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Organic Home Spaces: the Chambered Nautilus in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing; a Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*

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Abstract

Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* — a coming of age narrative played out against the backdrop of diasporic locations—is most often read in light of a series of clearly articulated dichotomies that present culture, identity, and home as dialectically opposed conditions that require cultural synthesis. In what follows, I argue that Ortiz Cofer's text, while full of clashing dichotomies, does not actually propose a synthesis in the form of hybridization. Rather, *Silent Dancing* presents a complicated and nuanced consideration of home — here in terms of both the gendered, domestic space of the home, as well as the larger political and cultural space of the nation — that is informed by feminist practice on the one hand, and diasporic locations on the other.

Keywords

Diaspora, Puerto Rico, identity, home, feminist

Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* presents us with a specific image of home, the Chambered Nautilus, which invokes not the binary logic of western intellectual discourse, but rather proposes an alternative logic rooted in Caribbean aesthetic and cultural practices. Drawing on the work of Edward Soja, Antonio Benetíz Rojo, Ramón Soto-Crespo, and Homi Bhabha, I propose that we read Ortiz Cofer in light of the ebb and flow of Caribbean aesthetic and poetic practices, as she articulates home and nation not in light of easily identifiable locations, but rather as shifting spaces of negotiation.

Given Ortiz Cofer's cultural context of the diasporic Puerto Rican experience,[1]it is not surprising that the dominant mode for analyzing her text has focused on particular kinds of hybridity. More specifically, critics have tended to read her text in terms of a series of binaries that resolve themselves into third categories created through synthesis, wherein questions of identity and belonging become resolved in an in-between category.[2] Though this tendency offers a way of reading Ortiz Cofer's text that leaves us with a comfortable sense of hybridity as a resistance strategy, it nonetheless glosses over the important differences that result from, borrowing Homi Bhabha's phrase, being the same but not quite. When we take into account Puerto Rico's unique political relationship to the United States -– a relationship that was codified into law as being "foreign in a domestic sense" by the United States Supreme Court[3] -– in addition to the particular nuances of Ortiz Cofer's text, the easy categories and resolutions offered by dialectical hybridity become distanced from a text that, at its core, is about constant movements and shifts.

Silent Dancing consistently plays with a number of dichotomies in order to emphasis the ways that identity is shaped and formulated around hybrid multiplicity. These division are well tread in terms of Boricua[4]

1 Unlike other Latin Americans, Puerto Ricans are naturally born American citizens because of Puerto Rico's continued colonial relationship with the United States. As a result, Puerto Ricans tend to move more fluidly and more often between the mainland United States and the island, then do other migrant groups.

2 See here Teresa Derrickson's "'Cold/Hot, English/Spanish': The Puerto Rican Divide in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*, as well as Marisel Moreno's "'More Room': Space, Woman and Nation in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*."

3 Here I am referring to a series of Supreme Court Cases known as the Insular Cases that, in the early years of the 20th century, tried to clarify the relationship between the United States and its newly acquired territory. At question was whether or not "The Constitution followed the flag" in regard to assure territories the same constitutional rights enjoyed by states and their citizens. In *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901) the Fuller court determined that Puerto Rico was "foreign in a domestic sense," an in-between category that offered Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans certain protections as a territory, but not the full protection or consideration of a state.

4 Here I am using the term Boricua in the way that Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez suggests, to denote literature written by Puerto Ricans in the United States. The term Boricua here functions as an anti-colonial signifier, in much the same way that the term "Chicano" does in the American west and references a pre-colonial pasts. In relation to Ortiz Cofer, this term is particularly relevant, as the term Nuyorican is both an inaccurate representation of her experience, and a problematic signifier for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, as it signals a geographic particular that ignores the other places of settlement for diasporic Puerto Ricans, notably, Chicago, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and much of the American Rust Belt.

literature and are readily identifiable within Ortiz Cofer's text and the larger Boricua discourse as a whole: Spanish/English, American/Puerto Rican, Hot/Cold, Urban Metropolis/Rural Colonial, Self/Other. Reading *Silent Dancing* in light of dialectical synthesis, however, presents a number of problems, not the least of which is the foundational premise that articulating ethnic and cultural identity, indeed articulating transnational identities, or identities outside of strict national spaces, must always happen with the dialectical mode. This is false, and as so much of the writing of the Puerto Rican diaspora reminds us, playing out national and cultural difference within the context of the Commonwealth is not as easy as posing one identity against another, until they invert, blend, and create a new third space.[5] Rather, for writers of the Puerto Rican diaspora generally, and Ortiz Cofer specifically, writing as a Puerto Rican does not mean creating third-space through synthesis, rather, as a result of the uneasy political relationship with the US, it is *always already* a third space.

In reading Ortiz Cofer's text in light of a foundational Thirdspace — that is Thirdspace as the originary position, not the synthesized version of a dialectic — it is helpful to contextualize what I mean by Thirdspace. Specifically, I am drawing on the notion proposed by Edward Soja in his text *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* wherein he theorizes his notion of Thirdspace through his reading and contextualization of the French Philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Soja writes:

> I have chosen to call this new awareness Thirdspace and to initiate its evolving definition by describing it as a product of a "thirding" of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope,

5 Within the context of both Puerto Rican and Boricua writing, the challenge of articulating an "authentic" Puerto Rican identity occurs over and over again. Much of this has to do with the continued political relationship with the United States, but this anxiety works itself out in a number of ways: location, language use, time away from the island, place of birth, the way different Puerto Rican bodies signify different racial categories in the US, etc. This is a tension that is palatable within Ortiz Cofer's work and interviews, though it is also traceable in Piri Thomas, Esmeralda Santiago, Rosario Ferré, Rosario Morales, Aurora Levin Morales, Pedro Pietri, Miguel Piñero, and the other Nuyorican poets as well.

> substance and meaning. Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also […] the exploration of Thirdspace can de described and inscribed in journeys to "real-and-imagined" (or perhaps "realandimagined"?) places (11).

I contend that *Silent Dancing*, and more specifically its representation of home, is an example of this Thirdspace. The home space in the text moves beyond dualisms, and articulates through its insistence on movement, flow, and contradiction an alternative to the dualistic thinking that has characterized so much of the text's critical reception. In Thirdspace (the space of real and imagined spaces) part of what is revealed is the way that space is both imagined and constructed through such imaginings. In this context, movement within the diaspora, both from and to the island, can be imagined in light of these visions of real and imagined places. Puerto Rico is real as the United States is real, but the way in which those spaces operate, and the ways that we read movement within them is very much imagined space (Puerto Rico as idyllic home, New York as space of opportunity and sophistication) In Thirdspace, we move into an arena that can allow for various modes of contradiction, that is founded upon the intersections of historicity, sociality, and spatiality, and creates, through this conflux the foundation for a radically different kind of hyrbridity, a hybridity that is perhaps best described as an Anzaldúan, New Mestiza consciousness.

I want to draw attention here to Anzaldúa's notion of the new *mestiza* in part because Ortiz Cofer's text is, among other things, a borderland text that is produced as a response to negotiating borderland spaces. While Puerto Rico is not often thought of in these terms, particularly, since unlike the American southwest, there is not a physical border zone, Puerto Rico is nonetheless a legally coded borderland state. Its continued Commonwealth (Free Associated State) Status is, as Ramón Soto-Crespo reminds us, anomalous, insofar as Puerto Rico is neither a state nor, in the strictest sense a colony, but is rather an in-between zone—a space that after a hundred years of US control still remains "foreign in a domestic sense", owned by the United States, but not part of it. In arguing for what he calls the Mainland Passage, Soto-Crespo brings together the thinking of Walter Mignolo and Gloria Anzaldúa in the following way:

> When we examine Puerto Rico's mass migration through Mignolo's and Anzaldúa's borderland logic, the historical event of a passage to the mainland becomes symbolic of a deeper conceptual shift shaping in the Puerto Rican community. The mainland passage is the historical reality that makes possible the conceptual transition from island nation to borderland. This passage to the mainland has been key in breaking through the impasse that political nationalism represented for the island's population. The literature of the mainland passage, its chronicles and memories, tells the history of a people building an actual borderland (5).

Ortiz Cofer's writing is symptomatic of this mainland passage, insofar as it chronicles the creation of a borderland space, wherein the historical reality of diasporic movement — as well as the ways that this is both gendered and cyclical — emerges as an articulation of the Puerto Rican experience wherein culture, "national" identity, and movement can radically reconfigure the way that we think of "nations" that defy their borders. Perhaps one of the strongest symbolic examples of this can be found in the way Ortiz Cofer thinks of home, and unpacking the metaphor she uses -- the chambered nautilus -- reveals this explicitly.

The nautilus, the sea creature, invokes images of the aquatic, and in using this as a metaphor for home space, Ortiz Cofer draws attention, not to stasis, rootedness, or permanence, but to motion, movement, ebb, and flow. Antonio Benetíz Rojo characterizes this forward and backward, unpredictable motion as one of the defining aspects of Caribbean aesthetic and cultural practice. For Benitez Rojo, Caribbean identity lies not in static locations or easy transportations of culture from here and there; rather, Caribbean-ness is always performative. Moreover, the performance of being Caribbean can never be codified into strict terms, as it both adheres to and defies the very categories that try and contain it. He writes:

> But the culture of the Caribbean, at least in its most distinctive aspect, is not terrestrial but aquatic, a sinuous culture where time unfolds

> irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar. The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity (11).

The waves, fluidity, folds, and sinuosity that Benetíz Rojo describes are instructive with regard to Ortiz Cofer's text, insofar as the movements the text performs are these acts of doubling, of folding and unfolding, of extension and retraction. Her family's movements within the Puerto Rican diaspora, and the cultural negotiations that this requires, creates a system in which identity, home, and belonging, all fail to map in neat ways, but rather present messy and at times contradictory shifts. Moreover, Ortiz Cofer's use of aquatic imagery — the chambered nautilus — as a metaphor for home space, continues to engage this fluidity, and implies an articulation of culture that is steeped in movement — location and dislocation — not stasis. As such, the idea of home, and moreover the idea of home-as-nation takes on interesting implications in the text, as the sea-imagery implies a decidedly gendered reading of home, and more specifically the kinds of homes that can be formulated within diasporic movement.

Joseph Lim describes the chambered nautilus as a study in "two opposite kinds of spaces; the successive diminution of tiny chambers and the open-ended space that an infinite coil implies" (23). The chambered nautilus possesses a strikingly beautiful shell whose pearlescent interior is an example of a naturally occurring logarithmic spiral, containing within it the contradictions of perfectly portioned space that seem to both expand and retract simultaneously, accommodating the needs of the living being within. In the opening lines of her text, Ortiz Cofer explicitly engages the imagery of the chambered nautilus when she describes her grandmother's house as follows:

> My grandmother's house is like a chambered nautilus; it has many rooms, yet it is not a mansion. Its proportions are small and its design simple. It is a house that has grown organically, according to the needs of its inhabitants. To all of us in the family it is known as *la casa de Mamá*. It is the place of our origin; the stage for our memories and dreams of Island life (23).

The image of the house's growth and expansion as a nautilus invokes images of the non-terrestrial; it is not constrained by territory or space, but rather grows organically according to its needs, existing literally within the ebb and flow of sea tides. The image of the aquatic invokes Benetíz Rojo's claims about Caribbean culture, a culture that, in his consideration, is built around movement and flow; processes which can (and historically have) accommodated binary difference not in terms of synthesis but in terms of what he calls a "syncretic artifact." While discussing this artifact he says:

> A syncretic artifact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences, what happens is that, in the melting pot of societies that the world provides, syncretic processes realize themselves through an economy in whose modality of exchange the signifier of *there* -- of the Other -- is consumed ("read") according to local codes that are already in existence; that is codes from *here* (21).

The syncretic artifact, as opposed to the synthesis, allows us to consider the chambered nautilus as home in light of various meanings, meanings which are at times transparently layered and at other times opaquely obfuscating. The signifier made of difference — in this case infinite and contained space, growth and stasis, movement and permanence — is interpreted differently in different spaces and registers. The metaphor of confined and perfectly fragmented space, as well as infinite expansion is apt for a diasporic, differently colonial space, as it speaks to the movement of people across what Suzanne Bost has noted is a "quite literally fluid boundary" between Puerto Rico and the United States (189). As such, the image also raises compelling questions about home, identity, and movement particularly in relation to gender.

Because of Puerto Rico's status as a Free Associated State (in English, Commonwealth), Puerto Ricans tend to not experience migration as a one-way process, but as a more fluid, open ebb and flow to and from the island. This fact is what leads Jorge Duany to note that Puerto Rico is best conceived of as *La nación en vaivén*, the nation on the move.[6] This ebb and

6 As Duany argues, Puerto Rico is best conceptualized as a space that has a national culture though it lacks a nation state. As such the articulation of the culture becomes much more nuanced and in some ways free flowing because it does not rely on the notion of the state to validate it, since there is, after all, no state to speak of.

flow of bodies has interesting implications for the way that identity and culture are enacted, as the models of departure and arrival that attend to so much of our understanding of migration get turned on their head within the Puerto Rican context. Considering briefly, the way migration is coded in terms of gender makes this clearer.

Standard models of migration tend to posit that migration is initially undertaken by men, who then either return home (often envisioned as the "motherland") or send for the families they left behind. As Gina M. Pérez has demonstrated, "the history of Puerto Rican migration and displacement is simultaneously a narrative of gender, and show[s] its embeddedness in development ideologies, labor history, place-making, and ethnic identity construction in a transnational context" (7). To put it succinctly, during the largest waves of Puerto Rican migration (between 1940-70, when nearly a third of the island's population moved to the mainland United States), both the government of Puerto Rico and the federal government of the United States encouraged and aided the movement of women from the island to the mainland.[7] The effect of this is that for many Puerto Ricans operating within the diaspora, the original movement from the island to the mainland was not undertaken by men, but by women.[8] As a result, within the context of Puerto Rican diaspora, movement is often times engaged in and maintained by women, so that, extraordinarily, both *aquí* and *afuera* have connotations that are decidedly feminine, a point that is maintained in Cofer's text.[9]

Returning then to the chambered nautilus as the metaphor for the diasporic nation of Puerto Rico, the organically expanding house is coded

7 In response to the overpopulation of the island, the Puerto Rican and Unites States' governments began a eugenics program which sterilized poor women in the countryside. Again, to quote Pérez, "On the one hand policymakers were increasingly vocal about the advantages of encouraging young women's migration, since 'aside from birth control, the most effective means of reducing the population of Puerto Rico is emigration primarily of women of child-bearing ages.' More importantly perhaps, it was believed that women's emigration would facilitate continued emigration since '[it] is obvious that girls, with their typically strong family loyalties, will send for their kin' and serve as 'advance guards which would make easy the entrance of latecomers'" (67-68).

8 For more on this see Alicea, "'A Chambered Nautilus': The Contradictory Nature of Puerto Rican Women's Role in the Social Construction of a Transnational Community"; Pérez's *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement and Puerto Rican Families*; and Olmedo's "Puerto Rican Grandmothers share and Relive their *Memorias.*"

9 Here I am using the Spanish term *afuera* as it is often used in the Puerto Rican context to mean "over there" or "outside". The term applies to those living in the United States.

as a feminine space that is both bounded within the small chambers of the nautilus shell, and unbounded, extending, perhaps infinitely, uncontained by the terrestrial. The feminine house as an expanding entity is hardly a space of stasis; it is, in fact, quite the opposite. Its growth and expansion, reminiscent of a pregnant body, does not imply singularity and closure, it implies multiplicity and expansion. The "nation" in this sense moves past its appointed boundaries (indeed, more Puerto Ricans live in the mainland United States than live in Puerto Rico), expanding to accommodate the needs of its inhabitants.[10]

Coding the home-space, the nation-in-home, then as an organic and shifting entity has very interesting implications for the way we think of diaspora and return. This image of the organically expansive nation — the nation that defies borders and particular localities — implies a very different way of thinking about diasporic experience. In this instance it is less the case that the United States conquered Puerto Rico than it is a notion of Puerto Rican cultural identity expanding to accommodate new spaces, in this case, the spaces of the mainland Puerto Rican community. This is, of course, not to discount the historical fact of the US invasion in 1898, insofar as it is to propose that thinking of the nautilus as nation-in-home signals a more complicated reading of national space that is not easily codified as nation vs. colony, as the commonwealth signals a very different political space; a borderland space that is neither part of the national body proper, nor entirely distinct from it.

The argument I have been making, that the chambered nautilus serves as a metaphor for diaspora, and as such invokes images of contradictory and complicated spaces — gendered migration patterns, non-terrestrial, expansive "national" boundaries — becomes even more dense when we consider the implications of gender division and cultural identity formation that is present throughout the text. While the chambered nautilus is a mobile, dynamic, and femininely coded vision of home, the meaning of that home and its symbolic role as national allegory require close attention. By turning to the first *ensayo* of Ortiz Cofer's text "Casa" — which in

10 I am putting the term "nation" in quotations here to signify that thinking of Puerto Rico as a nation is not entirely accurate. While I agree with Duany that Puerto Rico is a cultural nation, to be a nation without a state is a complicated position. It is this complication that I mean to draw attention to here, as the slippage of thinking of Puerto Rico as either a nation or a colony is precisely the kind of move that I want to complicate.

addition to reformulating the feminine as an active presence, also brings her text into conversation with her literary inspiration, Virginia Woolf — we reveal that the "home" of the novel is also embedded in discursive practices that create culture continuity, while simultaneously demarcating the limitations of feminine agency within traditional patriarchal cultures.[11]

The opening lines of "Casa" are as follows: "At three or four o'clock in the afternoon, the hour of *café con leche*, the women of my family gathered in Mamá's living room to speak of important things and to tell stories for the hundredth time, as if to each other, meant to be overheard by us young girls, their daughters" (Ortiz Cofer 14). The connection of women across generations immediately invokes Woolf, as it is precisely these combinations that she seeks to articulate in much of her work, particularly in *Moments of Being* and *A Room of One's Own*. The particularities of gender and home space are coded in terms of ethnicity (*café con leche*), and contextualized in terms of feminist discourse (speaking of important things). In light of both, the women's conversations serve as a way to ground both ethnic and cultural experiences as well as gender identity and expectations; these afternoon stories are not just idle afternoon chatter, rather they are networks of support that allow these women to learn and teach each other how to be in the world in the specific context of Puerto Rican women's culture.

The representation of feminine Puerto Rican culture and its association with *Casa*, specifically her grandmother's home, links both Puerto Rican and the house to feminine space and agency. In an interview with Rafael Ocasio, Ortiz Cofer says: "In Puerto Rico, even though it's been called a *machista* society, in my generation — it's probably changed some by now — women grew up with women. I spent almost all my time with my mother, grandmother and aunts. Boys spent time with each other and with the men. It was two cultures" (qtd. in Ocasio 733). These two cultures — the masculine and the feminine — may at first glance map nicely unto the already gendered divisions of space that we expect in patriarchal culture; men occupy public space with other men, while women remain in domestic space. The boundary between the public and the private spheres is policed along the lines of women's bodies and the domestic, which, as Amy Kaplan has noted:

11 I am using the Spanish word for "essay" here, as it is the term Ortiz Cofer claims most closely fits her meaning as "it can mean 'a rehearsal,' an exercise or practice" (12).

> […] has a double meaning that links the space of the familial household to that of the nation, by imagining both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home…Domestication implies that the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tamed; domesticity monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage as it regulates the traces of savagery within its purview (25).

The domestic space, conceptually and geographically, is a regulation of self and other; it creates an inherent boundary between the world and home. In the case of *casa*, however, the world is not distinct from the home, insofar as it is constituted and constructed through it.

In this sense, the women of Ortiz Cofer's family participate in an ongoing narrative that cements the family's origins in Puerto Rico by telling and retelling the life of the family and maintaining the stories that give continuity to the family's experiences, even in light of the discontinuity of movement and relocation. At the center of this process is Mamá, the matriarch of Ortiz Cofer's family, whose storytelling inspired Ortiz Cofer to eventually become a writer.[12] In Mamá, Ortiz Cofer finds her literary ancestor, the mother that she thinks back through. She says of Mamá:

> She could not articulate like Virginia Woolf but, in her own way, she showed me the power of the word […] women have had to trace their literary ancestry in a different way than men. We have had our mothers and grandmothers as storytellers teach us what perhaps men have learned from their orators, politicians, philosophers and writers. We have our own culture (Ocasio 733-4).

12 In her interview with Rafael Ocasio, Ortiz Cofer claims: "The power that I give to these women is the same I give to Virginia Woolf. To me, my grandmother is as important in oral tradition as Virginia Woolf is in writing. The stories I head from my grandmother became the basis for my imaginative life" (qtd. in Ocascio 733).

The reaffirmation of a women's culture, and more specifically, a women's literary tradition outside the confines of traditional literacy, creates the grounds for questioning the legitimacy and privilege of male-centered discourse and experience, by re-centering women's experiences and knowledge.

While Ortiz Cofer makes the connection between Woolf, her grandmother, and feminine practice explicit in her interview, she also symbolically achieves this in the text. In the *ensayo* "More Room," Ortiz Cofer's amplifies the echoes of Woolf and adds to them the particularity of a non-white, working-class subject position. By highlighting her grandmother's story, she underscores the challenges of achieving the room of one's own, emphasizing the loss that lies in the foundation of the family home. The story of Mamá's house — the chambered nautilus — demonstrates this clearly. After eight pregnancies and the loss of three children, Mamá who "had knowledge of her body and perceived that if she had any more children, her dreams and her plans would have to be permanently forgotten, because she would be a chronically ill woman" (Ortiz Cofer 27), demanded a new room built at the back of the house that she then banished her loving husband to. Ortiz Cofer describes the results as follows:

> And so it was that Mamá discovered the only means of birth control available to a Catholic woman of her time: sacrifice. She gave up the comfort of Papá's sexual love for something she deemed greater: the right to own and control her body, so that she might live to meet her grandchildren -- me among them -- so that she could give more of herself to the one's already there, so that she could be more than a channel for other lives, so that even now that time has robbed her of the elasticity of her body and her amazing reservoir of energy, she still emanates the kind of joy that can only achieved by living according to the dictates of one's own heart (28).

The loss of sexual love demarcates the (limited) choices available to women in traditional Puerto Rican culture, a point that Ortiz Cofer reinforces

throughout the text. In order to be able to fulfill her role as a mother, Mamá sacrifices one of the joys and privileges of marriage, sexuality, in order to claim her space, both the space of her home and the space of her body, as her own.

The feminine house as site of origin then, is also articulated as a space of sacrifice. The room of her own is occasioned by a loving man who is willing to give her space and time and not press his marital "privilege" unto her, and further demands that in order to live by the dictates of her heart, she give up the demands of her flesh; her room, located in the heart of the family home, is a solitary solace, her empowerment and emanating joy sharpened by loneliness. The maternal home then, also becomes a space that Homi Bhabha articulates as "unhomely" in multiple registers. Of the unhomely Bhabha writes:

> By making visible the forgetting of the 'unhomely' moment in civil society, feminism specifies the patriarchal, gendered nature of civil society and disturbs the symmetry of private and public which is now shadowed, or uncannily doubled, by the difference of genders which does not neatly map on to the private and the public, but becomes disturbingly supplementary to them. This results in redrawing the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-is-political; the world-in-home (15).

The home that Ortiz Cofer is locating always already carries its contradictions and limitations within in, thus making it unhomely. In this case, the sacrifice of sexual love in order to be a better mother, woman, and wife is a bitter-sweet pill that both Mama and Papa must swallow. In order to be more than a conduit for other lives, in order to be a good mother, Mama must give up the very thing that makes her maternity possible, sexual love.

While the feminist interventions of the women of the Ortiz Cofer's family — the morality and cautionary tales told in her grandmother's home — uncover and contest spaces of patriarchal dominance, these interventions do not just occur in the register of gender, rather they also,

and importantly point to the cultural and political negotiations of diaspora and displacement. Ortiz Cofer demonstrates this clearly when she writes:

> It was on these rockers that my mother, her sisters, and my grandmother sat on these afternoons of my childhood to tell their stories, teaching each other and my cousin and me what it was like to be a woman, more specifically a Puerto Rican woman. They talked about life on the island, and life in *Los Nueva Yores*, their way of referring to the US from New York City to California: the other place, not home, all the same (14).

Constructing an identity as a Puerto Rican woman includes both the immediacy and expectations of island life *and* understanding and grappling with the force the United States exerts on their everyday lives. The other place is a haunting presence that lurks as both a promise and a possibility; a place that is not their own, but that nonetheless exerts influence in their lives vis-à-vis the lives of other people: the family, friends, and acquaintances who are living *afuera.* The shadow presence of the US and the lack/absence that it invokes suggests that being a Puerto Rican woman already means negotiating identity across disparate locations and spaces.

In this moment, Ortiz Cofer gestures towards what has been read as one of the central negotiations of her text: the conflicting identities that are formulated around specific locations within the diaspora. To this end, it is worth noting that in some real sense there is no space, even within Puerto Rico, that is free from the influence exerted by the United States. Even those who choose to stay in Puerto Rico must come to terms with the behemoth cultural and political force to the north, including women like Mamá, who spend the entirety of their lives on the island. The vision, then of Puerto Rico as a somehow pure cultural space reminds us again of Soja's notion of real and imagined spaces. The cultural purity of the Puerto Rican past outside of colonial influence is an imagined space, though it is one that forcefully asserts itself throughout the text, and indeed throughout the diaspora.

To put it more pointedly, the construction of an idealized home space in Puerto Rico requires the looming and unhomely presence of the United States to sustain it. In this sense Puerto Rico as a space is — as

it has been since its "discovery" in 1493 — implicated and constructed through the gaze of other dominant powers (Spain and the United States) and in its modern form has literally been constituted through the crash and collision of disparate groups of people: African Slaves, Indigenous Peoples, and various Western colonizers (Spaniards, Corsicans, Mallorcans, Italians, Americans).[13] The result is that Puerto Rico has perhaps always functioned, at least in terms of its articulation as a home-space, in reference to other places: places left behind, places abandoned, places forcefully foregone, and places that beckon. The negotiation that the women of Ortiz Cofer's family participate in is a practice that, after five hundred years of colonization, cannot help but be specific to a profound sense of dislocation; part of the Puerto Rican experience has been historically situated around remembering home in other places not here, or in creating homes in spaces that are most often far from hospitable.

In articulating a sense of home within diaspora, Ortiz Cofer presents us models of thinking about Puerto Rican cultural identity that defies dualistic thinking and practice. As Carmen Faymonville has noted:

> Recognizing the ambiguity of the boundaries of diaspora, Ortiz Cofer posits a homeland as a place that also has to be imagined by nurturing a sense of communal distinctiveness. Her imagination of "home," however, does not have to take the shape of a particular community rooted in a particular sort of place. Whereas modernist theories of nation conceptualize nations as particular community rooted in a specific place, geography, or physical setting, Ortiz Cofer contends that the physical setting and the geography themselves are not a given, but have to be imagined along with the more abstract "home" or "community" (134).

13 See here José Luis Gonazalez's *Puerto Rico: The Four Storeyed Country* in which he traces the different waves of European immigration to Puerto Rico, and draws attention to the way that the different waves of colonizing groups in Puerto Rico tended to maintain their insularity as a class (we could include the United States here, though he does not). They tended to speak their own native languages, they tended to maintain, to the extent that they could, their "racial insularity" and to conceive of themselves, not as Puerto Ricans, but as still belonging to the places which they originated from.

Part of the way that Ortiz Cofer foregrounds this notion of home and belonging is by engaging in practices that we can read in light of Thirdspace thinking and Caribbean aesthetic and poetic practices of ebb and flow. In representing home in light of gendered particularities, and in light of spaces of movement, Ortiz Cofer reminds us that home can be *both* a particular space and a mobile one. By rejecting what Faymonville notes as the modernist practice of place-based notions of nation, Ortiz Cofer reminds us that Puerto Rico is a borderland state, not a nation, not a colony per se, but something else that exists outside the limited space of dualistic thinking.

Using the Chambered Nautilus as a metaphor for the house allows Judith Ortiz Cofer to articulate a seemingly impossible position; home can simultaneously contain both possibilities and contradictions in light of various registers of identity that need not be immediately resolved into easily hybridized synthesis. The image of the chambered nautilus allows for the recognition of the viability and authenticity of diaspora as a home space, even as it simultaneously acknowledges that these shifting locations are, in their own ways, unhomely. Further, the chambered nautilus theoretically invites a reading of Ortiz Cofer that, like the text itself, is dynamic, shifting, and in process.

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