

“The Coming Together of Many ‘I’s”: Individual and Collective Autobiography in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Latin Deli*

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Judith Ortiz Cofer opens her well-known personal essay “The Story of My Body” with a telling epigraph from Victor Hernández Cruz: “Migration is the story of my body” (1995, 135). Born in 1952 in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cofer moved to Paterson, New Jersey, when she was two years old, and to Augusta, Georgia, for her last two-and-a-half years of high school. Because of her father’s job in the Navy and her mother’s homesickness, she was continually shuttled back and forth between the United States and Puerto Rico during her childhood, spending extended periods in her grandmother’s island home surrounded by the storytelling women of her family. She returned to Puerto Rico for the first and second grades, and when she started public school in Paterson in the third grade, “Spanish had become my first language again,” she remembers, “and there was the culture shock of going into the classroom” (1997a, 73). She has described “growing up bilingual and bicultural” as the “key experience” at the center of her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Growing up in multiple communities, climates, and cultures, she was always both an insider and an outsider, “never quite belonging” (1993, 85, 89). She explained to an interviewer,

As a child going back and forth to Puerto Rico, I became very observant; I guess children who are lonely because they are dislocated and relocated geographically and emotionally become observers of life. The shifts were abrupt and always traumatic. Many of the stories in *Silent Dancing* have to do with the stories I heard those months on the island, which were so different from the months we spent in Paterson, an urban center that in the sixties was a location of much racial strife.

(1992, 45)

In more than thirteen books of poetry, adult and children's fiction, and essays that have reached an increasingly wider audience, Ortiz Cofer explores her often painfully multicultural, multilingual childhood. She is best known for her two autobiographical collections, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990) and *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women* (1995). Both books have been widely anthologized, and *The Latin Deli* was reissued in 1995 by the mainstream publisher W. W. Norton, but publishers generally dislike multi-genre books, Ortiz Cofer says, "because books are supposed to have their own little niche in a bookstore" (1997c). As Lourdes Torres (1998) observes, Latina autobiographies "subvert conventions" on a number of levels, often mixing genres because of their "thematic concern" with "fragmented, multiple identity" (277).

In *The Latin Deli*, Ortiz Cofer continues her explorations of what she calls the "cultural schizophrenia" and attendant traumas brought on by "living simultaneously in two cultures" (1990, 124), throughout the collection using narrators and characters who appear and reappear in poems, fictional stories, letters, creative nonfiction, and personal essays. She envisions the disparate genres as separate but related forms intended, if "indirectly," to reflect on each other and give body to persistent themes in her work, "the same material with different illumination" (1997c; 1997b, 60). Her opening poem, "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica," gestures toward the abundance of ethnic groups, broad array of characters, and wide variety of genres in the book, her subtitle unmistakably a side glance at Horace, whose strictures against mixing genres form the basis of his "Ars Poetica": Each genre "has its place allotted," Horace advises, "each is bound/To keep it, nor invade its neighbour's ground" (91), or the author risks a foolish, monstrous hybrid

such as “unions of lamb with tiger, snake with bird” or “a maid above, a hideous fish below” (89). Deliberately flouting Jacques Derrida’s patriarchal “law of genre” (1980, 55), Ortiz Cofer negotiates the indistinct boundaries of autobiography, which Celeste Schenck (1988), Caren Kaplan (1998), and others have mapped as an emergent, shifting, “out-law” territory for experiment and generic border crossings, a refuge particularly attractive to ethnic American women writers.¹

In her variant of the coextensive poetry and autobiography that Schenck describes, Ortiz Cofer crosses the public with the private, not only combining separate genres within the same book, but blurring boundaries among poetry, nonfiction, creative nonfiction, and fiction, and among narrative voices. The autobiographical “I” of her personal narratives and poems extends to include first-person narrators beyond herself, some of them alter egos—quasi-nonfictional versions of herself—and some of them fictional characters who live in El Building, a microcosm of the Puerto Rican community in Paterson, New Jersey. These narrators’ often painful experiences—of racial discrimination in the United States, adolescent anxieties over appearance and belonging, marital unrest and divorce, the exercise of parental authority in immigrant families, the death of a husband, the loss of a son—unfold against the sometimes muted but always essential backdrop of national politics in the 1960s, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Northern racial tensions and violence, the forced integration of Southern schools, and the war in Vietnam.

Throughout *The Latin Deli*, Ortiz Cofer bears witness, making the private public and situating her own traumatic experiences and those of her community within a larger context, as chapters in American history. Pierre Janet (1925) famously argued that individual trauma can be resolved only when it is translated into narrative, contextualized as “one of the chapters in our personal history,” and sympathetically witnessed by others (662). If trauma “undoes the self” and the continuity of narrative identity, the acts of bearing witness and transforming memory into story “reintegrat[e] the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood” (Brison 1999, 41, 40).² Through her plurality of “I” narrators, Ortiz Cofer forges connections between herself and a number of sustaining communities, and between her barrio community and its national matrix. “I see art as a bridging, an understanding,” she explained to Carmen Hernández in an interview: “I don’t see it as speechmaking. I’m a very political person, but my politics are in the stories and the poems”

(1997d, 102). Her autobiographical writings explore many selves as shaped by history, and as collectively shaping history. The reader is invited to participate in the piecing together of these individual histories to create a composite autobiographical subject and a barrio community, and to place them in urban, feminist, ethnic, and national contexts.

I

The opening story in *The Latin Deli*, appropriately titled “American History,” is an important education in racial and ethnic prejudice in which personal, community, and national trauma converge. Ortiz Cofer’s first-person narrator and alter ego Elena recounts her memories of the day that President Kennedy was assassinated, an event eclipsed at the time by her elation at the prospect of studying for a history test with a boy she had a crush on. Eugene is not Puerto Rican; he is blond, a student in honors classes “not open to me,” she explains, “because English was not my first language, though I was a straight A student” (1995, 9). Neither the high school teacher who berates the “mostly black and Puerto Rican kids” at her school, saying, “The president is dead, you idiots. I should have known that wouldn’t mean anything to a bunch of losers like you kids” (1995, 11–12), nor her own mother, who sobs, “Hija, the president has been killed. We must show respect” (1995, 13), deflects her from her goal of studying with Eugene. But Eugene’s mother turns her away at the door to his apartment, muttering, “I don’t know how you people do it,” explaining that Eugene “doesn’t want to study with you, [...] cannot study with you,” and that it was “nothing personal” (1995, 14–15). “That night, I lay in my bed,” she remembers, “trying to feel the right thing for our dead president. But the tears that came up from a deep source inside me were strictly for me” (1995, 15). Elena’s personal trauma is as much a lesson in American history as the national trauma that will appear in the history books. In “American History,” Ortiz Cofer explained in an interview, the girl is “faced at the end of the story with a political situation”: “The mother of the boy she loves rejects her because she’s Puerto Rican. The story doesn’t end with a speech on prejudice but with the heartbreak of a girl still unable to comprehend that it all comes together and affects her life: the death of a president, life in America, prejudice, the plight of the immigrant” (1997b). As the bigoted high school teacher inadvertently suggests, Elena and her classmates are “losers” long before the nation loses its president.

A champion of civil rights and the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy assumes the status of a saint to Elena's mother and other residents of the barrio, who deeply mourn his passing and display his picture on home altars along with the Sacred Heart. In *The Psychology of Shame* (1989), Gershen Kaufman argues that personality is "profoundly shaped" by the "patterning of experience" and cultural values transmitted in family, peer group, and school settings. Cultural and national identifications develop through the "public celebration of holidays, rituals, and heroes" that act as an "interpersonal bridge" between the individual and society (45). In "Kennedy in the Barrio" in Ortiz Cofer's later collection, *The Year of Our Revolution* (1998), Elena describes the joy in the neighborhood when he was inaugurated and their faith in Kennedy as a potential "interpersonal bridge": "I heard the Cuban [store] owner Larry Reyes say that an Irish Catholic being elected meant that someday an hispano could be president of the United States too" (37). (According to sociologist Helen I. Safa (1988), Cubans in the United States enjoyed a substantially higher socioeconomic status than other Hispanic groups in the 1960s [137-50]. Significantly, it is a well-established Cuban and not a Puerto Rican who voices this hope for the future.) Celebration appears only as prelude to loss, however. On the day of the assassination, when sobbing, huddling women pray and say the rosary, Elena is sent home alone: "The dark, empty silence of our apartment gave me no solace, and in a turmoil of emotions I had never experienced before, I went to sleep the night of the day President Kennedy died." She seems surprised that she "rose the next day to a world that looked the same" (1998, 38). In the different version of the day of the assassination in "American History," Elena also returns to an empty apartment after she is turned away from Eugene's door; in "American History," the phrase "the day that President Kennedy was shot" recurs three times (1995, 7, 11), suggesting the frozen shock of trauma, a world standing still.

Historical events provoking high emotions become moments when the individual and the collective intersect. In a hybrid essay/series of poems "Some of the Characters" in *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer evokes the anxious days of the Cuban Missile Crisis when her father, serving in the Navy, was unable to communicate with them for six months. She, her brother, and her bereft, helpless mother spent hours glued to the television, listening to Kennedy's speeches on the news as they "waited and waited to hear something other than the official statement that [their father's] ship's

location was classified until the Cuban ‘situation’ was resolved” (1990, 116, 120). While the family is beginning to climb socially, living in an apartment that is a “‘step up’ from the barrio” and El Building and entertaining “‘suburban’ fantasies,” the narrator’s new awareness of politics and the outside world is represented as a descent, an irreversible fall from innocence (1990, 119, 117). Forced to make “the rounds [. . .] to the Red Cross, to the Veterans’ Administration, to endless offices where we were trying to get answers about Father’s whereabouts” (1990, 120), the narrator speaks for her non-English-speaking mother, assuming a new public role and consciousness. She describes months spent watching President Kennedy on “the grainy screen of our T.V.; pleading with strangers to listen to me, a skinny Puerto Rican child; taking my mother from office to office: ‘Where is my father, her husband? Where is he?’” (1990, 121). When her father finally returns, he is a different man, and “I did not recognize the sullen stranger as my quiet but tender *Papi*” (1990, 121). She has changed as well: “The end of childhood had arrived like a black-bordered telegram delivered in silence to the door” (1990, 121). Much of *Silent Dancing*, which she subtitles *A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, centers on the joy and plenitude of her memories of her grandmother’s house in Puerto Rico. “Some of the Characters,” the book’s historically grounded essay/series of poems on their Paterson building super, Sal, and her experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis, looks forward to the political consciousness and explorations of adolescence in *The Latin Deli*. It marks an unwelcome “Fall” from childhood innocence into adulthood, “a traumatic time for my young mother, my brother, and myself” (1990, 116), paralleled by her new exclusion from Sal’s nurturing presence and the “bountiful harvest” of his garden in the back yard (1990, 121).

Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical essay “The Story of My Body” in *The Latin Deli* also charts a painful fall from innocence in her changing body’s passage from childhood to womanhood and in her equally unwelcome developing consciousness of racism in the United States. Focusing on her body and its attributes, she explores her sense of cultural dislocation, her acute adolescent anxieties about her appearance, and her feelings of shame, inferiority, and powerlessness prompted by racial prejudice. She dramatizes two traumatic experiences of bigotry—one as a child in New Jersey and another as a teenager in Georgia—against the almost invisible backdrop of history.

As in “American History,” where the blond Eugene and his honors classes both prove unattainable, each of the episodes turns on a blond

American icon that is coveted and just out of reach. A grocery store in Paterson owned by three Italian brothers is the setting for what she describes as her “first experience of color prejudice.” As a child Ortiz Cofer enjoys wandering the grocery’s “well-stocked aisles,” avoiding the two older brothers who “watched me and the other Puerto Rican kids as if they thought we were going to steal something,” preferring instead the handsome blond brother who “smiled and winked” at her (1995, 136–37). The item in the store that she desires above all others is Susie, a blonde talking schoolteacher doll, perched “like a princess” at the top of a stack of toys in the center aisle. When, after weeks of longing, she reaches “on tiptoe” to touch the doll’s blonde hair, she is humiliated by the loud shout of a “mean brother” in a “blood-stained butcher’s apron”: “Don’t come in here unless you gonna buy something. You PR kids put your dirty hands on stuff. You always look dirty. But maybe dirty brown is your natural color.” While she claims that the event was not a “turning point” in her life, the bloody apron of the grocer “who first referred to [her] as colored” suggests the psychic violence of the experience. “The moment is frozen in my mind,” she recalls, “as if there were a photograph of it on file” (1995, 137–38).

The episode in Georgia, when she pined all year for a blond “pretty white boy” in her high school, mirrors the structure of the supermarket narrative. Like the blond brother’s smile, the boy’s is seductive. “I’ll call him Ted. Oh, he was pretty: yellow hair that fell over his forehead, a smile to die for [. . .] Ted looked like an angel to me” (1995, 144). Like the blonde doll, and like Eugene, the blond boy is just out of her reach. After having finally asked her to a school dance, he calls the night before the dance to break their date, saying that his father won’t let him go out with a Puerto Rican: “Ted’s father had known Puerto Ricans in the army. He had lived in New York City [. . .] and had seen how the spics lived. Like rats. Ted repeated his father’s words to me as if I should understand his predicament when I heard why he was breaking our date” (1995, 146).

“The Story of My Body” revolves around Ortiz Cofer’s experience of shifting judgments of her skin color and looks based on dehumanizing and supposedly “natural” racial hierarchies and constructions. She undermines naturalized similes and metaphors such as “like rats,” “your natural color” in what first appears to be a digression on the broad spectrum of meanings of color in the animal kingdom. She writes that colors can signal danger (“the most colorful creatures are often the most poisonous”) or be a means to attract a mate (1995, 135–36). In the

“human world” according to Ortiz Cofer, the organizing categories of skin, color, size, and looks seem to represent specific, quantifiable “variables” that can be specified in an algebraic expression of one’s self-esteem (1995, 146), but she shows them to be variable functions of perception, with meanings that are equally various and that blur almost immediately. “I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico,” she begins, “but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States.”³ A “pretty baby” in her birthplace, Ortiz Cofer becomes “Skinny Bones” and the “Shrimp” in Paterson (1995, 135). Her memories of public school include humiliating ranking by size in gym class, an implicit “hierarchy for popularity” leaving her always the last chosen for teams, and also ranking by standards of beauty inseparable from skin color and race. “I came there from Puerto Rico, thinking myself a pretty girl, and found that the hierarchy for popularity was as follows: pretty white girl, pretty Jewish girl, pretty Puerto Rican girl, pretty black girl” (1995, 143). She dreads the playground, where every “volleyball or softball game was the metaphor for the battlefield of life to the inner city kids—the black kids versus the Puerto Rican kids, the whites versus the blacks versus the Puerto Rican kids [. . .]” (1995, 139). In a battle with no clear victors, the American Dream seems out of reach for students that the teacher in “American History” dismisses as “losers.”

The racial strife that prompted Ortiz Cofer’s transfer to Catholic school and ultimately her family’s move to Georgia indirectly informs her essay “The Paterson Public Library,” a tribute to books and learning as well as an account of her sixth-grade year, when she was terrorized by a black girl named Lorraine, whose antagonism was aroused when Ortiz Cofer was assigned to tutor her. Lorraine would lie in wait for her when she walked to the library: “She would hiss her threats at me, addressing me as You little spic. Her hostility sent shudders through me.” The trees that winter looked from a distance like “angry black girls waiting to attack me” (1995, 131). When Lorraine announced that she would beat her up, she could only wait in “knee-liquefying fear” until it happened (1995, 132). “No one intervened. To this crowd, it was one of many such violent scenes taking place among the adults and the children of people fighting over a rapidly shrinking territory” (1995, 134). The conflict with Lorraine is narrated from the child’s point of view, without explicit reference to its larger historical context, the bloody Paterson race riots in the summer of 1964, a summer that witnessed a spiral of racial violence in major Eastern cities—full-scale riots in July in New York City and

Rochester, and in August in Chicago, Philadelphia, Jersey City, Paterson, and nearby Elizabeth. Rather than discussing the widespread bloodshed and destruction in inner city neighborhoods in 1964, Ortiz Cofer explains only that her perspective on Lorraine would not change until she became an adult: "It would be many years," she writes, "before I learned about the politics of race, before I internalized the awful reality of the struggle for territory that underscored the lives of blacks and Puerto Ricans in Paterson during my childhood" (1995, 132).

History operates on several levels within and without "The Paterson Public Library." The essay implicitly encapsulates a moment in American history, the year of race riots in Paterson that would herald more racial violence to come among both Puerto Ricans and blacks, in Paterson and across the nation. Ortiz Cofer explicitly revivifies a moment in her own childhood history that becomes symbolic of larger historical forces, and the essay also documents her changing adult consciousness of the "politics of race." Although race and racial prejudice divided the two girls in the sixth grade, Ortiz Cofer's own experiences of exclusion and bigotry later in her life become a bridge to her understanding Lorraine's attitudes retrospectively. Ortiz Cofer comes to see the burdens shared by both racial groups in their contested territory:

Each job given to a light-skinned Hispanic was one less job for a black man; every apartment leased to a Puerto Rican family was one less place available to blacks. Worst of all, though the Puerto Rican children had to master a new language in the schools and were often subjected to the scorn and impatience of teachers burdened with too many students making too many demands in a classroom, the blacks were obviously the ones singled out for "special" treatment. In other words, whenever possible they were assigned to special education classes in order to relieve the teacher's workload, mainly because their black English dialect sounded "ungrammatical" and "illiterate" to our white Seton Hall University and City College-educated instructors. I have on occasion become angry at being treated like I'm mentally deficient by persons who make that prejudgment upon hearing an unfamiliar accent. I can only imagine what it must have been like for children

like Lorraine, whose skin color alone put her in a pigeonhole she felt she had to fight her way out of every day of her life.

(1995, 132–33)

In her own anger, she discerns an echo of Lorraine's rage, and with it, a revised sense of community, a new "us" and "them" that she "can only imagine."

In "The Paterson Public Library" and other essays, Ortiz Cofer implicitly grounds autobiography in history, placing her personal experience within collective experience. Sheila Rowbotham (1999) suggests that "retrospection can reveal buried clues" obscured earlier by the dailiness of contemporary life. While some of the emotion of the original experience—"how it felt at the time"—may be lost through time and distance, new perspective may be gained as the autobiographer is able to see her "broader surroundings historically" (2). Ortiz Cofer is able to combine "how it felt at the time" to the child with the new historical perspective of the adult. In *Silent Dancing*, she defines the impulse toward autobiographical reflection as the "need most of us feel at some point to study ourselves and our lives in retrospect; to understand what people and events formed us (and yes, what and who hurt us, too)" (1990, 11). In *The Latin Deli*, as she continues to follow the "tracks left by strong emotions" to their sources in her past, she finds the "meaning and truth in [the] ordinary events" of her life embedded in shared historical events as well as the complex history of shifting racial alliances and communities (1990, 13).

What Ortiz Cofer calls the "politics of race" provides an important clue to the history behind the scenes of her wounding encounter with Ted in "The Story of My Body," which she introduces with a brief but telling description of her new high school in Georgia: "I was enrolled in a huge school of nearly two thousand students that had just that year been forced to integrate. There were two black girls and there was me" (1995, 144). Like other Southern states, Georgia was slow to desegregate after the landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* ruling in 1954. Ortiz Cofer began high school in Augusta in the late 1960s. In 1967, the percentage of African Americans attending schools with white students in Georgia had reached only 8.8%, and only 15% by 1969 (Tuck 2001, 208). Tensions over forced integration continued to remain high in Augusta in the 1970s, which saw racial rioting and bloodshed, widespread white

boycotts of the schools, and massive protests and rallies (Tuck 2001, 235; Cashin 1985, 116–23). The charged historical context of the desegregation of schools in the South is crucial to understanding Ortiz Cofer's encounter with Ted, as it explains both her unwelcome visibility and her extreme vulnerability to the prejudices of others. She spends the week before the date with Ted anxiously grooming herself in front of the mirror, but what Ted's father ultimately mirrors back to her is only the color of her skin, her Hispanic surname, and the ugly stereotypes that obscure all other aspects of her appearance and identity. "I don't remember what I said before hanging up," she says of the phone conversation: "I do recall the darkness of my room that sleepless night and the heaviness of my blanket in which I wrapped myself like a shroud" (1995, 146). The story of Ted ends in a stricken, death-like retreat alleviated only by the "understanding silence" of her mother, a sympathetic witness to Ortiz Cofer's pain. In the violence done to her sense of self, individual history and the national history of forced integration meet.

II

Individual experience, particularly traumatic experience, becomes a microcosm of collective experience in *The Latin Deli*. Even the autobiographical "I" functions as a composite self, developed through competing genres within the same book, sometimes as an apparently nonfictional "I," and sometimes as an alternate first-person narrator who is a character or alter ego of Ortiz Cofer's nonfictional persona—such as Elena, whose father works in the jeans factory in Passaic, or Evita, whose father is the super in El Building, or the unnamed narrators of "Twist and Shout" and "By Love Betrayed," an array of older and younger girls who share many of the same characteristics as the Ortiz Cofer "I." Ortiz Cofer thus repeatedly complicates Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" between author and reader (1989) by confusing the identities of her fictional and nonfictional "I" narrators. Elena and the Ortiz Cofer persona are both skinny, unhappy with their looks, insatiable readers, top students, "hopeless nonathlete[s]," and afraid of the black girls on the playground (1995, 7–9, 140, 143). Both are called "Skinny Bones" at school (1995, 8, 135). The narrators are not immediately identified by name in their narratives and are differentiated more by their fathers' different professions than by any

characteristics that distinguish them from each other. “American History,” for example, opens with an “I” that we assume is Ortiz Cofer; it is not until the fourth page that we learn she is the character Elena (10). The “I” narrators in the next two pieces are not identified at all by name; in the fourth narrative, “By Love Betrayed,” the “I” narrator is not named as Eva (or Evita) until the final page. In the next prose piece, “The Witch’s Husband,” the narrator is a college teacher in the United States, presumably Ortiz Cofer, but is not identified by name. In the poems in the book, narrators’ names are not used at all. While Ortiz Cofer appears to write poems in her own voice addressed to her daughter Tanya, her husband, grandfather and grandmother, some of the other poems seem to be narrated by Eva, and yet others by women in El Building who are elsewhere called Corazón and Doña Iris. Olga, who also works in the denim factory, is the subject of a third-person poem and narrates a poignant letter to a lover left behind in Puerto Rico. “Advanced Biology” reads much like the earlier short story “American History,” focusing on another young girl with her study partner at school, until halfway through the piece when the character’s mother calls her “Judith,” revealing that her name coincides with the author’s, fulfilling what Lejeune calls the “contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name” that characterizes autobiography (1989, 19).

As we puzzle through these narrators, we reconstruct El Building and the experiences of its residents (Evita on the second floor, Elena on the third, the newlyweds Lydia and Roberto in 4A, the widowed Doña Ernestina in 4D, the super’s mistress in 5A, the good-looking fourteen-year-old Manny and his sister Amy in 5B), and we construct a composite adolescent “I” as the experiences of Elena, Evita, Ortiz Cofer, and others overlap and are superimposed on one another. Switching between narrators as well as narrative forms intensifies the effect that Rocío Davis (2002) describes in Ortiz Cofer’s earlier multi-genre collection *Silent Dancing*:

Though the text reveals certain formal characteristics found in other autobiographies, the design and intention behind this textual destabilization and the cultural implications of such fragmentation prove to be quite distinct. The insularity of the essays and poems emphasizes breaks, beginnings and rebeginnings, and an episodic structuring of lives and selves that invites the

reader to fill in the gaps, to compose whole meaning from the fragments of the life retained in the memory and on the page.

(149)

Teresa Derrickson (2003) suggests that the “abrupt genre shifts” in *Silent Dancing* “enact and structurally replicate the same cultural shifts attendant thematically in the text” (136n2).⁴ In *The Latin Deli*, similar gaps, switches between genres, and the addition of multiple narrative voices and characters invite the reader to piece together a plural autobiographical subject and to experience the cultural dislocations of her community. In the “Preface” to *Silent Dancing* and in interviews, Ortiz Cofer describes her autobiographical writings as “creative nonfiction” based on more than the facts of her own life: “I wanted to try to connect myself to the threads of lives that have touched mine and at some point converged into the tapestry that is my memory of childhood” (1990, 13).

This tapestry focuses on the members of a specific Puerto Rican barrio whose lives unfold against the background of a turbulent and divisive period in American history. National trauma intrudes on their lives most decisively and invasively in the form of Vietnam, where more than 48,000 Puerto Rican soldiers fought, more than 3,000 were wounded, and more than 400 died (Fortuño 2005). In *The Latin Deli*’s story “Nada,” the widow Doña Ernestina divests herself of all of her possessions when her son is killed in Vietnam, and finally kills herself, leaving “nothing behind” (1995, 60). She turns down the government’s offer to bury her son with “full military honors,” sending their medal and flag back marked “Ya no vive aquí: Does not live here anymore” (1995, 51). With her husband and son gone, she tells the women of El Building, “I have nada. Nada. Nada. I tell you,” the narrator says, “that word is like a drain that sucks everything down. Hearing her say nada over and over made me feel as if I were being yanked into a dark pit” (1995, 56).

The “I” narrator in “Nada,” a divorced housewife in El Building, shifts to “we” as the women gather in the laundry to discuss Doña Ernestina’s crisis and later come together to dress her in their own best clothes for her funeral. This first-person plural narrator speaks for the community of women in the barrio, including Elenita from the book’s other first-person narratives, who appears as a third-person character in this story and in “Corazón’s Cafe.” But even this very distinct fictional narrator becomes part of the composite autobiographical self of *The*

Latin Deli. Describing the fine line between her creative nonfiction and fiction, Ortiz Cofer (1997b) explains that “Nada’ is a fictional work, I didn’t know a woman to whom this happened and I didn’t know a woman who was the narrator, but I knew many women to whom many of the things happened and I condensed it all and created a narrator that was me if I had stayed in the barrio. But not me since I did not stay in the barrio” (58). Creating an “I” that is “not me,” as Ortiz Cofer says, but paradoxically “me if I had stayed in the barrio,” and “not me” alone but “many women,” Ortiz Cofer reimagines self, community, and the history that has deeply affected herself and her characters. Similarly, in a poem to her husband near the end of *The Latin Deli*, she conflates the private with the collective, as their wedding anniversary occasions an “anniversary reaction” to the nation’s losses in Vietnam that assumes kinship even beyond the ethnic and geographic boundaries of the Paterson barrio, and she mourns “young men, like our brothers once,/who each year become more like our sons/because they died the year we met,/or the year we got married/or the year our child was born” (1995, 164).

In the “Preface” to *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer explains that her personal essays are “non-fiction” and “memoir” (1990, 13), but also that “the past is mainly a creation of the imagination.” While she uses “facts one can research and confirm,” her primary concern is with the “poetic truth” of remembered experience (1990, 12), a “combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion” (1990, 11). She subtitles *Silent Dancing* a “partial remembrance” and draws attention to competing memories between two witnesses to the same family event in one of its stories, “The Last Word.” In *The Latin Deli*, the witnessing of historical events becomes a deeply felt reconstruction of the remembered past as it was experienced by more than one individual observer and interpreted within individual, family, community, and national contexts. “I’m not writing about things just because I’m interested in the political situation, but because it was what I witnessed, what I imagined,” Ortiz Cofer comments, adding, “[a]nd it’s not just autobiographical: I put myself in the place of the people. Knowing the people that I knew when I was growing up, I think this is the way they would have behaved” (1997d, 102). Like Doña Ernestina, dressed for burial in clothing from other women in El Building, she dons other personae and voices. She describes herself as a “witness” rather than a “central character” in her own autobiography (1997c), which becomes a reimagined history that

includes alternative selves and the lives of many others, “the women who populate the barrio of my imagination” (1997b, 58).

The stories, essays, and poems in *The Latin Deli* are bookended by two poems about female figures who suggest the autobiographical writer’s roles as empathetic witness, insider, and outsider in the community. In the poem that opens the book, “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” Corazón oversees the lives of her customers at the Latin deli; she looks on with an understanding smile and “maternal interest/as they speak to her and each other/of their dreams and their disillusion” (1995, 3). Later, in the story “Corazón’s Café,” she is described as “a confidante,” who knows how to listen and “how to keep secrets” (1995, 111). In the book’s closing poem, “The Medium’s Burden,” a medium sits at the kitchen tables of the women in the barrio, listening with an enigmatic smile to their frightening dreams, haunted by her foreknowledge of their lives. Their recurrent nightmares of death exhibit the frozen quality of traumatic recall, as Cristina dreams she is buried alive and Virginia dreams that her gaze turns her husband and baby to stone. “I know their hearts,” the medium explains, “and I am tormented forever/by knowing” (1995, 170). She is burdened too by her own recurring dreams, her own “pentimento” of personal pain.

“The Medium’s Burden” is preceded by a series of autobiographical essays detailing painful experiences of racism and cultural difference in Ortiz Cofer’s life. “In my own recurring dream,” the medium complains, “I am the woman in the painting,/whose mouth is sealed in a smile/beneath the pentimento” (1995, 169). Laura Brown (1995) and others argue that trauma may include “layers of trauma” (or pentimento) rather than being precipitated by a single event, including “intergenerational,” inherited trauma, and the accumulation of trauma “spread laterally through an oppressed social group” (110). In the opening and closing poems Corazón and the medium counterpoint each other, insider and outsider, witnesses to life and death, both bearing the burdens of the community they inhabit.

Both women are unnamed in the poems that frame the book and present a puzzle to a reader attempting to identify the narrative voices and personae throughout the text, including the voice of the nonfictional Ortiz Cofer “I.” Only later do we learn that the proprietress of the Latin deli is Corazón, whose story is told in “Corazón’s Café,” and only then do we make a tentative, more elusive connection between the medium and Doña Iris, who reads cards in El Building and predicted “a long journey

within a year” when Doña Ernestina’s son went off to Vietnam (1995, 53). Both Corazón and Doña Iris are liminal figures—Doña Iris at the boundary of this world and the next (her classical namesake was known for passage between the world of mortals and the world of the gods; she also ushered women into the Elysian Fields after death [Ward 1999, 215–16]) and Corazón at the boundary of this world and the community’s former world, the “Patroness of Exiles [. . .] conjuring up products/from places that now exist only in [the] hearts” and memories of her customers (1995, 3–4). Yet, like the artist Ortiz Cofer, both are central to the imagined community of women in the book, functioning as gathering places for their voices, hopes, and dreams.

The story or the origin of the Latin deli, “Corazón’s Café,” begins with the death of Corazón’s husband Manuel but goes on to celebrate the life at the heart of the barrio as well as the heart of the artist’s vision. While the older generation pines to return home to the Island and the younger generation yearns for suburban houses and tidy lawns, Manuel and Corazón’s deli provides a “taste of home” (1995, 112) and a warm, nourishing neighborhood refuge. The tale ends with Corazón’s decision to keep their bodega open after the death of her husband:

Although she had often talked of moving to a house in the suburbs, especially after their store had started paying for itself, she knew that Manuel loved El Building for the same reasons that others claimed to hate it. It had vida. It was filled with the life energies of generations of other Island people; the stairs sagged from the weight of their burdens, and the walls had absorbed the smells of their food. El Building had become their country now.

(1995, 93)

In preserving the life of their inner-city neighborhood, she resists the flight to the suburbs, for “as Manuel liked to say, at least there was life in the barrio. To him the suburbs were a fancy prison where you went to retire from life” (1995, 112). His vision of the barrio community poses an alternative to the conventional American Dream, which Elena’s parents in “American History” seem to pursue when they drive out to the suburbs every weekend, to “Clifton, and Passaic, out to where people mowed grass on Sundays. [. . .] I had learned to listen to my parents’ dreams,” Elena says, “which were spoken in Spanish, as fairy tales, like the stories about life in the island paradise of Puerto Rico before I was born” (1995, 10). Manuel

and Corazón's dream of a paradisiacal center in the here-and-now of the Puerto Rican community has a fairy tale quality as well, particularly evident in Manuel's magical talent with food, the references to Fate and El Destino (1995, 112), and the third-person narration (the only third-person narrative in the book). The symbolic weight of her name is underlined when her husband tells her that the building has "'corazón y alma' [. . .] making a pun with her name, 'heart and soul'" (1995, 111). Corazón's deli becomes a figure for the heart of Ortiz Cofer's autobiographical enterprise, a place where disparate characters converge and Ortiz Cofer is able to "connect [her]self to the threads of lives that have touched," extended, and shaped her own (1990, 13).

III

A number of theorists of autobiography suggest that a relational, polyvocal narrative voice emerges in lifewriting by women and ethnic minorities, based on a conception of the self as constituted through community.⁵ Traditional "individualistic paradigms" of the genre, Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) argues, "do not take into account the central role collective consciousness of self plays in the lives of women and minorities" and in the evolution of their identities and literary "self-definition" (79). Friedman paints her picture of female selfhood and group identities with broad strokes, without considering the complexity and range of collective affiliations that women, or even women of color, might embrace. She does not address potential conflicts between ethnic and gender identities, or differences between and within ethnic groups, or important communities beyond those determined by gender or ethnicity. But as Friedman suggests, certain broadly conceived collective identities imposed by the dominant culture are inescapable components of the self. Whereas "a white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex," women and minorities are continually reminded of them (75). They inevitably experience the "dual consciousness" that W. E. B. DuBois famously described in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (qtd. in Friedman 76). Their identities, then, are in part a function of being defined by others as groups—as women, or Puerto Ricans, or Latinas. It is particularly those who are "vulnerable to being named from the outside," Jeanne Perreault (1998)

points out, who make strategic choices to “enmesh” self and community for both “self-defense and social transformation” (192).

Ortiz Cofer makes several such “strategic choices” in her essay, “The Myth of the Latin Woman,” in *The Latin Deli*. Analyzing stereotypes of the Latina, she relates a series of experiences when she was “named from the outside,” describing the boy who complained of her tepid sexual response after a date, saying, “I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early”; the woman at her first poetry reading who mistook her for a waitress; the male strangers who serenaded her on a London street with “I Just Met a Girl Named María”; a different group of men in an American hotel lobby who sang “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina” and an off-color version of “La Bamba” to her. To the drunken, middle-aged man in the upscale hotel, she tells a friend, she is not a human being, someone’s wife or mother, but “just an Evita or a María: merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe” (1995, 151–52). Speaking both as “I” and “we” in the essay, Ortiz Cofer suggests that many of her “Hispanic compañeras” suffer every day from “harsher forms of ethnic and racial prejudice” than she has experienced: “For them life is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic, or criminal.” Her goal as a writer, as she defines it in the essay, is to “replace the old pervasive stereotypes” with “a much more interesting set of realities” (1995, 154).

Throughout her work, Ortiz Cofer counters debilitating group stereotypes by constructing a fictive “I” that is individual and collective and a complex network of group affiliations that are positive and sustaining. As Hertha D. Sweet Wong (1998) argues, the relational self of feminist theory often depends on uninterrogated notions of “community” as monolithic, fixed, and unified, when in fact communities are plural, with “numerous sites of interaction and overlap” (176), and can even be “largely imagined” (172). For the Native American autobiographers that Wong discusses, communities are multiple and strategically constructed, sometimes as an “ideal of community” (176). In *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer fashions a transnational ethnic and feminist identity within a nourishing, remembered community of women that begins with the women in her family, trading stories in her grandmother’s “many-chambered” Puerto Rican casa, “the place of our origin; the stage for our memories and dreams of Island life” (1990, 23), and extends backwards and outwards to encompass women’s oral traditions in Puerto Rico and the inspiration of Virginia Woolf and other female literary mentors (1990, 11–13). The

epigraph to *Silent Dancing*, “A woman writing thinks back through her mothers,” from Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, signals Ortiz Cofer’s awareness of the enmeshing of her identity with the multiple communities of this expanded maternal ancestry. In *The Latin Deli*, she focuses on several female communities: that of her family in Puerto Rico and the United States; distinguishable but intermeshed communities of women as writers, educators, wives, mothers, daughters, Latinas, island Puerto Ricans, mainland Puerto Ricans, Americans; and most prominently, the Puerto Rican community within the strife-ridden, multiracial inner-city community in Paterson.

Different collectivities and allegiances within individual essays in *The Latin Deli* complicate Ortiz Cofer’s evolving autobiographical identities. John Brenkman reminds us that individuals are “members of several interlaced collectivities, so that their social identities are formed by and their discursive participation occurs within several potentially conflicting cultural practices/traditions at once” (qtd. in Goldman 1998, 291). While the blonde doll in the nonfictional “The Story of My Body” seems unattainable to the dark-haired young Puerto Rican girl reviled as “dirty” and a potential thief, the “Susie Schoolteacher doll” that she does later take home is attainable to the girl foregrounded in the final paragraph of the essay who is the future teacher and writer. In the personal essay “The Myth of the Latin Woman,” the men who serenade the nonfictional Ortiz Cofer narrator collapse distinctions between Puerto Rican, Argentinian, and Mexican American women. She uses this opportunity to speak for herself and her “Hispanic compañeras” (despite the class differences she draws attention to) while also pointing out her membership in the interracial community of the educated: to her “colleague” she suggests that the man in the hotel lobby is probably “well educated” (as they are) despite his ignorance and boorish behavior (1995, 152). In settings such as this, she is Puerto Rican; locked in combat with her Puerto Rican mother in the essay “Advanced Biology” or visiting her grandmother in the essay “The Witch’s Husband,” she is not. In a sequence of poems to her daughter at the close of the book, she is a daughter, the mother of a daughter, and a poet imaginatively inhabiting her daughter’s feelings; she steps in and out of competing roles, and draws generations of women together around her daughter in her imagination: “I saw the women of our family in black,/gathering in a circle around you” (1995, 160).

As they gather to gossip and tell stories in the laundry, in kitchens, in the bodega, the women of El Building constitute an imagined “ideal of

community” central to the spirit of *The Latin Deli*. “How many times have I made the doctor’s appointment, taken care of the children, and fed the husbands of my friends in the barrio?” asks the narrator of “Nada”: “It is not that the men can’t do these things; it’s just that they know how much women help each other” (1995, 59). It is a community where the nonfictional autobiographical “I” is both a member and an outsider. While her alter ego characters are all young girls and women who live in El Building, Ortiz Cofer herself did not live in a similar apartment building after the family’s return to the United States when she was in the third grade; she describes her family as isolated from the barrio while she was growing up, living in a sort of “exile,” although “there were Puerto Ricans by the hundreds only one block away” (1990, 64). Through her fictional first-person narrators, she reinserts herself into an imagined and remembered community, again, experiencing “me if I had stayed in the barrio” (1997b, 58). The isolation, cultural dislocation, and traumatic racial prejudice experienced by the Ortiz Cofer “I” and many of the adolescent “I” narrators in *The Latin Deli* are “put [. . .] in [their] place in that life-history which each one of us is perpetually building up” and recovered not only as a “chapter” within the nonfictional autobiographical subject’s unfolding “personal history” (Janet 1925, 662), but within overlapping, ongoing, collective, gendered, ethnic, local, and national histories as well. Trauma, so often a “symptom of history” rather than personal experience (Caruth 1995, 5), is resolved individually and collectively through continuing narratives that connect the self to larger communities.

Autobiography construed in this way embodies the “ethical imperative” that Michael Fischer (1986) discerns in contemporary ethnic lifewriting. He observes that many recent ethnic autobiographies foreground “their own linguistic and fictive nature” through fragmentation, dissonance, various forms of textual interference, and manipulations of the narrator and narrative voice by such means as shifting narrative points of view in some cases, multiple voices or perspectives, or “using the narrator as an inscribed figure within the text” (232). Such post-modern techniques, he argues, replicate the experience of ethnicity itself, which he describes as a “puzzling quest” rather than a stable identity, “reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual” and not simply passed on or inherited (230, 195). Visiting her mother in Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cofer reflects on their reciprocal influence on each other over the past twenty years. Her mother has redefined her

own “Puertoricanness” after her years in the United States and many conflicts with her Americanized daughter. In contrast, Ortiz Cofer writes, “I struggle daily to consolidate my opposing cultural identities” (1995, 121). Her generational and cultural differences from her mother include differences in gender identity as well. In her essay “Marina” in *Silent Dancing*, she describes their efforts to “define and translate key words for both of us, words such as ‘woman’ and ‘mother’” (1990, 152), and to find “new place[s] to begin our search for the meaning of the word *woman*” (1990, 160). While many feminists object to post-modernist decenterings of already marginalized subjects,⁶ the quest that Fischer locates behind experimentation in autobiography by hyphenated Americans—to find “a voice or style that does not violate one’s several components of identity” (1986, 196)—might be said to apply particularly to what Torres describes as the “shifting and multiple identity” in autobiographies by ethnic American women (1998, 285). Sidonie Smith’s discussion of what she terms “I-lying” in women’s autobiographical writing includes literary tactics that “disrupt [. . .] the surface of the unified, authoritative, essential ‘self’” such as Fischer describes in ethnic writing (1999, 48). By drawing attention to the fictive nature of the autobiographical subject, Smith argues, lifewriting by women draws attention to other cultural fictions as well, “foreground[ing] the constructedness of not only the ‘I’ but of gender (and race and ethnicity and sexuality)” (1999, 49).

The combined effect of destabilizing narrative voice and fragmenting the text is to challenge “prescriptive paradigms” and to force the reader to create meaning, a “radical, continual process” of individual and collective self-making with political implications (Torres 1998, 285). Fischer contends that these literary strategies serve the important “ethical” function of “attempting to activate in the reader a desire for *communitas* with others, while preserving rather than effacing differences” (1986, 232–33). The “process of assuming an ethnic identity” (and, one could add, a female identity or other communal identities) through autobiographical reflection, Fischer argues, “is an insistence on a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self: one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism” (1986, 196). As Torres (1998), Perreault (1998), and others point out, many ethnic feminist autobiographies enact a new writing of personal and collective transformation that is political in its intention and effects, creating a re-collected past predicated on a vision of the future. In Ortiz Cofer’s “idealized view,” as she describes it

in an interview with Lorraine Lopez (1999), her daughter's generation will see an "opening up" of American literature and culture to a multitude of "different ways of seeing and speaking," and a much "easier acceptance of the certitude of diversity in the United States."

Inner-city Paterson of the 1960s was a "smorgasbord of an ethnic population" (1995, 127), Ortiz Cofer observes in *The Latin Deli*, a metaphor reminiscent of the book's title.⁷ Despite what Ortiz Cofer in "Advanced Biology" calls the "white exodus" to the suburbs following the "migration" of "black and brown people" into their community (1995, 121), the neighborhood surrounding El Building includes long-standing Jewish residents and somewhat more recent Italian-Americans and Irish-Americans, along with African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Cubans. In "Not for Sale," a salesman the women call "El Arabe" circulates among the Puerto Rican housewives in El Building, offering bedspreads and jewelry and stories from his "exotic homeland" in "halting Spanish," adding to the profusion of mingled languages and cultures in the book (1995, 16). The tale of El Arabe, Ortiz Cofer has explained in an interview, is a fictional story blending autobiographical fact and creative nonfiction (1997b, 58–60). Her nameless narrator, a sixteen-year-old girl, complains that she lives "like an exile in the foreign country" of her parents' fifth-floor apartment, trapped by their cultural restrictions and language barrier, sequestered in a bedroom full of books in English that she alone in her family can read. No dating, no driver's license, no school trip: "no, no, no," repeats her controlling, authoritarian father, who wants "a decent Puerto Rican señorita, not a wild American teenager" (1995, 16), and who expects "to find my mother and me in our places" when he gets home from the factory (1995, 19). In accord with Fischer's observation that "bifocality, or reciprocity of perspectives" in ethnic autobiography often involves at least three cultures, thus providing "multiple axes of comparison" in the formation of ethnic identity (1986, 199), "Not for Sale" turns on multiple cultural and linguistic axes, as "El Arabe" attempts to "buy" the narrator as a wife for his son in a "multilingual stream of offers" involving cash, cattle, and horses, which leads to "utter confusion" (1995, 20–21). When the narrator angrily "protests that we were not living in some backward country where women were slaves" (1995, 20), she is in fact speaking of Puerto Rico and not El Arabe's home country. El Arabe's attitudes toward women temper her view of her father and Puerto Rico, however, and after the incident, he also learns to say "yes" to his daughter

occasionally, to at least begin to acknowledge what she sees as “the present reality of my life in Paterson, New Jersey” (1995, 20). In “Not for Sale,” which appears early in collection, Ortiz Cofer interweaves thematic threads that persist throughout the book: conflicts between generations and cultures, restrictions on women, reciprocal cultural influences, the potential for transformation, gender identity, community, and national identity. The narrator emphasizes that they are no longer in Puerto Rico. “Look,” the girl says to her mother, pointing to the city outside their window, “Do you see palm trees, any sand or blue water? All I see is concrete. We are in the United States. I am an American citizen” (20).

As “American History,” the title of the first prose piece in her collection suggests, Ortiz Cofer’s individual and collective autobiography is a lesson in United States history, a recovery of the self such as bell hooks describes in *Talking Back*: “We learned that the self existed in relation, was dependent for its very being on the lives and experiences of everyone, the self not as signifier of one ‘I’ but the coming together of many ‘I’s, the self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community” (1989, 30–31). Throughout *The Latin Deli*, we bear witness to and participate in the “coming together of many ‘I’s” and their stories, as Ortiz Cofer “connect[s] [her]self to the threads of lives that have touched” hers and “converged into the tapestry” of her life (1990, 13). Like Corazón and the medium, the “storytelling woman” on the young girl’s tapestry bedspread in “Not for Sale”—a Scheherazade who is “invisible” to the “characters she had created”—embodies the collective “I” of the autobiographical storyteller in the text as a whole (1995, 17). In each scene on the tapestry the storytelling woman sits “slightly behind the action” that unfolds continuously, one story interwoven with the next, an infinite series that her very survival depends upon (1995, 17–18). As the unnamed adolescent narrator tells us, the woman’s stories will “never end—as I had once feared—since it was in my voice that she spoke to me, placing my dreams among hers, weaving them in” (1995, 21).

Notes

1. Schenck (1988) builds on Derrida’s “The Law of Genre” (1980) to suggest that genre theory is both gendered and racialized: “Mixed, unclassifiable, blurred, or hybrid genres, like impure, anomalous, or monstrous genders, have traditionally offered up problems to their diagnosticians. Implicit in these sexual metaphors as thoroughly as in genre theory itself is also a binary opposition

between norm and departure, between convention and confusion, Platonic idea and deceiving appearance, pure form and polluted copy, which bears a subtext of not only gender but also racial oppression” (284). On the parallels between crossing gender and genre boundaries, see Ortiz Cofer’s comments in her interview with Jocelyn Bartkevicius (1997b, 70).

2. Janet (1925) distinguished between “traumatic memory,” frozen memories which may recur in involuntary flashbacks and nightmares, and “narrative memory,” the resolution of trauma through story-making, which requires “the organisation of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves, and [. . .] the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history” (662). Most contemporary theorists and psychologists of trauma build directly on Janet’s influential work. For two particularly rich considerations of the roles of narrative and community in recovery based on Janet, see Susan J. Brison (1999) and Judith Lewis Herman (1992). Recent theorists such as Cathy Caruth (1995) study trauma as a shared “symptom of history” rather than the product of individual experience. Certain collectively experienced and even inherited traumas, such as Vietnam, the stresses associated with immigration, or the cumulative, “insidious trauma” of repeated experiences of racism, may afflict many individuals within a community. See, for example, the essays in Anthony J. Marsella et al. (1996).

3. As Joseph P. Fitzpatrick (1971) points out, Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States in large numbers during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, entering a discourse on skin color completely alien to Puerto Rico’s, where racial mixture was common, and identity was not based on color (101–14).

4. In her survey of the question of genres in *Silent Dancing*, Carmen Flys Junquera (2007) considers not only the interplay of poetry and prose, but also the continuum of fictional and nonfictional narrators in terms suggestive of Ortiz Cofer’s later strategies in *The Latin Deli*. She observes that Ortiz Cofer’s memoir expands beyond the individual life: “the young protagonist of *Silent Dancing* tells stories of her coming of age, but in the process recreates the fragmented lives of all the women around her [. . .]” (169). See also Myra Socolovsky’s discussion of Ortiz Cofer’s novel *The Line of the Sun* as a hybrid fiction/autobiographical nonfiction that transgresses generic boundaries, thereby creating “a productive space for the exploration of personal and political island history” (2009, 103).

5. See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s introduction to their *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998), a comprehensive survey of theory on women’s autobiography, particularly their discussion of the relational self, influenced by Nancy Chodorow’s gendered ego psychology, and the polyvocal, based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. See also Anne E. Goldman (1998), Hertha D. Sweet Wong (1998), and Paul John Eakin (1999, 46–53), who build on these

premises but also critique the essentialist tendencies of early feminist theory on the subject.

6. See, for example, Wong (1998, 170), Torres (1998, 277–78), Smith (1999, 39–42), Schenck (1988, 288–89), and the anthologies *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (ed. Ashley et al. [1994]) and *Feminism/Postmodernism*, (ed. Nicholson [1990]) for debates on the uses and limits of post-modernism within feminist theory and autobiography. Linda Hutcheon (1995) argues that while postmodernist, feminist, and postcolonial critiques may take similar forms, for example, in the strategic use of textual gaps, postcolonialism and feminism “go beyond the post-modern limits of deconstructing existing orthodoxies into the realms of social and political action” (130). Fischer’s emphasis on the term “post-modern,” dream-work, and transference in the production of ethnicity distracts somewhat from the ethical and political ends he discerns in ethnic autobiography.

7. The term “Latin deli” itself contains what Fischer (1986) calls cultural “inter-reference,” the “interweaving of cultural threads from different arenas” (230), just as “El Building” contains linguistic “inter-reference.” In an interview with Rafael Ocasio (1994), Ortiz Cofer expresses her annoyance with “purists” who police linguistic hybridity: “Am I corrupting the language when I use my own Anglicisms because that’s what I grew up with? Or is the language simply evolving and changing to reflect a global society?” (736; see also 735 and 739 on the terms “Latin deli” and “El Building” in particular). For a rich consideration of linguistic hybridity and transethnic fusions in ethnic American literature, see Martha Cutter (2005).

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