Speaking in Puerto Rican: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer

by Rafael Ocasio and Rita Ganey

from the Bilingual Review, May-Aug 92, Vol. 17 Issue 2, p. 143, 4 p.

RO: Maybe you should start by talking about your poetry. You are a poet by trade and that was your first literary work.

JOC: Poetry is my obsession. I think that poetry has taught me the craft of writing. I have known for a long time that I needed to express myself creatively. For a while I wanted to be a sociologist and save the world. Eventually, I even looked into the visual arts but found out very rapidly that I had no talent in that area. It dawned on me that the one thing I had consistency been doing was writing and chat I loved studying literature, particularly poetry.

RO: When did you start publishing your poetry?

JOC: Only after I finished graduate school did I really attempt to write poems that I wanted to show other people. I was frankly surprised when they were taken for publication, because one of the first poems chat was published was called "Latin Women Pray." It's an ironic little poem about being a Puerto Rican and praying to an Anglo god with a Jewish heritage, and all you can hope is chat He's bilingual. It was a political statement as well as a sarcastic poem. It was published in The New Mexico Humanities Review and an editorial member wrote a note and said, "Please send us more, we don't get this kind of stuff."

RO: Most of your poetry has been published in traditional mainstream journals. Why?

JOC: Initially, I kept thinking, why should anyone be interested in a Puerto Rican woman writing about the ordinary things she knows? Then, I realized that Puerto Rican writers are really writing for Puerto Ricans. And that very few Puerto Ricans were publishing in the mainstream or American university journals. Yet, liberal journals were really hungry for their work. I started reading The Georgia Review, and The Kenyon Review, journals that are representative of literary journals of the United States, and I was not finding anything by Puerto Rican writers. I simply knew that I needed a market to send my material to and, not being a Hispanic scholar, I only knew these markets. By sending to the American journals, I was doing something new, but I wasn't aware of it. That is really the message of my whole career. I was a Navy brat, and we always lived away from the Puerto Rican barrios. I've lived in Georgia since I was 14, except for 10 years that we lived in Fort Lauderdale. Therefore, I was never physically connected to the Puerto Rican literary establishment. I didn't know any better, so I sent my work to the mainstream journals and became one of the first Puerto Rican writers to publish in them.

RO: How would you describe your poetry?

JOC: The more I wrote poetry, the more I learned about it, the more I understood that I was passionately committed to the art form. Writing a poem is a discipline; most people think that you just sit down and you let the Muse strike you on the head and out comes a poem. My poems go through 15, 20, 25 drafts. In fact, I'm working on one now about going back to see my mother ten years after my father had died and finding out that she had a lover. It was a traumatic experience for me. I must have 30 drafts of that. It's a delicate subject, and I love my mother so much that if she ever reads it, I want her to understand that it's done with affection. Poetry fine tunes my writing. When I go from working on my poetry to working on a novel, the demands of language are already established. I don't want to write 20 pages a day and find 18 of them are disposable. When I sit down to write a page of prose, it is as economical, as concentrated, and as strong as a poem.

RO: Does poetry writing have a personal commitment for you?

JOC: Yes. Because I've lived physically isolated from the Puerto Rican community, my poetry has kept me connected emotionally. Even though I live in rural Georgia, my husband is North American, and my daughter was born here, I feel connected to the island and to my heritage. Every time I sit down to write a poem about my grandmother, I have to call her back. In a sense it's like being a medium. You sit down at a table and call back the spirits of your ancestors. When the novel was published my mother said, "Everybody is amazed that you write as if you've been here all your life." In a sense I have been connected through my imagination. It's like having a child who is away. You don't stop loving them. My poetry is my emotional and intellectual connection to my heritage.

RO: Is poetry spiritual to you?

JOC: I think of poetry not as an abstract thing. When I write a poem, I'm not writing about ideas. I'm writing about people and places and things. When I write a poem about my grandmother, I'm writing about a living, flesh and blood person. If the poem itself is about my spiritual connection, then that's another thing. I do not write about philosophical abstractions; I write about people.

RO: It is obvious that women, specifically your grandmother, are influences in your work.

JOC: A lot of my stories have to do with the fact that my grandmother, who is slightly suspicious of books, is a woman connected to her work, her children, her family, and has not had the opportunity or the time to be educated. She loves storytelling, though. If she can teach something by telling a story, she'll do it. My book of essays, Silent Dancing, is dedicated to that very strong narrative impulse. Most of the stories in my work date back to the times when I would sit around at my grandmother's house and listen to the women telling their stories.

RO: How did you make the transition from poetry to prose writing?

JOC: I don't feel that I've made a transition. I've added a genre. I've never stopped writing poetry. What the public mainly sees between books is my poems. The poem is an immediate source for telling a story. I found a few years ago that I got an immense

amount of satisfaction from telling a story. I knew that there were certain characters I wanted to create and let them act. I chose my black sheep Angel Guzman, who is a real person and who was a real black sheep of my family. In my childhood, I had heard only stories that my mother thought a small child should hear about Guzman. I let my imagination run wild. The novel developed out of my strong sense that I could tell a story and that the natural form for it should be a novel.

RO: You once mentioned that you felt like Malinche when you announced your intentions of writing a novel.

JOC: The United States is a place of specialization. You're supposed to stick to your little corner of literature. In Latin America and Europe, writers are writers. Octavio Paz writes plays, he writes essays, he writes anything he wants, and nobody finds that suspicious. If a poet in the United States writes a novel, people say, "What for, the money?" It is true that prose makes more money than poetry. That was not my motivation, because I never believed that anything I wrote would bring me money. Some of my very dedicated friends in poetry thought that I was going to abandon poetry to become a novelist. Writing is writing. If one morning I get up and have an urge to write an essay, that's just as legitimate as writing a poem. Because of my poetry friends' original reaction, I felt like I was betraying some kind of trust. You do not have to be like a nun practicing only poetry. I feel that I have the right to experiment with any form I choose.

RO: Let's talk more specifically about your novel. The Spanish tone which permeates your English prose resembles the criollismo techniques as it presents universal values through original Latin American motifs. Would you comment on that particular style or do you feel that there is a special affinity with American and Spanish American, including Puerto Rican writers?

JOC: I intended to make the language relate to the theme. I was writing about rural Puerto Ricans, leading their lives in connections to each other and the land. I felt that idiomatic American English would defeat that purpose, because Spanish is lyrical. These people were thinking and speaking in Spanish, but I was writing my novel in English. I wrote as if it were being translated at the moment of writing. It preserved the flavor of the Spanish, because Spanish is syntactically different from English. It is also more poetic in its expression. My poems that deal with Puerto Rico are syntactically different than my poems that deal with my life in the United States. The tone is a direct result of the different syntactical construction I used in order to make it seem credible and feasible that these people were actually Spanish speakers and thinkers, not Americans impersonating Puerto Ricans.

RO: A characteristic many people have pointed out in the literature written by Puerto Ricans in New York is the highly autobiographical quality of it. Would you say that element is a particular characteristic of minority literature?

JOC: I am not an expert in minority literatures, but I have read some Jewish novels and works by other ethnic minorities. Autobiography plays a large part, but it's really a logical process. It's not that it's boring, but most everybody knows what it's like to be professional in middle-class America. Not many people know what it's like to be a Puerto Rican woman growing up in the 1960s. Why should I reach out and invent

something, when my own life provides me with interesting material that is not readily available to the public? I thought to use my life first, because it was there. Like Mount Rushmore, you know. In the novel I am currently working on, I'm departing somewhat from that. The protagonist is a woman who lived three decades before I was born. She's a dancer, which I'm not. I'm distancing myself to see what it was like to be a Puerto Rican woman in the 1930s and 1940s rather than a Puerto Rican girl in the 1960s. I am still using everything I heard my aunts and my mother say. I'm using life, but I'm not using my life. I would say it is a logical thing to do. If a Black man wants to write a novel, I would say that his first choice would be to tell about being a Black man in America, rather than an Irish man in New York City, because that's politically meaningless to him. The minority writer has to take a political stand. Our lives are political.

RO: One element that really struck me when I was reading The Line of the Sun was how you play with the boundaries of autobiography and fiction. I was really interested to see that your Marisol becomes a writer herself.

JOC: I wrote a preface using Virginia Woolf to say that memory is ninety percent fiction. As a writer, I feel absolutely at liberty to cross over boundaries. My technique is to start with something that I know very well, like my Uncle Guzman. People loved him in spite of the fact that he was a rascal. I started with that which was absolutely true. Then I started imagining him in situations that had never actually happened. I think literature has a truth that has nothing to do with the dictionary definition of truth. I think there's factuality and there's truth. I can say to you, "My father was in the Cuban missile crisis," and tell you the dates, but that is not as meaningful as the fact that we lost contact with him for six months and thought he was dead. The truth is what I felt about my father disappearing, not that he was actually on a ship in Cuba at that time. Truth is what I can make people feel. I have tried to be accurate with history. If I'm going to talk about the Cuban missile crisis, I talk about it as a historical event that took place in particular years. The thoughts and the feelings of the people involved are mine to make up. The only license that the poet has is to make truth what she wants it to be, as long as you can convince someone else that it's important.

RO: What do you think will be the reaction of the Puerto Rican scholar and reader to your novel? What will be the reaction of the American scholar and reader?

JOC: Interestingly enough, I've gotten mainly the reaction of the American readers to my novel. That has been an interesting phenomenon to me because it was published by the University of Georgia Press, which had never published a novel before, certainly a novel like mine. They sent it to American reviewers all over the place. It has been reviewed very little by Hispanic scholars. I don't know if they're ignoring it, or if it just hasn't come into their hands. It has been reviewed very widely by Americans. I've been stunned that ninety-nine percent of the reviews have been extremely positive in what they say the message is. "We can read a book that's not just aimed at Puerto Rican audiences." They can read the book in their language and get the flavor and the sense of the Puerto Rican idiom. I feel good about having written something that will teach people how Puerto Ricans think and talk. I want Puerto Ricans to read my novel, but they're not going to learn as much as the Americans who may have Puerto Rican neighbors and not know what makes them different. I was at a conference in Paris where different writers were being discussed. A publisher said, "We don't know where

to put Judith Cofer." Judith Cofer is writing in standard English, and she lives in Georgia. Until recently, I was somewhere in limbo. I'm not a mainstream North American writer, but I publish in mainstream North American journals. I'm not an island writer. All I know is that I'm a writer, period, writing about the one thing that defines me as a human being--my biculturalism. It's just now being taken seriously by the Hispanic critics. A wonderful review of my novel came out in The San Juan Star in English and then in El Nuevo Dia. Several of the bookstores immediately ordered my book. There were several people on the island very interested in what I'm doing. The reviewer for El Nuevo Dia said she was relieved that somebody was writing about Puerto Ricans in standard English, because there are many misconceptions held by Americans that are promulgated by some of the Nuyorican writers who write in a language that is only understood by bilingual people.

RO: What are your most immediate plans?

JOC: I'm working on a novel that I tentatively call Star of the Caribbean. I'm very caught up in it. For the next couple of years, I will be researching and working on this novel, which is set further back in the past in Puerto Rico than The Line of the Sun. The Line of the Sun started in the early 1950s. This one starts on the 1930s and takes three characters--a white Puerto Rican girl of Spanish ancestry, a North American boy who is on the island because his father is an industrialist, and a mulatto. These three characters, a painter, a writer, and a dancer, come together. They're going to explore the world from completely different perspectives. I'm exploring an artist's view of this mess we've created, this political triangle of the North American, the black, and the white on the island. I'm doing it by putting the essence of each of these groups into a young artist, not yet corrupt, and letting them see if they can find their way clear of the mess that the adults have made of the island. I may be in for more than I can chew, but I'm having fun exploring that. Everything is in the making right now. I'm also finishing a new book of poems. By finishing, I mean I'm gathering them all. These are poems that I have written in the last five years that are not collected in a book yet. They've been published in literary journals. I'm putting them together to see if they make a book. If they do, I'll start sending it out for publication.

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

(*) This interview was conducted in November 1990 at Lanier Plaza Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, by Rafael Ocasio. The written transcript was edited by Rita Ganey.

~~~~~~~~

Rafael Ocasio and Rita Ganey

Copyright of Bilingual Review is the property of Bilingual Review and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.
Source: Bilingual Review, May-Aug92, Vol. 17 Issue 2, p143, 4p.
~~~~~~~~