Dr. Yohann Brultey – yohann.brultey@gmail.com

Dissertation summary

"Towards a Reconfiguration of the Literature of the U.S. South: the Example of the Integration of Writers of Latino Origin"

*This summary offers a wide yet **incomplete** survey of the dissertation, the issues at stake, the literary analysis done, and the examples used. The aim of this exercise, as stated by the guidelines of the French Ministry of Higher Education, is to offer a text in English that **proportionally** summarizes every part of the dissertation, with a total length of roughly 10% of the French version. This summary should not be seen as anything but a concise and expurgated interpretation of the original research.*

The induction of Judith Ortiz Cofer to the Georgia Hall of Fame spurred this research—indeed, as the first brown woman to be officially acknowledged as belonging to the great family of Southern literature, Ortiz Cofer demonstrated a change in the way intellectual institutions were starting to perceive the region. The official validation of Ortiz Cofer's affiliation to the long tradition of southern literature raises the question of the legitimacy of the whole notion of southern literature at the beginning of the 21st century. Considering the strong influences of both immigration and cultural contact with the rest of the North American continent, what mental and cultural map can be associated with the southern space in 2012?

Those new influences prompted us to cast a critical eye on recent literary productions of writers of Latino origin—where do they stand, both in their words and their works, relative to the contemporary South and the southern literary tradition? Such questions mirror the issues at stake in southern studies since the turn of the new century: is the idea of a South still meaningful in the 21th century? If yes, should it be defined along strict borders and ideas, or should it be seen in a more global, inclusive way? Should the idea of a South be an intellectual end in itself, or should it be on the contrary a tool facilitating our critical analysis of both writing and socio-cultural events taking place in the South we live in? Furthermore, this study attempts

to cast light on a category of writers that has never been seriously or systematically studied by scholars, in order to discover what those writers have to say about their experience in the South.

The main objective of this work is to demonstrate, through micro and macro analyses of texts written mainly in English by writers of Latino descent, how those authors fit in the wide tradition of southern literature, and how they account for the topographical and socio-cultural changes that have been at work in the region for the last 30 years. In order to define the main corpus of writers, we had to resort to a traditional, widely accepted rule of selection, as stated by the organizational committee of the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame, and applied it to the widest definition of the U.S. South available, including Texas and Florida: “A writer must have been either a native of [the South] or have produced a significant work during or subsequent to a substantial time of work and/or residence in [the South].”

The first chapter of this work focuses on characters, and the social and cultural reconfiguration that is at work through them. We demonstrate how there are both tensions and similarities between the works of the corpus and traditional southern fiction, especially when it comes to the question of the representation of family spaces and foodways. Characters are also characterized by quests implying motion. Often related to questions of identity, these quests allow writers to challenge traditional perceptions of race.

Chapter two deals with the reconfiguration of the linguistic spaces in the region and the question of new religious forms appearing in the region, along with the importance of death and the not-too-far Otherworld, a place that challenges borders of time and space. In an attempt to demonstrate how a phenomenon of hybridisation is stressed by the writers, we finally study how important the tradition of storytelling is, and how the notion of History in itself is reconfigured in an open, fluid, and dynamic way.

Finally Chapter three is about questions related to geography and topography, showing how the redefinition of the southern space goes along with geographical stretchings and distortions, and attempts at perceiving moving borders as depending more on the motion and interconnection of human bodies than on any fakely essentializing and transhistorical definitions.

THE SOUTHERN PERSONA – RECONFIGURING THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND IDENTITY SPACES AT THE LIGHT OF CHARACTERS IN MOTION

The theme of family as a social frame places the stories in a larger generational and historical framework through a structure based on the succession of generations and a system of push and pull linking each family member. One prime example can be found in the works of Roberta Fernández, who perfectly illustrates the importance of the question of family entanglements in her collection of short stories *Intaglio*. At the beginning of nearly every story, the author draws an actual family tree that guides the understanding of the readers and helps them navigate among the gallery of characters featured in the text. Each story is also titled with the first name of the associated character—as an example, the first one, titled "Andrea," focuses on the relationship between Andrea Carducci and her family, while being told from the point of view of the young Adriana, Andrea's niece. The use of the family tree derives from both practical and symbolical concerns: through its position at the beginning of each story, it denotes the importance of family space and its multiple intersections and ramifications in the text; but it also allows the author to offer the tree to her reader as a "reference," a micro-social map that can be re-read and re-discovered as the narration progresses. Family becomes the prime space of narration—the apparent simplicity of the motif of the family tree enters in contrast with the complex and entangled familial and social relationships unveiled by the text. Not only does the tree act as a beacon that shows the reader-explorer the beginning of stories in which families act as both background and actors, it also plays the role of a guide, a map allowing readers to navigate the labyrinth of family-related questions. Family relationships become the root of many plots, as with many traditional southern works. The recurrent bringing forward of foodways complements that aspect—through its juxtaposition to family-related topoï, foodways appear as the embodiment of the southern social sphere.

Food, and the circumstances of its consumption, play an important role in the corpus. A relevant example can be found in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*. At the beginning of the story, Pilar, the teenage daughter of Cuban exiles, decides to run away from the comfort of her parents' New York apartment. As she's riding the Greyhound to Miami, with the idea in mind of

finding solace in her grandmother's arms, her first contact with the southern space is through culinary ways—when a new passenger gets on the bus at a stop in Richmond, Virginia, and sits next to her:

> After New Jersey, it's straight shot down I-95. I'm sitting next to this skinny woman who got on in Richmond. Her name is Minnie French but she's weirdly old-looking for a young person. Maybe it's her name or the three shopping bags of food she's got under her seat. Fried chicken, potato salad, ham sandwiches, chocolate cupcakes, even a jumbo can of peaches in heavy syrup. Minnie takes dainty bites of everything, chewing it fast like a squirrel. She offers me a chicken thigh but I'm not hungry.[1]

It's in the state of Virginia—often considered the northernmost southern state—that Pilar is suddenly confronted with typical southern fare, including fried chicken, potato salad, and canned peaches. As a character, Minnie is both identified through her physical appearance and through the presence of many grocery bags at her feet, creating a single entity. Through Minnie, who readily shares her abundant victuals, a first border is crossed by Pilar in her adventures—the culinary border of the South.

Other interesting aspects of the multiple roles played by foodways can be heard in many of Carmen Agra Deedy's audio collection of stories, *Growing Up Cuban in Decatur, Georgia*. In "Rice Pudding," Agra Deedy deals with the topic of the family transmission of a recipe. [2] The taste and smell of the rice pudding prepared by her aunt seems to have made a long-lasting impression on the narrator, leading her to cook it for her own daughters—even if she admits the inferior quality of her take on the recipe. Frustrated by her incapacity at perfectly reproducing the recipe, the narrator attempts to learn it again from her aunt, with no success. However, the taste for the family recipe seems to be inherited from generation to generation.[3] If the narrator believes her rice pudding cannot compete with her aunt's, her daughter is convinced that her take on the recipe makes the « best rice pudding in the world ». The recipe

---

[1] García, *DIC*, 27.

[2] "Tia Cordalia makes the best rice pudding in the world. I had my first taste of it when I was five years old. […] From the porch swing, I awaited the results of her culinary machinations as the fragrance of cinnamon, vanilla, and lime wafted through the screen door. That delicious rice pudding smell can still send a shiver of anticipation down my spine. I'm thirty-three years old now and I only have rice pudding if I make it for my own three daughters. But my rice pudding tastes nothing like my great aunt's […]" Deedy, *GCDG*.

[3] "It was spring before I could bring myself to make rice pudding, again. I tried to remember all the steps. I sifted and poured and stirred with a *different* hand. And as I tasted from the sticky spoon, the tears welled as I realized instantly that my rice pudding still tasted nothing like my great aunt Cordalia's, just as my daughter Katie entered the room, dipped her finger in the pot and rolled her eyes. "God, mom, you make the best rice pudding in the world." Deedy, *GCDG*.

is transmitted with success through its particular adaptation, linking the aunt and her great-niece, and demonstrating a strong cohesion in family traditions through an exploration of a *trace*.

Rituals associated with food help create a gustative identity leading to cohesion in terms of identity and intergenerational transmission—even though cobbler and grits now also cohabitate with beans and flautas in many occasions. These notions of transition and motion can also be found in the way characters progress physically and emotionally through the southern space.

A good example can be found in *Dreaming in Cuban*, by Cristina Garcia, in which the whole exile trip of Lourdes and her husband Rufino is described in detail, from Havana to New York, through Miami:

> When she had first left Cuba, Lourdes hadn't known how long they'd be way. She was to meet Rufino in Miami, where the rest of his family had fled. […] After several days, they left Miami in a secondhand Chevrolet. Lourdes couldn't stand Rufino's family, the endless brooding over their lost wealth, the competition for dishwasher jobs. 'I want to go where it's cold,' Lourdes told her husband. They began to drive. 'Colder,' she said as they passed the low salt marshes of Georgia, as if the word were a whip driving them north. 'Colder,' she said through the withered fields of a Carolina winter. 'Colder,' she said again in Washington, D.C., despite the cherry-blossom promises, despite the whitestone monuments hoarding winter light. 'This is cold enough,' she finally said when they reached New York.[4]

Following their arrival in Miami, Lourdes and her family progressively move up North, in an attempt to flee heat—Lourdes seems to be trying to distance herself from her family and past as much as she can, as if they embodied a South she doesn't want to be assimilated with. With García, the idea of motion is stressed through the detailed account of every single stop during the trip, and through the repetition of the comparative of superiority "colder" by Lourdes. But paradoxically, if Lourdes decides to go as much up North as possible, her daughter Pilar wants to go as much down South as possible, in a quest to find her grandmother who still lives in Cuba.[5] Pilar precisely follows the road travelled by her mother more than ten years before, placing herself in an existence in motion.

[4] García, *DIC*, 69-70.

[5] "That's it. My mind's made up. I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here. I take all my money out of the bank […] and buy a one-way bus ticket to Miami." García, *DIC*, 25.

Characters are constantly in motion, leading to the creation of a trace in the Glissantian way: through travels, exiles, migrations, the trace becomes the layered and fragmented representation of a certain path, crossing boundaries, identities, and family lines. More than the starting or end point of a human adventure, the trace emphasizes the importance of the notion of process. Characters are shown as benefiting from their wandering, bringing a sort of stability in a clear instability, which leads to strongly productive forms of personal and cultural identities. The feeling of motion and transgression can also be found in the way the role and significance of borders are reevaluated in the texts.

One interesting example of such a reevaluation can be found in Sergio Troncoso's *The Last Tortilla*, in his story "Day of the Dead." The story follows Lupe, a young woman living in Mexico and working as a babysitter and maid for an American family. For the Rogers, Lupe is an employee like any other, but the narration hints at the illegal nature of her employment, considering her crossing of the border every morning:

> One raft, with a man astride on it, waited on the Mexican side while a man in another raft was just pushing off the American side with a long pole. Three people were scurrying up the embankment on the other side. They stepped through a perfectly square hole in a chainlink fence that was welded atop a guardrail and curved toward Mexico like an upright hand with an infinite number of fingers bent at the knuckle. Lupe walked quickly toward the pasamojados. […] By the time she reached the group, another raft had already drifted across the Río Grande and was on its way back. […] They smiled at each other quickly, and Lupe said gracias, and together they peered at the pole and the raft creeping over the sheet of still blackness toward them. The river Styx of the Americas.[6]

Every morning, Lupe crosses the Rio Grande on a makeshift raft along with many other illegal workers. The *pasamojados*, the ferrymen, organize the crossing for a price. From Lupe's point of view, the crossing is described as a terrifying experience: the raft moves in the darkness of the early morning, floating on the "river Styx of the Americas," a reference to the mythological river separating the earth from the underworld, the world of the living and the world of the dead, carting the souls of the dead. The border is compared to a loathsome point of passage between two worlds which, although separate, are in constant contact. Another detail puts forward the paradoxical situation of Lupe towards the border: the use of the words "Rio Grande" to describe the border-river, the U.S. version of the Mexican "Río Bravo." Even though she lives in Mexico and works illegally in the U.S., Lupe uses the English way to name the river,

---

[6] Troncoso, *LT*, 188-9.

symbolizing the complexity of both her physical and psychological position towards the notion of border.

Another interesting, yet very different example of a complex relationship toward borders can be found in Ana Menéndez's *Loving Che*. In the book, the anonymous female narrator, who fled Cuba for Miami with her grandfather in the late fifties, has lost all contact with her mother. In her quest to find her mother's *trace*, the narrator crosses a great many times the two hundred miles that act as a natural border between Cuba and Florida. During her first Miami-Havana flight, the narration gives an uncanny feeling of immediacy to the crossing.[7] The narrator, a U.S. citizen, is confronted to technical difficulties before embarking—an issue certainly due to the visa restrictions imposed by the U.S. to its citizens when it comes to flying to Cuba. However the ocean crossing is described as almost instantaneous, with the narrative juxtaposition of two temporarily and geographically disjointed situations: from the smile of the agent at the gate in Miami to the landing and disembarkation in Havana, there is no line break or any textual mention of the flight in itself. The border is ignored, erased by the narration, as if the action went from one place to another with no necessary transition.

More than a simple contact point between different political regions, the border becomes a crossing zone, a space of cultural blending and creation. The political border becomes the place where the different traces—past, present, and future—intermingle and crossover. The representation of symbolic borders, such as death, follow the same model, with characters and narrations entering in a relationship transcending time and space. Characters are driven in exploratory quests leading to the creation of a *trace*, an idea of progression and fluidity also metaphorically put forward in texts through the multiple references to bodies of water.

A good example can be found in García's *The Agüero Sisters*, in which water is used as a way to symbolize a necessary (re)discovery of the self and of the *trace*. In a scene from the

[7] "By the time I emerged from the underground darkness, holding my ticket, I was recalling with fondness how easy it had been to travel through Jamaica all those years before. I was beginning to regret this form of legal travel and dreading whatever sister-tortures awaited me on the other side on Havana. It was now two hours past the departure time, but when I asked a woman at the gate about it, she just smiled and said, Don't worry so much. In Havana, it was past midnight by the time we made it off the airplane and onto a rickety bus that deposited us at the terminal." Ana Menéndez, *Loving Che*, New York: Grove Press, 2004, 178.

novel, main character Reina goes on a quest to understand her own identity and find answers to the old family mysteries haunting her: during a sailing trip around Key Biscayne with her sister Constacia, Reina is described as "long[ing] for deeper waters to explore,"[8] a remark hinting to a both physical and symbolical urge. Reina is an adventurer ready to brave the waters, whether it is to find her sister or to learn more about the mysterious death of her mother—who supposedly drowned, even though Reina is convinced the violent temper of her father had a role to play in the tragic outcome.[9] Reina's short trip in the deep water surrounding the island is an occasion for the woman to realize a psychological crossing, and to sail up the *trace* of the events that led to the demise of her family—a crossing Constancia refuses to take part in, her refusal being symbolized by her terror when aboard the boat.[10] However, as Katherine Payant noticed in her study of the alienation and reconciliation process in García's novels, the ocean will eventually benefit Constancia—the character, following the advice of a *santero* priest, will take part in a swimming ritual physically bringing her close the Cuban coasts,[11] showing once again the importance of the ocean in the physical and mental process of liberation of the individual.

Bodies of water, such as oceans and rivers, have a role to play in the constitution of a topology of motion. They are put forward as expanses of possibilities—symbolically, the never-ending ebb and tide resonates with the idea of a productive motion of bodies in space and time, while drowning is associated with the fear, hopelessness, and close-mindedness associated with a motionless existence. Those who find their way in water are those whose lives revolve around the idea of spatial, psychological, and intellectual progress. However, characters very often show signs of a fear located deep down in the meanders of their minds: the fear of losing their identity, which would be the consequence of their moves.

---

[8] García, *AS* 166.

[9] "Describe the colors of Mami's devastated throat. Force her to listen. Shout it loud in her sister's face. Mami couldn't have drowned, like their father said. No, she couldn't have drowned, which means their father must have lied." García, *AS* 167.

[10] "Turn around, Reina. *Tengo miedo*." García, *AS* 167.

[11] "The final, physical struggle between the sisters during Constancia's ritual swim toward Cuba (commanded by a *santero*) dramatizes Constancia's fight with her past and her grasping for identity." Katherine B. Payant, "From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina García," *MELUS* 26:3, 2001, 177.

A prime example of such a confusion between identities can be found in “The Other” by Judith Ortiz Cofer, a poem that puts forward the dual identity of the poem’s speaker, who is torn between her insular Puerto Rican origins and her life on the continental U.S.:

> A sloe-eyed dark woman shadows me.
> In the morning she sings
> Spanish love songs in a high falsetto
> Filling my shower with echoes.
> She is by my side
> in front of the mirror as I slip
> into my tailored skirt and she
> into her red cotton dress. […]
> Her mouth is like a red bull’s eye
> daring me.
> Everywhere I go I must
> make room for her; she crowds me
> in elevators where others wonder
> at all the space I need.
> At night her weight tips my bed, and
> it is her wild dreams that run rampant
> through my head exhausting me. […][12]

The doppelganger is described as a (stereo)typical Puerto Rican woman, with dark eyes and crimson lips, dressed in a red cotton dress and singing love songs in Spanish. The narrator stresses the constant presence of the doppelganger on her side, who accompanies her in all her daily activities. The doppelganger becomes an invading presence, making the narrator physically and psychologically bigger, “crowding her,” forcing her to allow enough space for both her identities: the continental one, serious, professional and dark, with its tight bun and its strict dress code, and the island doppelganger that invades her imaginary during the night, having her make the wildest dreams. The image of such an “other” self, a disturbing part of the narrator herself, underlines the potential psychological trouble experienced after a migration.

If in order to attempt to fight the fear of losing their identity some characters choose an isolationist stance—that almost always leads to their withering and demise—others on the contrary embrace their different identities without rejecting any, such as the narrator of the autobiographical collection of stories by Carmen Agra Deedy, *Growing Up Cuban in Decatur, Georgia*. In the story entitled “Mangoes and Magnolias,” the young Carmen has a conversation

[12] Ortiz Cofer, *Rm* 40.

with her father following an altercation with a classmate who has verbally denied Carmen's U.S. identity:

> "Papi, I'm not really Cuban, because I'm growing up in Decatur! But I'm not American because I don't look like them, and I don't talk like them." I trailed off as my neck and face grew hot. My father, the gardener, looked at me intently for a few moments then asked: "Did you know what grafting is? […] Carmen, when we took you from Cuba, you were like a young mango tree, torn up by the roots. You could have withered and died. Instead, you have been grafted into this small southern town, Decatur. And you don't know it yet, but you're an amazing hybrid. A tree that gives forth both mangoes and magnolias. And you don't have to stop eating the fruit to smell the flowers."[13]

Carmen, unsettled by her dual identity, feels she's facing a contradiction; but her father, using the images of the graft and the hybrid, explains to her that if she has indeed been uprooted from the soil where she was born, she has been quickly "grafted" in the southern clay, creating a hybrid individual—qualified as "amazing" by the man. The metaphor evokes Édouard Glissant's notion of *creolisation*, defining the contacts between different cultures leading to a third, unpredictable, cultural result[14]—without leading to a dilution of identity.[15]

The corpus shows a sense of motion and of process through the characters. If the fear of a loss of identity due to geographical and intellectual wanderings remains, a form of potential rebirth exists through the notion of *creolization*. This double phenomenon of identity dislocation followed by a more inclusive reconstruction helps pointing out how fallacious is the whole idea of an essential, timeless and fixed southern identity.

Living in the United States goes along with a necessary racial classification—the Latino rainbow of fluid colors morphs into an exclusive racialisation, encouraged legally and administratively. In Gwendolyn Zepeda's *To the Last Man I Slept With and All the Jerks Like Him*, the short story "Blue Birds" can be found in a very autobiographical chapter entitled "Half-White Child of Hippies, Born in Houston in 1971," a story in which the narrator reflects on her experience of racial classification at school:

---

[13] Agra Deedy, *GCDG*.

[14] "La mise en contact de plusieurs cultures ou au moins de plusieurs éléments de cultures distinctes, dans un endroit du monde, avec pour résultante une donnée nouvelle, totalement imprévisible par rapport à la somme ou à la simple synthèse de ces éléments."

[15] "[La créolisation] ne conclut pas à la perte d'identité, à la dilution de l'étant. Elle n'infère pas le renoncement à soi. […] [Elle] est imprévisible, elle ne saurait se figer, s'arrêter, s'inscrire dans des essences, dans des absolus identitaires. Consentir que l'étant change en perdurant, ce n'est pas approcher un absolu." Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde, Poétique IV*. Paris : Gallimard, 1997, 25-6.

> We fed the government's hunger for statistics by filling out forms several times a year. On the line above "RACE," I copied what I had seen my father write many times: Mexican, hyphen, American. Later that would change to a mere check in a box next to 'Hispanic,' and then a darkened bubble next to 'latino,' and then a write-in of 'mixed' […][16]

The young narrator has no option but to define and declare her race on the forms handed out by her school—it can be noticed that she carefully copies the expression "Mexican-American" that she saw her father use often, assimilating the very cultural question of race through the imitation of a parental act. However, Zepeda's narrator only understands very slowly and painfully the meaning of the different designations, considering herself as white because of the tone of her skin.[17] When she arrives in her new school, she realizes she's not "as white" as she thinks, and decides to performatively embody her Latina identity in order to improve her relationship with the Mexican-American children living in her neighborhood.[18] But in spite of her efforts, the narrator still gets a stream of abuse from María, who calls her a *bolilla*, a word originally designating a variety of white Mexican bread, and used as a racial insult against a white person—when the narrator finds the courage to retort that she's not white, she's ironically asked if it means she's black. The passage stresses the binary system at work when it comes to the question of racial categorization, forcing individuals to fit in strict, restrictive, and predetermined categories. The narrator, facing a complex situation she doesn't fully comprehend, has no choice but to flee the scene, being symbolically ostracized from the world of clear-cut identities.

The texts put forward how the American racial binaries, far from being natural and essential, are actually a highly cultural phenomenon. Latino characters in the South get stuck in an identity warp, through their impossibility to fit in the black/white binary, due to their own culturally inherited perception of the question of race and skin color—leading them into a potentially uncomfortable and invisible position of inbetweeners. Furthermore, the new

---

[16] Zepeda, *LMSW* 12.

[17] "Although I felt comfortable with children of all races, I became increasingly aware, through my interactions with our classroom's ethnic majority, that I was not really white. Now I only had to convince everyone else." Zepeda, *LMSW* 13.

[18] "[…] I shared my barbies with girls in the neighborhood. I learned enough Spanish to pay proper respect to their mothers. [...] My attempts to conform weren't enough to please certain people. María from three blocks away decided she hated me because of the color of my skin. "Hey, *bolilla!*" she'd yell down the street. "Hey, *pinche bolilla!*" One day I had the courage to yell back, "I'm not a *bolilla!*" "What are you then—a nigger?" she screamed laughing. Overcome by the foreignness of her logic and vulgarity, I turned and ran away." *Ibid.* 13.

awareness of their position in a racialized system sometimes bring a temptation for a certain racism directed towards African Americans—however, the corpus of texts also tends to emphasize the similarities between the different "brown" minorities—poverty, rejection, absence in official history and invisibilization. But by the same token, whiteness, and more generally racial purity, is analyzed, deconstructed, and re-evaluated in the corpus, and stops being seen as a fundamental characteristic of southern identity.

"The Flood," by Lorraine López, featured in her collection of short stories *Homicide Survivors Picnic*, stars Lydia, a young woman from Tennessee, who has agreed to take care of Roxanne, the young bi-racial daughter of her sister. The story opens on Lydia and Roxanne, seated in an almost empty southern bakery—the other customers being a group of old white men, as clearly stated by the narration.[19] In the first lines of the story, whiteness is stressed, put forward, de-normalized. This de-essentialization of whiteness goes on, with little Roxanne asking Lydia a couple of questions,[20] including "Why are these guys so white?" Roxanne's question surprises Lydia, both because of the innocent tone of voice, and because of the way whiteness is pointed out as strange, unsettling. Through her question, the bi-racial child questions the notion of whiteness itself and its traditional position as a standard—a remark that prompts Lydia to rethink her own way of looking at the group of men:

> Against her will, Lydia glances over her shoulder. The men, seven or eight in all, are strikingly white […] they are nearly luminous, ghostly. With beaky noses and hunched shoulders, they huddle over their sweet rolls and coffee like celestial buzzards picking over paradisiacal carrion. These men provide such a sharp contrast from Roxanne's dusky skin and kinky jet hair that Lydia's pupils dilate perceptibly when she turns back to their own table. "Maybe they're in a club or something."[21]

The whiteness of the old men is described as "striking," and they are compared to ghosts and buzzards—the men are characterized by their decrepitude and the notion of death with which it is associated. Through her answer to Roxanne, that the men may be in "a club," Lydia suddenly has a vision of the men as old, white, and disturbing, from an era of white supremacy.

---

[19] "'Auntie,' Roxanne says to Lydia in her piercing four-year-old way, the volume of it drawing stares from elderly white men seated near the storefront window. 'Auntie, let's sit here.'" López, *HSP* 10.

[20] Roxanne climbs into the chair before the bottled apple juice and the cream puff Lydia has set out. "Why are these guys so white?" she asks in a stage whisper that is maybe half a decibel lower than her raucous speaking voice. Lydia's certain that even the men with hearing devices embedded in their hairy, oversized ears have heard this. "Shush." *Ibid.* 10.

[21] *Ibid.* 10-1.

On the contrary, she describes Roxanne as physically powerful,[22] with developed senses,[23] and an impressive intelligence for her age.[24] For Lydia, Roxanne is the embodiment of a « new type »[25] in her southern family. Diametrically opposed to "pillowy" white women and "desiccated" white men, she is appears perfectly healthy—a way for López to show the slow disappearance of a South dominated by an unquestioned whiteness and purity of race.[26]

Wandering, inbetweenness, and dislocation of identity—whether those situations are due to migrations or internal family issues—can bring a potentially productive instability, especially when it comes to the question of racial identification. Through a process of deconstruction denaturalization of whiteness, the limits of identification in the southern space are threatened and expanded. The authors, their works of fiction, and their characters position themselves in intermediary spaces—*inbetween spaces* as Bhabha would put it—which become prevalent to the detriment of binary or absolute systems of thought. Such a rejection of binaries can also be found in the way languages are exploited in the corpus.

---

[22] "But the robust Roxanne could be photographed for the cover of *Health and Fitness* magazine. Her dark legs are strong, well-muscled as she skips ahead and trots back to Lydia bearing found treasures." *Ibid.* 29.

[23] "The child has a wickedly powerful arm and a sharp eye. In this soupy heat, [Lydia's] not keen on hauling around the stuffed animals Roxanne is sure to win. […]The little girl topples all three pyramids, one after the other, and selects a six-foot stuffed snake as her prize. At the dart booth, Roxanne punctures five balloons in a row, winning a goldfish doll as big as a calf. Next, she brings the sledge-hammer down so hard on the child-sized scale that the weighted ball sticks to the bell, won't come down. 'I never seen anything like this,' says the heavy woman who hands over a huge, inflated parrot." *Ibid.* 23-4.

[24] "She's a bright girl, too, Lydia thinks, not really knowing what other four-year-olds are like. But Roxanne has an uncanny ability to read people, or at least Lydia, and to anticipate her thoughts before she speaks them. Roxanne also has a sharp sense of direction, and she's observant and shrewd. Yes, Lydia tells herself, the kid knows which side her bread is buttered on. Roxanne would do fine for herself wherever she went." *Ibid.* 30.

[25] "The girl is the forerunner of a new physical type for Lydia's family, which is comprised of gaunt, desicated-looking men and pale, pillowy women—the lot of them short as jockeys. (Lydia, herself, is a compromise between these types, trim and curvy now, but likely headed toward plush flabbiness as she ages) At a family reunion picnic, Roxanne would be a thoroughbred colt grazing among stick-like reeds and fat, waxy mushrooms. Why, she could eat them all up." *Ibid.* 30.

[26] "I just wanted to emphasize the new southerner, the new race—this is the healthy, strong, resistant, resilient thoroughbred, whites are not the thoroughbred anymore. It's a nice inversion, because when you think about World War Two and eugenics and the idea of a pure race, here you actually have a genetic mixing which produces this girl who is so strong and healthy. And you have these old, white "celestial vultures" who are clearly on their way out, they're practically transparent in their whiteness, because they're fading away. Roxanne embodies the new order. And Roxanne hammers that point by pointing the pictures of white people on the wall—obviously you don't see any black people—and she's able to pronounce them "dead, dead, dead." She can do that because people like her, the millennium type, when they come of age, men like those on the pictures will be gone, literally." Interview with Lorraine López.

SOUTHERN LANGUAGES—RECONFIGURING THE LINGUISTIC SPACE AND FORMS OF EXPRESSION RELATED TO TRADITION, RELIGION, AND THE IMAGINARY

Many authors of the corpus invoke the tradition of storytelling as a strong influence in their works. If Judith Ortiz Cofer has very quickly understood the importance of storytelling in the southern space and declares she discovered the strength of orality thanks to her grandmother,[27] René Saldaña goes even further, stressing the importance and peculiarity of storytelling in the region:

> You know, I've never heard of storytellers from the North. I know they are there, but there isn't that tradition of storytellers. In Mexico, the South, the Native American community, there has always been that tradition of passing one's history and stories orally, from one generation to the next. My maternal grandfather was a wonderful storyteller. I think having grown up listening to him tell one story after another, influenced me without my knowing. I would just sit there because he was my grandfather, not out of respect, but just because I loved the stories I would listen. […] But it's that same idea that I tried to pass on to my students, saying that the personal story is more important than the technical ability of writing—that counts for a great deal, making that writing come alive. […] They're able to write their own *cuentitos*, even though they don't call it that way. And ideally they'll pass them to their kids in the classroom, and those kids will also tell *cuentitos*.[28]

For Saldaña, storytelling is the foundation of the literary and cultural tradition of the southern space, from Mexico to Puerto Rico, through Georgia and Texas—oral transmission and storytellers play an essential role in the life of those societies than up North. If Saldaña doesn't deny the existence of storytellers beyond the Mason-Dixon line, he still puts forward their less privileged position: in the South, orality can be felt even in texts, making them "come alive."

The idea of writers as storytellers evolving in the heart of a specific community is a widespread notion that can be found in the whole southern space, from Mexico to Puerto Rico and Tennessee. Oral tradition—paradoxically expressed through written words in the corpus—brings a sort of vital essence to the texts, becoming a form of expression in motion placing the writers as chroniclers of the contemporary world. The tradition of storytelling—and its common integration of actual members of the community into the stories—can be directly linked to the importance of the notion of intergenerational transmission and plays a role in bridging the gap

[27] "I did also notice rather quickly that the storytelling impulse is very strong in the South […] I learned powerful storytelling from my grandmother, and poetry from my grandfather." Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer.

[28] Interview with René Saldaña.

between the different elements constituting the enlarged southern space. Furthermore, this inclination towards storytelling contributes to a redefinition of the perception of History.

In an interview with Eduardo Del Rio, Cristina García shares her strong interest in the notion of transmission, inside both the family and the community:

> I'm fascinated with how family history gets passed on. How family mythology is created. How legends are made within the family. Why certain versions of things survive as opposed to others, and who's invested in these particular versions of events. […] It's not anything objective.[29]

Along with stressing the importance of the notion of transmission, García notices how the family mythology, and by extension community mythology, are far from being linear and objective processes—different versions of stories and History coexist, shaping a fragmented cultural and historical landscape.

The plot of Menéndez's *Loving Che* gravitates around such a notion of relationship between (personal) stories and History, challenging the perception of History as linear and stable. The narrator was supposedly sent to Florida along with her grandfather by her mother following Castro's rise to power.[30] The story and destiny of the narrator are intimately linked to the Cuban revolution, a version whose details are questioned by the narrator through her obsessive quest for her long-lost mother. Following the receipt of a mysterious parcel from a woman named Teresa, a Cuban woman who supposedly had a fiery love story with Che Guevara, the narrator starts believing—and convincing herself—that Teresa is her biological mother: she consciously organizes the fragmented documents and photographs contained in the parcel to recreate an artificial, highly personal story of her own past, of a *trace* she would like to be part of.

Resorting to an orally-inspired tradition allows openness and fluidity—a form of instability that challenges the overall idea of an official History, stable and fixed. History is created and exploited in real time, becoming a fusion between the expression of storytellers

---

[29] Eduardo R. del Rio, *One Island, Many Voices: Conversations with Cuban-American Writers*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008, 43.

[30] "In my grandfather's house there was no television set, no magazines, no photographs, only books and the quiet turning of pages. Of my parents, as of most things, he spoke little. I grew up with the understanding that my father had been in prison, and had died there, and that in her grief my mother had sent me away. […] The time came, however, when my grandfather's silence about my mother no longer satisfied me. […] The easy respect, the love, I had shared with my grandfather slowly came to be overlaid with frustration and distrust. The more questions I had for him, the more he seemed to retreat into the quiet of his books." Menéndez, *LC* 3-4.

and the emotional landscape and trace of the characters. History and stories blend, emphasizing the importance of the perception of tradition and customs as constantly renewed and reimagined. The official, historical overarching frame, heir to the figure of the colonizer, is challenged in its fixity and narrowness—and so is the position of authors when it comes to the question of literary genres.

Generally speaking, our writers enjoy toying with the notion of literary genre, through their interest in widely diverse genres and their steadfast refusal to stick to a single one in their works. A daring example is Judith Ortiz Cofer, who has published since 1986 many collections of poems, short stories, essays, along with novels and children's books. As early as *The Line of the Sun* (1986), Ortiz Cofer decided to juxtapose prose and poetry, aiming at a sort of intellectual and artistic flexibility.[31] The fluidity with which Ortiz Cofer navigates between the different literary genres, using poetry as a starting point in a way to better "discover and explore," reminds Édouard Glissant's discourse on literary genres: for the philosopher, the deconstruction of literary genres and of their borders allows a sort of intellectual wandering[32] that permits to put into light hidden structures and truths, giving depth and perspective to narrations.[33] Ortiz Cofer's *The Latin Deli* juxtaposes pseudo-autobiographical stories

[31] "I basically refused to separate the prose from the poetry, because what I was trying to do was to tell the truth, but tell it slant: give it a different light, see if what you say in the poem can also be expanded in the prose. I like to ask myself: what led to that particular poem? What made me want to write this poem? […] I don't write by decree, I wait to find out, I like to discover and explore. Whatever form it takes is where I go. I teach a creative writing class in which I take my students from the lyric essay, to micro-fiction, to prose-poetry, and then to poetry, and I have them write the same thing in different forms, and it allows them to discover which way is the best to tell the story. I guess that how I approach the fact that we have much more liberty to do that now than we did in the past. Literature has become much more flexible: while my early books were rejected because they were multi-genre, now I see more and more works based on collage, and people are freer to explore the connection between the genres." Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer.

[32] "La poésie est jusqu'ici le seul art qui peut aller réellement derrière les apparences. Je crois que c'est là une de ses vocations. C'est la volonté de défaire les genres, cette partition qui a été si profitable, si fructueuse dans le cas des littératures occidentales. Je crois que nous pouvons écrire des poèmes qui sont des essais, des essais qui sont des romans, des romans qui sont des poèmes. Je veux dire que nous essayons de défaire précisément parce que nous sentons que les rôles qui ont été impartis à ces genres dans la littérature occidentale ne conviennent plus pour notre investigation qui n'est pas seulement une investigation du réel, mais qui est aussi une investigation de l'imaginaire, des profondeurs, du non-dit, des interdits. […] Nous devons cahoter tous les genres pour pouvoir exprimer ce que nous voulons exprimer." Édouard Glissant, *L'Imaginaire des langues : entretiens avec Lise Gauvin*, Paris : Gallimard, 2010, 29.

[33] "[Il s'agit de] faire remonter à la surface des coordonnées, des vérités, des structures que personne ne voit d'ordinaire, [d'empêcher que la littérature] devien[ne] un objet de surface alors [qu'elle est], traditionnellement, un objet de profondeur." Édouard Glissant, *L'Imaginaire des langues : entretiens avec Lise Gauvin*, Paris : Gallimard, 2010, 71.

(" American History," "Not for Sale"), poetical interludes ("From 'Some Spanish Verbs'"), polemical essays ("The Myth of the Latin Woman : I Just Met a Girl Named María") and pedagogical ones ("5 : 00 A.M. : Writing as Ritual"), giving the collection the appearance of a colorful and complicatedly woven quilt.

The decompartmentalization of literary genres at work in the corpus directly stems from the interest of writers for the oral tradition—an attempt at exploring realities is at work through the multiplication of genres. This breakup of the traditional barriers between genres goes hand in hand with the deconstruction of literary spaces. The attractiveness of literary wandering allows the display of literature as a complex, deep object, as opposed to a simple relationship with a flat surface. For Glissant, we have a prime example of attempts to "express the imaginary of the world" which show a change in the relationship towards History, including the refusal of its linearity. Texts don't fit the imperial and colonial forms, borrowing usually stable forms (such as the novel) but deconstructing through a process of Glissantian *archipélisation* that insists on margins, third spaces, and wanderings. These attempts at deconstructing stable realities can also be found in the way texts deal with the use of languages, mainly English and Spanish.

A certain tension can be noticed with the question of languages and their use. Halfway between the shame of not speaking English and/or Spanish, and the idea that one clearly has to speak English and definitely not speak Spanish. Even though there is a total lack of homogeneity in the corpus when it comes to the relationship with languages, the texts reveal a slow disappearance of monolingual writings: the new awareness of the existence of other languages and the acceptance of their relevancy in better assessing specific realities and *imaginaries*. For Glissant, one of the most important literary phenomenon of the early 21st century is the progressive disappearance of "monolingual writings,"[34] that is to say the traditional obliviousness of authors for the linguistic diversity in both their community and the world.

[34] "Les écritures étaient monolingues. Aujourd'hui, même quand un écrivain ne connait aucune autre langue, il tient compte, qu'il le sache ou non, de l'existence de ces langues autour de lui dans son processus d'écriture. On ne peut plus écrire une langue de manière monolingue. On est obligé de tenir compte des imaginaires des langues. […] On ne peut plus écrire son paysage ou décrire sa propre langue de manière monolingue. Les gens qui, comme les Américains, les Etats-Uniens, n'imaginent pas la problématique des langues n'imaginent même pas le monde." Édouard Glissant, *L'Imaginaire des langues : entretiens avec Lise Gauvin*, Paris : Gallimard, 2010, 14-5.

Without even speaking about the actual use of different languages in a single text that does exist in the corpus, “polylingual writings” show an awareness for other languages and an acknowledgement of the notion that they embody a different, non contradictory, imagination.

The flexible use of languages reflects an experience of the region and of the world that is also fluid and polymorphic. If Spanish is usually the language of emotion, of personal and intimate relationships—it demonstrates a sort of tenderness, far from purely pragmatic or professional ties. The relationship to English and Spanish is also a way to evaluate and gauge proximity and distance in characters, through a system of acceptation or rejection. However, texts tend more than anything else to promote the combination and juxtaposition of two languages, through attempts at showing the mastery of both Spanish and English as a sort of intellectual climax for characters. Interestingly, bilingualism and language mixing is often criticized by the characters’s opponents who perceive it as a sort of linguistic miscegenation—once again we see the idea of motion, intersection, superposition, and hybridity as opposed to an unproductive and dull stability.

Each author’s sensibility towards languages can be felt in their writing—from Cruz and his declared attempts at transcribing what he calls a “Spanish sensibility” into English, to Suárez and his perception of Spanish as a far-away language that is now filtered through his mastery of English, to Ana Menéndez who doesn’t use any textual markers (such as italics) when using Spanish. But there clearly is a process of interaction between languages that challenges the idea of monolinguism: even though English dominates the corpus, its presence doesn’t prevent an evolution of the way languages communicate and interact. A consciousness of languages appears, banishing by the same token the myth of a single reality and creating a world of possible—the “open speaking” (*parler ouvert*) becomes an “open thinking” (*penser ouvert*) that challenges artificially stable uniformities and one-track approaches. Hierarchies between languages fade away, and multilinguism emerges. After a fixed, stable, reassuring, and colonial monolinguism, a polyphonic writing in motion, characterized by its fluidity, instability, and postcolonial nature emerges. Such a progressive disappearance of hierarchical stabilities and clearly dichotomized practices can also be found in the way religious questions are handled.

Most authors of the corpus have been through religious teaching, or at least a very religious education—from René Saldaña who graduated from religious universities,[35] to Judith Ortiz Cofer who declares having been strongly influenced by her grandfather's mysticism,[36] to Lorraine López's fascination for the religious concepts developed by Flannery O'Connor,[37] it appears impossible to deny the influence of religion and faith on the writers and their texts. Generally speaking, the divine and sacred is put forward as a highly personal quest—a vision that goes along with the acceptance of God's infallibility. As a character declares in Nilo Cruz's play *A Bicycle Country*, even if God seems to randomly kill and destroy his creatures, his actions are always justified.[38] At the same time, one is supposed to ask God the right questions and be able to develop his or her own personal relationship with him—even if it means experiencing the scriptures first hand when the ministers don't seem to be able to help, as it is the case in Troncoso's "Espíritu Santo," in which Doña Dolores, who feels oppressed by demons supposedly harassing her, can't find any solace in her discussions with a priest.[39] Sitting in her armchair, Bible on her lap, Dolores starts interrogating the scriptures in a quest for truth, distancing herself from organized religious practices and reinforcing her personal link with God.[40]

---

[35] "I went to a small, religious, semi-private university in South Carolina, Bob Jones University, which is Protestant." Interview with René Saldaña.

[36] "I also had gentle influences in my life with my grandfather, who was a spiritist, a would-be poet, a gentle house builder. I heard my first poems spoken by my grandfather." Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer.

[37] "I love the big things O'Connor deals with in her writing. Religion, Catholicism, grace. She really opened my mind to what a story can be. I did come to the South with that intent […] it was illuminating." Interview with Lorraine López.

[38] "INES: — Oh, I don't like talking about politics. To me wars seem useless and unreasonable. Destruction. God destroys, but his destruction is always justified. He destroys in perfect order. He's an artist at it. After his hurricanes and earthquakes, there's always a blue morning with clouds. And if there's rain, it's because he hasn't finished cleaning up after himself. But we haven't learned to master that art. Man is sloppy and messy, and he can never master that art." Cruz, *BC* 164.

[39] "She took out the readings Father Magaña had given her at El Centro, at the cena. The priest had brought them there at her request, having planned to give her some preliminary explanations of these difficult biblical passages. But then he had been taken aback by her fresh facial injuries, the lump of magenta, the languid bloodshot eye. […] The horrified young curate had also forgotten to ask why it was that such matters had concerned Doña Dolores in the first place. […] She thanked the young priest and squeezed his hand tenderly. She would find out what was what by herself." Troncoso, *LT* 41.

[40] "Sitting contently on the green plastic cushions of her reading chair next to the fireplace, Doña Dolores read about the fall of man into evil, in Genesis. Why did Adam and Eve choose evil? Were they already flawed in some way before that choice? That couldn't be. Here it said clearly: "And they were both naked, the man and the woman, and were not ashamed." And here: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it

The existence in the corpus of a widespread quest for religious and spiritual meaning cannot be denied—religion remains one of the strongest framework in the works studied.. Religious places are present in the daily background of the characters's existence—churches and temples become typical places of action. Furthermore, religious symbolism are present throughout the corpus, bringing a mystical mood to the narration. The inner quest for faith is very often foregrounded as highly personal and intimate, through a resort to prayers, purification rituals, and spiritual elevation. The dialectic approach to religion brings character to a certain rejection of religious institutions, privileging the creation of their own mystical and religious environment—even when the deceased need to come back from the other world to advise them.

In texts mainly dealing with the everyday life of common people, death and the rituals associated to it hold an important position. From the death of the old Jorge del Pino in *Dreaming in Cuban*, to the violent death of Lupe in *The Last Tortilla*, and to the details about her own burial ceremony given by Ortiz Cofer in *Reaching for the Mainland*, *la muerte* knocks on everybody's door, taking multiple shapes and aspects. Generally speaking, death is never depicted as the end of the existence of an individual, on either material or spiritual plans. As the wise Leonor explains in *Intaglio*, "nothing is ever truly lost. Whatever disappears or dies simply becomes transformed into something new."[41] An interesting example can be found in the short story "The Visitor," included in Daniel Alarcón's *War by Candlelight*. The story depicts the struggle of a man trying to help his family following the utter destruction of their city under the bombs. Constructing, protecting, and reinforcing their shelter is one of his priorities:

> The sun warmed my cheeks. Across the valley, across the muddy strip of earth, I saw the cemetery hill. The children sat together; I waved to them. We would be better off here, I decided. These were the best lands. I went back for the children. While the girls waited, Efraín and I made two more trips, crossing the thick mud with careful steps, carrying more planks. With the remains of the shattered coffins, we made a new home on the eastern slopes.[42]

---

was very good." […] Moreover, it was also clear that God Himself created the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, created it and planted it in the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve. That much was also clear. So it seemed that God's world already *included* the possibility of evil, that this world was not perfect to start with. No one was perfect to start with. […] Why should one be good to begin with? *That* was the unanswerable question. There was no "answer" but faith." Troncoso, *LT* 41-2.

[41] Fernández, *INT* 102.

[42] Alarcón, *WbC* 111.

Through the image of the salvaging of planks from old caskets, the text puts forward a process of recycling—the casket, symbolizing death, becomes a resource allowing the construction of a shelter aimed at protecting lives. The hill on which the graveyard is located becomes a place of abundance, as it is among "the best lands"—the *city upon the hill* is about to be (re)constructed. Death becomes intimately linked with hope and rebirth, the soil where the dead have been buried becoming the fertile grounds for a new society. But the spiritual presence of the dead can also be felt in many texts, the most seductive example being how Doña Rosita, in Troncoso's "Day of the Dead," awaits for the return of the spirit of her husband Joaquín, preparing an altar in his honor and going to sleep knowing he'll join her during the night. [43] The world of the living and of the dead are not very far apart, especially on the *Día de los Muertos*, when "the primordial link between the living and the dead would become a highway easily traversed."

Death is present everywhere, and is often celebrated. Far from perceiving it as an end in itself, it is depicted as playing a part in an overarching process of rebirth, in which the visibilisation of death and post-mortem rituals plays a part. The world of the afterlife is not very remote, and ghosts frequently interact with the living, acting as supporting characters characterized by their compassion and wisdom—figures totally opposed to the traditional depiction of ghosts as angry, threatening specters. Ghosts are figures of wandering, through their trips back and forth in time and space. They play a role in a universe also inhabited by demons and curses—many pagan rituals, aiming at countering their relentless aggressions, are described in detail.

The existence of a harmonious blend of European liturgy and pagan rituals is stressed by the texts: Troncoso's Doña Dolores uses both a crucifix and palm frond to fight the demon in

[43] "Joaquín will love this, Doña Rosita thought, admiring her handiwork. Atop two milk crates she stacked the small shoebox carefully wrapped in gold foil paper. […] Over the warped tabletop planks Doña Rosita had smoothed a white tablecloth embroidered with tiny yellow and red roses. In her bedroom she unhooked a picture in a black frame from a thick, rusted nail by her dresser and, gently, arranged the picture upright inside one of the crates. She was at once frightened and excited. She believed the spirit of Don Joaquín might already be lurking among the living, here in this room. She thought she heard voices. They seemed to emanate from the walls. She knew that every day and night the world of the living was visited by that of the dead. But today and tonight, in this unique time, the primordial link between the living and the dead would become a highway easily traversed. An open passage in time would erupt to bring together misery and freedom. […] Tonight Don Joaquín would be close to her again. She felt it in her bones." Troncoso, *LT* 183-5.

her home; Ortiz Cofer's Consuelo, who comes from a devout Catholic background, is initiated to the art of *Santeria,*[44] and Fernández's Leonor uses the art of divination to predict the future.[45] A religious polyphony emerges with the blending of Christianity with Santeria and divination rituals. Christianity becomes non-exclusive through the addition and celebration of a native and African *trace*. Mystical borders are challenged with an emphasis put on their porousness. The texts reveal a tangible ambivalence when it comes to the question of organized religion: between the childlike fear of christening, boredom of nuns and disturbing indoctrination, the corpus paints a complete picture of the polyphonic status of religion in the southern space. The corpus gives a voice to introspection and doubt, in an attempt to celebrate instabilities and phenomena of hybridization. The religious reconfiguration at work that de-essentializes pure Christianity to the benefit of doubt and a blend of different faiths from many origins takes part in the phenomenon of *archipelization* at work in the southern space—a phenomenon that can also be blatantly found in the way places, spaces, and their definition are reimagined by the writers.

REIMAGINING THE SOUTHERN SPACE—THE REMAPPING OF PLACES, SPACE, AND MOTION AT A CONTINENTAL SCALE

The question of climate is frequently mentioned in the corpus. As trivial as it may appear, some consider that the South, its definition, and its future, are tightly related to its climate—whatever development and growth the region will see, it will never be like elsewhere

---

[44] "What are you looking for, Lucila?" I could not see anything of value or use in the rubble. "I'm looking for a little gift from the god of thunder, Changó." She used a stick to pull a sooty stone out of the pile. "This is a thunderstone. Very powerful magic, if no one has touched it. You can tell because it doesn't have any marks on the soot, see? It will still have Changó's power in it." "What do you use it for?" I was glad I wasn't totally ignorant about Santeria rituals. I had read in Abuelo's books about the African religions brought to the Caribbean by the slaves. […] I knew about the animal sacrifices of Santeria rituals and I knew that they were not discussed with outsiders like me." Ortiz Cofer, *MoC* 167-8.

[45] "I also have a favor to ask of you. Would you mind putting a stop to your lizard tail collection ? I think the cards have been giving me warnings lately. […] Lately, every time I've thrown the cards for myself I sense that something is wrong. First, I get the water signs, then the fire ones. […] This has gotten me thinking about the fury of the river as it went over the bank last year, destroying so much of my garden. […] It might be a good idea if you quit waving [lizards'] tails in the breeze. You might be messing around with the spirit of the lizard. You know I have great respect for the Great Lacerta." Fernández, *INT* 95-6.

because of the characteristic heat and humidity.[46] We remember how in *Dreaming in Cuban* Lourdes assimilates the heavy and wet climate to a southern space she doesn't want to hear about anymore; a similar instance can be found in López's short story giving its title to the collection, "Homicide Survivors Picnic." The young Ted, prone to violent headaches, comes back to Georgia after spending some time with his father in California—and quickly realizes how heat has an influence on both his well-being and the angry temper of his father. [47]

Climate plays a dual role in the way it united the different parts of the southern space and becomes a character in itself through the bringing of a feeling of tension in narrations. Heat and humidity become the root of some plots, underlying the characters's motivations, and unifying the different entities of the southern space through pain, sluggishness, anger, and sweat. Another unifying attempt lies in the use of fauna in the corpus.

The depiction of fauna tends to follow a twofold metaphor: the use of the animal as a representation of the migrant and foreigner and the representation of animals as a way to bring closer and put on a similar level the different parts of the southern space. Throughout the narration, a bestiary of the South starts to appear—if the migrant and exile is very often the *gusano*, the worm (for example in Suárez's poems[48]) it is also a bat and a bird, characterized by

---

[46] "In Memphis, Los Tigres del Norte filled up a thousand-seat auditorium at up to $50 a seat, which caught the attention of Judy Peiser at the city's Center for Southern Folklore. […] One day, perhaps, what Americans mean when they say 'Memphis' and 'music' will have to be redefined. "It's not New York or L.A., and it's never going to be, because it's hot and humid and it's still the South. But it's a more cosmopolitan place than it used to be." Hector Tobar, *Translation Nation*, New York: Penguin, 2005, 128.

[47] "California was a heck lot cooler than Georgia, too. […] the Georgia sun in late summer felt cruel as a blow as soon as he stepped out of the air-conditioning into it. And the smothering humidity that cupped the heat in made him feel like a fly trapped in a giant, sweaty fist. Without the dark glasses, the midday sunlight, even in the car, about blasted through Ted's eyeballs like laser beams drilling clear to the base of his skull, and he prayed this wasn't the onset of another migraine. […] His mother would have to lead him like a zombie to his bedroom, crank the blinds shut and settle him in his bed fully clothed, where he would ride out the nauseating waves that pushed him through a dark canal of pain. Come to think of it, he didn't remember getting these headaches in California. […] This summer, his dad had been kind of cool, not all touchy and pissed off like usual. Most of the time, the old man was kind of volcanic—bubbling and seething with hot undercurrents of anger that spewed forth in unexpected rages. But this visit, his father kept himself under control, even dropping the tirades against Ted's mother […] Ted didn't have a single headache the whole summer." López, *HSP* 90-1.

[48] "My mother has pictures of those days, the skinny kid / leaning against his tall father, of that beach, of the shimmering / surface of the water, and out on the horizon the barges / I learned later were filled with urchins, thousands of them, / dragged out, exposed, dying in the sun, much like what would / happen to us in our own country, those of us called / *gusanos*, the dissidents, those who quickly learned to live with exile, / in exile, for another forty years." Suárez, *IRL* 26.

their presence in the entire southern space through their migrations (in García's[49] fiction). Chickens also seem to have the power to suddenly appear in every nook and cranny of the texts—whether alive or cooked in a casserole. If for Menéndez, chicken is among the typical Cuban fare,[50] for Fernández putting one to death is an act of courage, demonstrating the end of Zulema's initiatory journey.[51] García depicts chicken as a rare commodity starving Cubans have to fight for, [52] while Agra Deedy uses the animal metaphorically in « Chicken Wings » to study the evolution of the financial situation of her family from Cuba to the United States.[53] The violent execution of a chicken demonstrates young Mili's mental illness in Ortiz Cofer's *The Meaning of Consuelo*,[54] while Saldaña stresses the importance of the bird by making its name the first words uttered by Rey as a baby.[55] Chickens, and their rearing, become the symbol of a whole region—going so far as attributing to them the power to help drug addicts.[56] If chicken is appreciated from Mexico to the Caribbean, it is interesting to notice how the development of agribusiness is transforming the southern U.S., bringing thousands of immigrant Latino workers

---

[49] "*Every spring and fall, I searched the trees for the many migrants that lingered in Cuba en route to and from South America.* […] *I watched their migrations and imagined flying in their immense flocks, darkening the unreachable parts of the sky. Often, they travelled at night, billions of them, at altitudes too high to be easily observed, taking their cues from the sun and the stars, wind directions, and the magnetic fields of the earth. That, I decided, was how I'd fancy traveling."* García, *AS* 63.

[50] "White rice, black beans, a wide basin of shrimp, potato salad, a plate of lobster tails in butter and parsley, a plate of stewed chicken. I sat back in my chair, now completely absorbed by the food and not listening to a word of the conversation." Menéndez, *LC* 198.

[51] "It was then that they would go to the chicken coop to pick out two or three chickens. At first Zulema was squeamish but she soon learned to wring a chicken by the neck before chopping off its head with a *machete*." Fernández, *INT* 145.

[52] "Celia found unused ration cards permitting Felicia one and a half pounds of chicken per month, two ounces of coffee every fifteen days, two packs of cigarettes per week, and four meters of cloth per year." García, *DiC* 214.

[53] "My father secured for us a chicken. […] The shrunken carcass of this poor underfed revolutionary bird was now no larger than a quail. My sister and I could hardly hide our disappointment anymore than our hunger." Agra Deedy, *GCDG*.

[54] "I turned around and what I saw horrified me. Even now I can vividly recall the gory scene: my sister covered in blood, holding a huge knife in her hand. I ran to her, screaming her name. She was laughing and waving the knife around. And at her feet was the fat white hen she had been cuddling only moments before, its neck dandling by a string of flesh, feathers soaked pink." Ortiz Cofer, *MoC* 90.

[55] "My family had been out driving one weekend when I pointed out the window and said, 'Ollo. Ollo.' My first word! […] 'Ollo. Ollo,' I repeated still pointing out the window as we drove past the Kentucky Fried Chicken. 'He wants chicken, he means chicken,' said Amá, beaming. 'He can speak. Oh, gracias a Diosito, my boy can speak.' " Saldaña, *JT* 36.

[56] "It was your last hope: a chicken farm in the Florida panhandle run by missionaries who bragged success with men like you. Shoveling shit in the hot sun would leave you too tired, they wowed, to want to light up. You didn't understand "hardscrabble" till then: the unyielding earth, the vicious pecking order of the South. Plus the wet heat and bugs nearly killed you." García, *LTD* 75.

to the poultry processing farms that are now flowering all over the rural South.[57] For Sergio Troncoso, author of a story entitled “Punching Chickens,” the exploitation of underpaid—and often illegal—Latino workers in poultry processing plants both testifies of an evolution of the identity of the region and reminds one of its vilest traditions:

> White southern writers have to think of the South now as not only black and white, but also brown, asking where they fit in. Those immigrants don’t have the history that African Americans had in the South in terms on slavery, but the interesting thing is that because the South is so agricultural, the new Latino immigrants coming are basically what the slaves used to be. They’re not *slaves*, but they work like slaves and they’re being exploited like slaves. We get our strawberries, and our apples, and our corn picked by poor Mexicans, and we don’t pay them a lot of money, because we all benefit from the cheap prices. In some ways, they’re economically replacing the Blacks who used to be slaves.[58]

Immigrant workers are the new slaves,Latinos playing the part of 19th century black slaves. Fauna possesses a unifying power on the perception of the region, through the mention of species that tend to be present specifically all over a southern space that sprawls from Mexico to the Caribbean. Furthermore, the emphasis put on the migratory capabilities of most of those animals is a way for writers to evoke an image of migration and exile, in an attempt to put forward the benefits gained from motion and the dangers of an intellectual and physical stasis. On a different level, the rise of chickens demonstrates the mobility of Latino migrants throughout the region, and place the workers in a position of modern slavery—leading to the idea of a continuing *plantation experience* dating back to the origins of the southern space.

If a common southern identity can be traced around its climate and its fauna, it is also characterized by the images of slavery and plantation world. From Mexico to Puerto Rico, colonization and slavery are part of the experience and consciousness of the southern space.[59] Such a plantation experience can still be found in the strawberry fields and poultry processing

---

[57] “Agribusiness conquered the rural United States, and in the decades to come it required enough labor to empty Oklahoma a dozen times. Agribusiness took the small chicken coop behind the Alabama farmer’s house and made it into a mechanized shed the length of a football field where 10,000 birds or more clucked before computerized feeders. […] They talk in the assorted regional varieties of Latin American Spanish, telling tales […] of the wages that await them in dreamlike Dixie towns.” Héctor Tobar, *Translation Nation*, New York: Penguin, 2005, 97.

[58] Interview with Sergio Troncoso.

[59] “There are clear similarities between Cuban-American literature and its Mexican-American and Puerto Rican counterparts. All these groups share the use of the Spanish language, and they collectively trace their heritage to indigenous and African roots. Perhaps the most important bond, however, is related to the concept of identity. All three groups have a shared past of having been and, some argue, continuing to be […] a colonized and oppressed people.” Eduardo R. del Rio, *One Island, Many Voices: Conversations with Cuban-American Writers*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008, 4.

plants all over the U.S. South,[60] and implies a dehumanization and invisibilization of the workers—that reminds one of the relationship between Troncoso's character Lupe and her employers.

The notion of *plantation experience* is a way to historicize the southern space without defending any political agenda in the way the latter is constituted. Through narrations, elements of the past (slavery, antebellum plantation structures, and tenant farming) resonate with modern elements (factories and farms employing a majority of underpaid immigrants), demonstrating the persistence of a class experience involving the exploitation and dehumanization of a particular minority. The invisibilization of certain categories of individuals persists, or is even reinforced—while at the same time, a redefinition of the relationship between the center and periphery of the North American continent takes place.

The image of the *island* usually goes together with the idea of distance, remoteness, and isolation, especially in its relation with the continent. The island is also the location of exoticism, of the "Other." However, it has to be noted that the island doesn't have to be, on the narrative plan, a landmass surrounded with water—the U.S. South has been traditionally, and wrongfully, imagined as culturally and socially isolated from the rest of the country and region. But the authors play on that notion of center / periphery demonstrating the constructiveness and imperialist thought lying behind it. Whether it is Mona and Juana in López's "The Imam of Auburn," who metaphorically put forward the "lying" geographies that pit against each other countries sharing a similar cultural space,[61] or Consuelo in Ortiz Cofer's *The Meaning of Consuelo* who transcends her childish insular perception of the world through its integration in

---

[60] "We were living in an Alabama *ranchito* […] with caged chickens in place of braying goats, and kindhearted evangelicals carrying Bibles […] A group of engineers and mechanics arrived, men with clipboards and take-charge attitudes, their smart eyes gazing up at the ceiling. They were the only white men in sight—office personnel, members of a higher company caste apparently. I began to feel very dark in their presence, to feel the full weight of the word "Alabama." There is no other way to say it: I felt I was on a plantation. […] [We] worked until sunrise. That is why we had been brought here from Mexico and Texas, along with black workers recruited from Selma: to fill the night shift, jobs no local would take." Héctor Tobar, *Translation Nation*, New York: Penguin, 2005, 103.

[61] "Juana hands her the tortoise-shell disk. […] 'Do you have any idea where he might be?' Mona huffs onto the mirror. Her moist breath fogs the reflective disc, but the condensation shrinks away, forming the shape of two Caribbean islands: one kidney-shaped and the other tiny as a speck. 'Here,' she says, handing back the mirror." López, *HSP* 126.

a greater regional frame, there is a clear display of redefining the southern space as decentered and *archipélique*.

The approach taken by the writers is twofold: on the one hand the decompartmentalization of the southern space, which implies the exposure of “lying” geographies through the moves and social interactions of the characters, and on the other hand, the redefinition of space as *archipélique*, placing human beings and social interactions at the heart of a geographically decentered South that rejects nationalism and isolation. The *continental* thought, colonialist and imperialist, that creates alienating margins, is replaced by the construction of the *archipelago*, decentered, in constant motion, and meaningful.

In their own words, the authors place themselves in an interesting literary posture—while they, for the most part, appreciate and embrace the southern label, they refuse to see the traditional Confederate South as the current limits of the region. There is a desire to exploit a connection between the local and the more global that immediately reminds in some ways of Eudora Welty’s thought.[62] The authors and their characters are resolutely turned towards the outside, linking and blending experiences at the crossroads that is the South.

In their literary productions, writers position themselves in a twofold, non contradictory way, through a desire to clearly anchor their works in precise places while at the same time having a universal vocation. The localization of texts doesn’t prevent authors to relentlessly mention the different constitutive elements of a South characterized by their *relation*. Furthermore, their attempt at de-alienating margins and de-centralizing centers testifies of a complex relationship towards borders—without accepting the theory stating that the idea of a South doesn’t make sense anymore in the 21st century. A willingness to spatialize the region—that has not much to do with a regionalist and isolationist perspective—can be found in the

[62] “When I speak of writing from where you have put down roots, it may be said that what I urge is "regional" writing. ’Regional,’ I think, is a careless term, as well as a condescending one, because what it does is fail to differentiate between the localized raw material of life and its outcome as art. ‘Regional’ is an outsider's term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life. Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Cervantes, Turgenev, the authors of the books of the Old Testament, all confined themselves to regions, great or small - but are they regional? Then who from the start of time has not been so? It may well be said that all work springing out of such vital impulse from its native soil has certain things in common. But what signifies is that these are not the little things that it takes a fine-tooth critic to search out, but the great things, that could not be missed or mistaken, for they are the beacon lights of literature.” Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” *The Eye of the Story*, New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1990, 132.

words and productions of writers, particularly through their recurrent use of the topos of the map.

For characters very regularly lost in identity quests leading them into unknown geographical and psychological grounds, maps are often a necessity. However, the traditional, fixed, paper-made maps are usually not very helpful. For example, when Menéndez's anonymous narrator explores the streets of Havana in search of information about her long-lost mother, she attempts to rationalize the space around her, taking the decision to explore the city street by street, avenue by avenue. [63] However, the reassuring exploratory mode used by the character leads to her failure—until she suddenly awakes one night and follows an entirely different mapping strategy:

> At some point I must have fallen asleep, and when I woke the window was dark. I got up with a start—there was something to do. And I remembered dinner at Caridad's. I wasn't even sure I could find her house again. Frantically I searched my notes for an address, and found none. […] I expected to first find the Pain de Paris and then remember from there. But as soon as I turned down a street, I heard someone calling my name and looked up to find a young man standing on a balcony, waiving to me. Again the door was opened as if by a ghost and I climbed the darkened steps up to Caridad's house.[64]

As if inspired by a dream, the narrator suddenly awakens, and breaks her daily routine thanks to the presence of a man located on a balcony—it is not due to a strict method of cartography that her quest progresses, but on the contrary thanks to that human beacon located on an elevated place, on a tri-dimensional the narrator was previously oblivious to, because of her total focus on her two-dimensional map. The uncanny of the whole scene is reinforced by the description of the door, "opened as if by a ghost," and by the fact Caridad is seen climbing stairs, demonstrating her detachment from a strictly two-dimensional plan. Another interesting example of such a reconfiguration of the way space is apprehended and mapped can be found in Ortiz Cofer's *Reaching for the Mainland*. In the poem "Visiting le Abuela," the author remembers her painful monthly visits to her grandmother, an old lady whose cheek is "lined like a map to another time."[65] Such an idea of bodily maps is also used by Cofer in "Through Climate

---

[63] "I ate again at Pain de Paris, happy to be out of the hotel. I finished quickly and decided to get straight to work. The previous night I had worked out a plan that, to my surprise, was not difficult to stick to. With L as my dividing line, I would begin on odd streets and visit every fifth house below L. The following day, I would take the even streets and do the same. The day after that, I would venture to the blocks above L. And then I would cross 23rd and do the same with the neighborhood around the Fosca. This new plan reassured me; it seemed almost scientific, and I actually looked forward to the assignment I had given myself." Menéndez, *LC* 194-5.

[64] Menéndez, *LC* 196-7.

[65] "I'd watch the old woman's hands, / folded like fledging sparrows on her lap, / swoop up to tuck a curl under her cap, / and drop again as if too weak to fly for long. / We'd listen to her tales, complex as cobwebs, until, / at

Changes", in which the skin of the narrator's mother's hands is depicted as a soft, slightly palpable, multi-dimensional map that links the two women.[66] The map, that seems to start on the mother's arm and is extended in the narrator's hand, appears as defined through human relationships and proximity, offering a reimagining of the regional space as determined more by human and social links than by political borders—maps become multidimensional and fluid.

In a literary corpus dominated by characters embarked in identity quests, it is not surprising to see recurrent references to notions of map and cartography—a definition of space is superimposed on a definition of identity. The depiction of maps testifies of a desire to rationalize spaces—a desire that was at the basis of the creation of a mythical, essentialized South. However, the corpus puts forward maps that are very different from the traditional paper maps, clear, fixed, and written with permanent ink: with writers, maps become multidimensional and characterized by their human dimension in which bodies and emotions have a part to play. The use of such maps testifies of an attempt at redefining the southern space: far from the essentialization of a region that would have strict borders, we notice a superimposition of emotional maps directly inherited from widely different and unique personal human experiences. New dynamics appear with a South characterized by the superimposition of the notions of *trace* and *relation*—the usual sense of place becoming more of a sense of process.

In their definition of the 21st century South and their positioning relative to such a space, the authors put forward the idea of original and genuine dynamics going further than the importance of a precise and stable place and the traditional *sense of place*. As Ortiz Cofer explains, the question of the "connections" she has with different places and people leads her to display an atypical posture. [67] The author refuses a strict attachment to a single place,

---

a sign from Mother, who paid these visits like giving alms, / I'd kiss the cheek lined like a map to another time, / and grasping Mother's steady hand, / I'd rush us out into the sunlight.[65] Ortiz Cofer, *RM* 16.

[66] I watch my mother's hands / gripping the wheel— / the subtle map of veins / becoming bas-relief, tracing / the same country as mine / clasped on my lap." Ortiz Cofer, *RM* 66.

[67] "I feel that I have adjusted to this life. If people ask me where I am from, I have to say Puerto-Rico, because it doesn't satisfy them if I say Athens, or Louisville, Georgia. But I'm no longer really Puerto-Rican the way my mother is. She is not happy anywhere else. My husband is not happy leaving Georgia, they both seem to be connected, and have interestingly similar ways of seeing the history and landscape of their native places, but I'm not. I have redefined home to me as the place where the people you love want to be. When I'm with my mother, I try to feel at home, but I know I have to return to Georgia because this is where the family that is my

preferring to explore a third way, intermediary and more fluid, in which places clearly interconnect with human beings and the emotional. However, for Lorraine López, this reconfiguration of the southern space in a more emotional, bodily experience doesn't mean the South is losing its identity[68]—the evolution of the region and of its perception and delineation don't lead to a dilution of identity, but to a renegotiation of the relationship between places, identities, languages, and aesthetics.

Authors insist on the idea of an interconnection between human and emotional aspects in the establishment of place—the notion of birth as a form of belonging to a specific, clearly delineated place disappears in favor of an attempt to define a *relation* between bodies and a space in flux. The southern space is not fixed or stable, its constant evolution and redefinition have to be embraced socially, culturally, and literarily. A widening of possibilities appears in all artistic forms—with an acknowledged desire to account for a multiple and moving society, going along with a phenomenon of Latinization of the entire United States. The study of the region and its texts necessarily goes through a phase of intellectual renegotiation, putting back at the heart of the debate questions of identity, family, race, and language. Even though attempting to challenge the idea of a South boasting a stable and transhistorical essence is not a new struggle, we can examine the modalities of definition of such a space—does it possess an actual, meaningful existence, or is it simply a myth that becomes utterly irrelevant at the beginning of this 21st century? Even though the fetishization and crystallization of a place and its associated culture are clearly challenged, it doesn't imply a denial of the existence of a South: far from the rejection of the notion, we can actually notice attempts at reconfiguring and reevaluating defining tropes and modes. Such a process of reevaluation is achieved through an emphasis on the notion of *performance*, placing once again bodies, their motion, their postures, at the heart of definitions. The southern space becomes a web of performances and

---

nucleus is now. I think that I have come upon a different way of being than my husband and my mother, due to necessity." Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer.

[68] "My work is definitely influenced by the South, and I feel way more comfortable writing about the South than about Los Angeles. California feels so amorphous and invisible, like mainstream American culture—spreading the message that there's no American culture, because it can't be seen. Here in the South, I can see and feel place. I think the 21st century South still has a very strong identity. I have a feeling of relief when I return to the South, I feel it's my home, I don't think I could live anywhere else in the United-States." Interview with Lorraine López.

identities that changes and fluctuates, rejecting the traditional notion of a "sense of place" that implied a strict and mind-numbing anchoring, replacing it with a more productive and progressive "sense of process." Complex dynamics start replacing basic identity affirmations—the South then becomes a non-essentialized space of *relation*.

A space made of a singular diversity appears—the definition of the southern space goes along with a system made of multiple, multidimensional maps, fully embraced in their constructiveness and characterized by their fluidity and their interactions with human and emotional experiences. From a simple, clear-cut identity affirmation, the texts and their authors offer new dynamics that renegotiate the space in a more open and inclusive way and see identities as organized around a network of interpersonal and interregional nodes. Following Glissant, the disappearance of a vision strictly based on a purely colonial center / periphery dichotomy goes along with the development of an *archipélique* perspective that stresses the existence and importance of an unavoidable and highly productive hybridization.[69]

The southern space is not redefined according to a set of stable borders and limits; on the contrary, it is remapped around a system of interpersonal and interregional hubs and nodules. The origins of such a perception can be found in the disappearance of the center-periphery model that dates back to the days of colonization, that tended to see the continent and its associated characteristics (Occident, whiteness, purity, historical continuity) as opposed to peripheries and margins (Africa, islands, miscegenation, exoticism, historical shift, violence). In a system defined through the notion of the *archipelago*, this phenomenon of *decentralization* paradoxically allows a recentering of scholarly research around an ensemble of *cultural zones* that are more meaningful than political spaces. 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

[69] "On s'oriente vers des situations où des réalités culturelles régionales ne seront plus considérées comme des périphéries ni comme des centres, mais seront considérées comme des multiplicités écumantes—il n'y a pas d'autres mots—de la réalité de la totalité-monde. […] Les pensées régionales deviennent des pensées centrales, c'est-à-dire qu'en fait il n'y a plus de centre et il n'y a plus de périphérie. […] Dans le rhizome de la totalité-monde, les centres et les périphéries sont des notions caduques. […] Cette existence de régions qui archipélisent les continents fait que la pensée des continents est de moins en moins dense, épaisse et pensante et la pensée des archipels de plus en plus écumante et proliférante." Édouard Glissant, *L'Imaginaire des langues : entretiens avec Lise Gauvin*, Paris : Gallimard, 2010, 46.

southern space is depicted in all its complexity by writers who might have never been so southern.