

Culture Shock Leads to Identity Crisis: A Culture Study on Judith Ortiz Cofer by Thalia Ramirez  
(ENWR 106 Professor Christa Verem)

Cultural identity isn't necessarily defined by where you come from. It also isn't defined by where you are. Cultural identity is what you define yourself as. But what if you're simply unsure? Prolific poet and author, Judith Ortiz Cofer, goes through the complexity of identifying herself after experiencing the culture shock of being a Puerto Rican immigrant living in the United States. Her writing is her outward expression of her experiences with this shock, which includes the natural struggles of cultural assimilation, but also, the gained perspectives of a new culture. While basking in the benefits and enduring the encumbrances, she faces the clash of coming into a new exciting culture while feeling isolated at the same time. Cofer's battle between the aspects she values and the aspects she dislikes from both Puerto Rican and American culture leads to her puzzling personal conflict of choosing which identity to call her own.

Puerto Rican culture is evidently an important element of Cofer's identity when she expresses her attachment to her heritage but also her difficulties with transitioning into American culture. Like Cofer, many immigrants experience the struggles of cultural assimilation and feel a sense of homesickness and isolation when trying to acculturate. Cofer exemplifies this homesickness in her poem "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" when she writes, "all wanting the comfort/of spoken Spanish." By "all", Cofer is referring to the many Spanish-speaking immigrants who walk into a Latin Deli and share the unfamiliarity of a new language (lines 18-19). It is interesting that the Spanish-speaking immigrants she is referring to are not only of her Puerto-Rican descent, but rather, they come from other Latin American countries, as well. This emphasizes the fact that the difficulty with cultural assimilation isn't something that is only

occurring to her, but to all immigrants. Immigrants like Cofer want to hear the familiarity of their spoken language and feel the familiarity of their cultural practices, which shows the tendency of people to hold on to their native culture even when they move to new locations. This poem continues to emphasize the element of homesickness when it reads:

She spends her days/ slicing *jamón y queso* and wrapping it in wax paper/ tied with string: plain ham and cheese/ that would cost less at A&P, but it would not satisfy/ the hunger of the fragile old man lost in the folds/ of his winter coat, who brings her lists of items/ that he reads to her like poetry (29-35)

Not only does this sense of unfamiliarity exist in language barriers, but it also exists in the products they purchase, because these products are tied to their culture. The immigrants represented by the “fragile old man,” want to purchase the products that they would buy in their countries and not the cheaper American replica that they would find at American supermarkets like “A&P”, because they’re familiar and therefore, comforting. The list of items that immigrants like the fragile old man bring are read to the sales clerk “like poetry,” which is Cofer’s way of saying that the list of Latin American products spoken in the Spanish language are so beautiful and comforting that they are almost poetic. In addition, by adding Spanish words in an English poem, the poem becomes more realistic. This realism is created by the analogous relationship between the Spanish words mixed with English words, and the scene of the poem where Spanish-speaking people are mixed in an English-speaking country. This clever utilization of *criollismo*, or mixing the languages in English text creates that reality of the little fragments of her Cofer’s language that she gets to hear and experience in the midst of her new unfamiliar setting. It also represents the words or phrases that Cofer as an immigrant prefers or feels more comfortable with in the Spanish translation. This scene that Cofer conjures up through the poem

reflects the issue that Cofer faces when pieces of her native culture appear in the culture that she is trying to assimilate to and so, she begins to miss home. Cofer doesn't make the poem directly about herself, as we do not see an "I" in this poem, though, she is speaking of relatable feelings of missing home and being lost in a new language and culture. These feelings define the struggles of cultural assimilation and highlight Cofer's longing for her Puerto Rican side, and therefore, inspire Cofer to write about them in her works.

Although Cofer, as an immigrant, holds her Puerto Rican side close to her heart, there are aspects of Puerto Rican culture that Cofer dislikes, which make her skeptical about choosing "just Puerto Rican" as her identifier. Cofer disapproves of the strict gender roles that exist in Puerto Rican culture even when she was a child. For example, in "The Changeling", the child version of Cofer dresses up in her father's and brother's clothing, transforming herself into a boy. Her mother's unpleasant reaction is displayed when the poem reads, "She was not amused/ by my transformations, sternly forbidding me/ from sitting down with them as a man . . . She'd order me back . . . to shed/ my costume, to braid my hair furiously/ with blind hands, and to return invisible, / as myself, / to the real world of her kitchen." (lines 21-23, 25-29). Here, Cofer's mother disapproves of Cofer's defiance of the gender roles that Puerto Rican society has imposed. Cofer must "shed" this clothing much like she must shed the idea of relating to a boy, or the action of breaking societal norms. Once she sheds the costume and returns back to her female self, she returns "invisible," which displays the insignificance that Puerto Rican women often feel about themselves. She also returns invisibly to the "real world of her kitchen" which is the archetypal setting of female responsibility; this is where Cofer is supposed to belong as a woman, as opposed to the man's world of adventure that she desires to be in. Her mother braids her hair "furiously" because she is angered at the fact that her child is trying to be something that

she cannot be: a man. The braid itself is a symbol of female delicacy and the expectation of women to be orderly and fragile, much like the hair-do itself. By braiding her hair, Cofer's mother physically establishes the gender construct, furiously forcing it upon her daughter's head. This was Cofer's mother's symbolic way of saying that she must, much like the braid, be orderly, pretty, and fragile, and must reject her desire to stray from this role and be a boy.

Not only does Cofer dislike some of the aspects of Puerto Rican culture, but she also begins to negate Puerto Rican cultural values even more when comparing them to American cultural values that she *does* like. This is often an effect when cultural values from both cultures clash, and the person experiencing culture shock must choose what values to accept and reject. For example, the issue of gender roles in Puerto Rico looks even worse when compared to America's take on gender roles. The symbol of the braid is reused in another one of Cofer's poems called "First Job: The Southern Sweets Sandwich Shop and Bakery" when the poem reads, "Lillie Mae hired me for my long black hair / she couldn't wait to braid" (Cofer lines 13-15). This shows that she was hired for being a female, as the braid symbolizes femininity. In an *American* bakery, having long hair that Lillie Mae was able to braid was an asset, which proves that being a female was a vital part of what got her a job. However, despite the fact that gender roles were more lenient in America, Cofer's boss in the poem continues to say later that a woman's hands should always be soft and beautiful because "that's what a man expects" (40). This proves that gender role differences still exist in America, but perhaps not as strongly as they do in Puerto Rico. In fact, the poem "First Job: The Southern Sweets Sandwich Shop and Bakery" was written about a situation that occurred when Cofer was fifteen, meaning that the situation had occurred in the late 60's. Therefore, perhaps it is so that the current Puerto Rican gender roles are still stuck in what we know to be the traditional gender roles of America, fifty

years before today's time. Cofer takes note of this and finds importance in the less severe American gender roles when deciding on a cultural identification. This factor gives Cofer a little more leverage to choosing "American" as her identifier, given that she is a woman aiming for success in today's day and time.

Puerto Rico's strict gender roles tend to cause Cofer to rethink her cultural label as a "Puerto Rican woman" not only because it would mean she'd have lesser opportunities for success, but she would also suffer the general downsides of gender discrimination. As a woman in Puerto Rico, she is unimportant and subordinate. This issue is shown more blatantly in the excerpt from "Silent Dancing" as Cofer is watching old home videos of her female family members who are infamous for making mistakes. Her family members blame these mistakes on the signs of female indecency that they view in the minor actions that the females display on the tapes. When one of Cofer's cousins looks directly at the camera, Cofer's father comments, "Decent girls never look at you directly in the face. *Humilde*, humble, a girl should express humility in all her actions." (Cofer 736). The Puerto Rican values expressed by her father show that he believes that women are subordinate to males. According to Cofer's father, this "indecency" that her cousin shows foreshadows her future mistakes. On the other hand, these values do not exist in American culture. Cofer expresses this angrily when she says, "This is not some primitive island I live on...I'm an American woman and I will do as I please...I can pass for an American girl anywhere—I've tried it— I never speak Spanish in public...I look better than any of these *humildes* here. My life is going to be different." (736). Here, she refers to Puerto Rico as a "primitive island" which is demeaning her native country just because she disagrees with these beliefs that come with the culture. She declares herself an American woman, because she is set off by the Puerto Rican values that her father expresses, and prefers the

American value of freedom, of doing as she pleases. This freedom is so important to Cofer that she chooses to neglect her language and choose a different path for her life. However, it's interesting to see that this stance against gender roles is the only thing that seems to cause Cofer to really diverge from her background. Does she really mean to reject her culture completely or does she only do so out of the anger caused by these gender roles? The tendency to compare values such as these after experiencing culture shock is a common one that has really affected the way that Cofer chooses who she wants to be identified as.

Although Cofer seems to have her mind set on American culture, this decision seems to be out of anger, which makes it temperamental verses permanent. There are many moments when she still seems to fall back to her roots. She expresses this regression to her roots in her poem, "The Other" by saying, "A sloe-eyed dark woman shadows me. In the morning she sings Spanish love songs in a high falsetto." (Cofer lines 1-3). Here, she is talking about her Puerto Rican side when she mentions that this "other" woman sings *Spanish* love songs. This other side of her is following her like a dark shadow, which shows that she cannot get rid of her Puerto Rican side no matter how hard she tries to be American. This refusal to let go shows that her roots are still a part of her that she cannot erase even though it may look like she wants to erase them. Being Puerto Rican is something that will always be in her heart and that piece of her will always trigger a reluctance to fully assimilate. But, as true as that may be, being Puerto Rican by blood it is also an aspect of her person that she cannot control. There is still a factor other than her natural attraction to her heritage that prevents Cofer from full American assimilation: other American people. No matter what, she is still a non-American in America. She is an immigrant. Cofer faces the burden of discrimination while living in America. Not only do the natural struggles of her culture shock make her feel personally ostracized, but American society also

imposes it on her, making assimilation a difficult transition for her. Cofer displays this issue in her work “American History” when she writes about Eugene, a white student in her American high school. She writes, “Eugene was in honors classes for all his subjects, classes that were not open to me because English was not my first language, though I was a straight-A student.” (Cofer “American History”). Here, even though Cofer displays higher-level abilities in her academic subjects, she is still just an immigrant who is “incapable” of taking honors classes in the eyes of biased Americans. Hence, her American schools will not let her advance. The stereotypical biases that Americans have of immigrants make it more difficult for immigrants like Cofer to assimilate, even when they want to. This is the side of America that Cofer dislikes and makes her fall back to her true Puerto Rican roots where she feels a sense of belonging.

Cofer jumps back and forth between her two conflicting cultures. One is her native island, with Spanish-speaking people and real *jamón y queso*. That same one is also a place where she must be a subordinate *humilde*. The other is the new land where she can be the woman she wants to be but is discriminated against, because America can't dismiss the Puerto Rican in her. The question is, can she even dismiss it herself? Culture shock has placed her in this perplexity that makes the question of identity a difficult one to answer. In an interview with Marilyn Kallet, Cofer reveals, “as an artist I discovered that assimilation is exactly what destroys the artistic—to blend so well that you forget what makes you unique.” (745). Cofer admits in this statement that fully assimilating would've destroyed the elements in her writing that make her unique—the elements that arise from her cultural duality. She is suggesting that her circumstance of having two identities and not fully blending into American culture is what contributes to her success as an artist. Through her influential culture shock, Judith Ortiz Cofer has become a woman of two identities who magically blends them when she puts a pen to a paper, forming one

combined culture that is just simply her own.

#### Works Cited

Cofer, Judith Ortiz. "American History." *Nexus*. 2012. 9 Apr. 2013.

[http://www.nexuslearning.net/books/holt\\_elementsoflit-3/Collection%204/american%20history%20p1.htm](http://www.nexuslearning.net/books/holt_elementsoflit-3/Collection%204/american%20history%20p1.htm)

Cofer, Judith Ortiz. "The Changeling." Ridl and Schakel 725.

--- "First Job: The Southern Sweets Sandwich Shop and Bakery." Ridl and Schakel 727.

--- "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica." Ridl and Schakel 727.

--- "The Other." *Reaching for the Mainland & Selected New Poems*. Ed. Keller, Gary D. Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1995. 40. Print.

Kallet, Marilyn. "The Art of Not Forgetting: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer."

*Approaching Literature: Reading + Thinking + Writing*. Ed. Ridl, Jack & Peter Schakel. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 744-747. Print.

Ridl, Jack & Peter Schakel, eds. *Approaching Literature: Reading + Thinking + Writing*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. Print.