Literature,' that I came across Flannery O'Connor, and it was like an explosion in my head, because I thought: here is a woman writer writing about an area I know, and not dwelling on only male issues. This was a woman writing about her neighbors, but beyond that, she had this genius to know that you can make the particular universal. You can write about a farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, and have it be meaningful to somebody in Paris, France. The point is the exploration of human nature, not just that there are pine trees and peacocks. (Interview Brulley)

At my school in Mexico City, I teach both *The Meaning of Consuelo* and *The Latin Deli*. *Consuelo* is taught to ninth graders, and *The Latin Deli* to eleventh graders. I want to insist on the fact we're talking about a Frenchman teaching a Puertorican / Georgian writer in a Mexican school—and the kids love it. I hope that when Cofer was talking about "making the particular universal," she was conscious that she had herself become a great example of such an accomplishment. She was extremely proud of her career and truly considered the South as her home:

The joke which ran was that I was the first Puerto Rican English professor this side of the [] Mississippi! I've started to think of this place as my home, and I've been rewarded: I have two professorships, and I was just inducted into the Georgia Writers' Hall of Fame... even if they had to bend all the rules. I was the first non-native Georgia writer to be included, because they thought I had made a contribution to the culture of this state. I'm deeply honored, even if I never expected it. (Brulley)

She was the nicest person ever. The first time I met Cofer, we had an interview scheduled in the early afternoon at her office of the University of Georgia campus. As it was the very first literary interview I had ever done, I was feeling a blend of excitement and terror. As a consequence, I arrived in Athens two hours before the scheduled time. As I had nothing better to do, I decided to go get something to eat at the local Waffle House. Waffle House always had a special place in my heart, it seems to be a sort of genuine Southern tradition for many people here. To me, as a foreigner, it's a very strong memory of my time in the South. So here I am, sitting down at a table in the UGA Waffle House, the waitress goes like "Sweetie what can I get you," I grab my notes for the interview and a few books by Cofer, I start sipping my sweet tea and reviewing my questions, when suddenly I raise my head and realize the lady who was seated two booths ahead of me was nobody else but Cofer. I remember I checked the photos on the back cover of

the books just to make sure it was her. I obviously couldn't find the nerve to interrupt her lunch, and I politely ignored her for the next thirty minutes. I remember that in the middle of the interview she was like "That's strange, I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before," and I was like "well, I guess we both enjoy the Waffle House, ma'am," and she said "oh you should have come sit with me, we could have shared something!" And I discovered that like me, she was a huge fan of the Waffle House. And it might sound ridiculous to some, but as two displaced people we had this sort of communion around the Waffle House. It's just part of what makes the South, the South.

Cofer had become a genuine Southern woman who felt at home and identified with the region, while still embracing her multiple and complex origins. She also understood that the South was changing, and was aware that the change in population in the South would not just be accepted by everybody. "When I first came to Georgia," she said,

the Latino population was so insignificantly small that no one was afraid. Now, the population in Georgia and in the South has gone up by several hundred percents. We've reached the critical mass, the point when people say "oh, the flood gates have been opened, we have to start watching out." I feel the level of fear and insecurity rising with the population. Eventually, I hope that will level out, because there's nothing to be done about it, it's a historical movement. We have to accept the fact that many of our neighbors are going to be Latinos. But that point hasn't been reached in the South yet. I think people are still more like "when is it going to stop." I think America is a series of waves that we have to endure. It's an evolutionary process, and I think the South is in turmoil right now. For the first time in a very long time, the population is looking different, is changing dramatically. It's going through what many States went through twenty years ago. I think Latino immigrants are starting to feel at home, because they start seeing themselves reflected in the place. [...] I may not be an activist, may not be politically involved, but I hope I'm giving voice to a phenomenon which might seem invisible to most people. (Brulley)

Judith Cofer was at the same time a prime example of the evolution of the South and one of its best chroniclers. She was aware of the troubled times that were ahead, and seemed to know that the presence of a “critical mass” of Latinos in the country might incite American voters to make some debatable choices. If you had asked me who Cofer was a few months ago, I would have replied, like I used to reply to my students in Mexico, that she was a brilliant writer still had many years in front of her to surprise her audience. Unfortunately for all of us, scholars, students, friends, readers, and admirers, she died last December.

ABSENCE AND DEATH

In one of our conversations a few years ago, Cofer told me the following:

I have started to let things coalesce into a vision of the South, after all of these years. I have now several pieces about my experiences in the South, and eventually what I hope is to put together a collection like *The Latin Deli*, but set in the South: a collection where the poems and stories and essays speak to each other through images, and language, rather than necessarily through links such as connected short stories. (Brultey)

One of the main criticisms made to Cofer, that is to say her lack of stories truly taking place in the U.S. South, in the fashion of writer Lorraine Lopez, was actually about to be. Unfortunately, I don't think Judith ever got to publish any of this, but I am convinced that someday some of this work in progress will be made public or even collected by scholars. In her final book, *The Cruel Country*, she was writing the following about her mother's death: "I came home to face the heretofore unacknowledged fact that death is not a surprise; death is the given." (*The Cruel Country*, 2016) It is still difficult for me to accept her death. The news of her death came as a surprise. As one of the main writers studied in my dissertation, I sensed she was only still midway in her long and promising career. She will leave a void. Cofer herself was strongly interested in that notion of absences and the way to fill them—I believe we should help her by not forgetting her work and by continually celebrating her accomplishments as a writer and as a woman.

To conclude,, I would like to read the poem “When you Come to My Funeral,” from *Reaching for the Mainland*:

When you Come to My Funeral

Bring conga drums and maracas,
meet at the statue in the plaza,
the one of Columbus pointing his index finger at the sky
as if to say, "you have found your way, amigos."
Be there at 3 o'clock, the hour of the siesta,
when the aroma of perking coffee draws laborers from the fields to the cool shade
of kitchens and cantinas.

Being your music and board the bus that goes
to the shore where I always wanted to live.
The trail is treacherous and narrow and the driver
will curse the day and embrace the wheel with
his strong brown arms, he was my friend,
invite him down for the party.

There will be rum punch and pasteles,
and if you bring a sad word for me leave it on the porch
like a wet umbrella, or better still, toss it out to sea.
I will be among you gathered at the edge of the Atlantic
to compose a new kind of dirge, one of vigorous beat
and a rocking cadence,
once that will take me out like a favorable current,
into the silence of my new way.

from *Reaching for the Mainland*, 1995