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## Multicultural Influence Upon Judith Ortiz Cofer's Silent Dancing: Telling the Story of a Bicultural Life, Illuminating American Multiculturalism

**Keywords / Palabras clave**

Ortiz Cofer, Multiculturalism, Silent Dancing

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## *Multicultural Influence Upon Judith Ortiz Cofer's Silent Dancing: Telling the Story of a Bicultural Life, Illuminating American Multiculturalism*

Margaret Bauer / East Carolina University

“I wanted the essays to be, not just family history, but also creative explorations of known territory. I wanted to trace back through scenes... the origins of my creative imagination”.  
(Judith Ortiz Cofer, *Silent Dancing* 12)

In her 1990 collection of autobiographical stories and poems, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, Judith Ortiz Cofer writes about spending her youth going back and forth between Puerto Rico and New Jersey. When her father joined the Navy due to the lack of opportunity for him to make an adequate living in Puerto Rico, he moved his family to New Jersey; but her mother was homesick, so, as a compromise, whenever he was sent overseas for any length of time, he sent his wife and children to stay with his in-laws in Puerto Rico for the duration. Consequently, the young Judith felt like an outsider in both New Jersey and Puerto Rico.

Cofer's sense of alienation, the conflicts arising from the necessity of being bilingual, the pressure

upon her as a child by her mother's inability to master English and discomfort with American ways, and finally her inclination to re-imagine the stories she heard as a child are key elements of Silent Dancing that may remind the reader of Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. In addition to these similarities to Kingston's memoir, Cofer prefaces Silent Dancing with a discussion of "the problem of writing truth from memory" (11), much of which echoes the literary criticism that has been written about Kingston's work. [1] Cofer also remarks in her preface on the fact that her life "is still very much 'in-progress'" at the time she is writing these memoirs (13). Both women wrote these autobiographical works while only in their thirties and before establishing their careers. The motivation for both books appears also to be similar: to analyze their childhood and adolescence and the stories told to them during those years in search of some empowering meaning.

In each book, therefore, the author retells the cautionary tales told to her during her childhood by the women of her family. What each young girl was being cautioned about is similar as well: her own, supposedly treacherous at times, sexuality. The central message in the stories they heard as adolescents was that they must prepare themselves for and save their virginity until marriage. Implicitly, a respectable marriage should be their goal in life, as that was, apparently, the only hope of security that the older generations of women in their families could conceive of for young women—ironically, in spite of Kingston's mother's success on her own as a doctor while her husband was in America without her, and in spite of Cofer's grandmother's obvious dominance over her artist-husband in the running of their home. In what might be viewed as retaliation (though perhaps unintentional) for this "betrayal" by members of their own sex, Kingston and Cofer have traitorously rewritten the stories passed down to them for their own common purpose of revealing the oppression of the women in the cultures in which they were raised. Finally, then, like the creator of Woman Warrior, Judith Ortiz Cofer is examining in Silent Dancing the people she encountered as a child—either through stories told to her or her own experiences and observations—in search of a female role model, a "woman warrior" with the strength to overcome the double oppression she

must deal with as a woman in Puerto Rico and as a woman of color in America. Perhaps a result of the authors' common purposes, several of the women whose stories Cofer includes in her book are directly comparable to women whose lives Kingston examines in her own search for a woman warrior.

Given the ulterior motive of these stories—to warn the young female listeners about consequences of improper behavior with their male acquaintances—it is not surprising that Cofer's collection includes a few “fallen women” reminiscent of Kingston's No Name Aunt. Particularly echoing the Kingston character is Cofer's Fulana, the title character of one of the collection's poems, essentially a “woman with no name” (Cofer 86). Cofer's footnote explains that “fulana” actually translates as “Mrs. So-and-so” or “Mrs. Blank” but has connotations of “tart” and “whore” (86). The poem explains that all of the children would know who was being talked about when gossips replaced the person's name “with Fulana in the presence of children” (86):

. . . she was the wild girl  
we were not allowed to play with,  
who painted her face with her absent mother's make-up,  
and who always wanted to be “wife”  
when we played house. She was bored  
with other games, preferred to turn the radio loud  
to songs about women and men  
loving and fighting to guitar, maracas, and drums.  
She wanted to be a dancer on the stage,  
dressed in nothing but yellow feathers.

The Fulana's rebellious nature would lead such a young girl into a “careless” lifestyle (86). Recognizing that her adventures might be considered romantic by “impressionable little girls” (86),

the community would ultimately drop her name from conversation in much the same way that Kingston's father's family never again mentioned his sister after she brought shame and violence to their home. Essentially, these women were erased from the community, a warning to the young listeners that such behavior leads to eradication—worse alienation than children like the young Maxine and Judith already suffered within their marginalized existences. Although they often felt invisible to the rest of the world, at least they had their families and communities. The possibility of losing these would have been an effective threat.

Cofer concludes the poem only with the warning of Fulana's possibly destructive example, whereas in retelling her aunt's story Kingston attempts to empower the tragically deceased woman with various explanations for her adultery, and, when these scenarios fail to ring true, with a theory about her "spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water" (16). Cofer does, however, provide later in her collection a sympathetic perspective of the longing for romance and glamour that the earlier cautionary poem lacks. In a sketch about her childhood friend Vida, a girl seemingly destined to become a "Fulana," the adolescent Judith, the girl / who became the woman / who became the writer of *Silent Dancing*, is just the kind of "impressionable little girl" the community worries about in the poem, and she does, indeed, find the dreams of her more glamorous friend appealing—at first. The person Cofer ultimately empowers in her story, then, is her own younger self, an intuitive child who is able to recognize that Vida's dreams have led her into a relationship with a possibly untrustworthy man. Cofer's response, however, is not to condemn Vida: "I became disenchanted with Vida, but remained loyal to her" (105). The loyalty continues, for she tells Vida's story in such a way that her readers are led to recognize the value in such dreamers, even as we perceive the danger in being one.

Vida's story, as Cofer tells it, breaks the pattern of more traditional stories of "fallen" women and provides the possibility of finding a compromise between a romantic and a mundane life. First, although Vida believes her admirer's promise to take her to California, "she was not totally naive,

and had managed to keep their passionate encounters within the limits of kissing and petting in the spacious backseat of the black Oldsmobile” (105). The story culminates then, not in Vida’s ruin, but in her giving up her Hollywood dreams and taking a job in a factory. Apparently, however, Vida has not forsaken her early goals entirely; she has merely postponed them until she can achieve them on her own. The last image of her is on a poster announcing that she won a beauty pageant sponsored by a Catholic church. Thus, unlike the typical “Fulana,” Vida has found a way to follow her dreams while maintaining her respectability. She even becomes a positive example “for impressionable little girls,” an example that does not leave the bad taste of guilt that drives Kingston to tell her aunt’s story and thereby end her own complicity in the silence that tries to erase this woman from the family history.

Perhaps most provocative among the parallels that might be noted between the two memoirs are the similarities—and then the significant differences—between Kingston’s Fa Mu Lan and Cofer’s María Sabida, heroines of their respective cultures, whose stories the authors heard as children. Kingston explains that she would often fall asleep while her mother told her tales of Fa Mu Lan’s adventures and consequently that she “couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began” (19)—that is, apparently, which parts of the stories she heard and which she herself created. Kingston’s use of the first person in telling Fa Mu Lan’s story, then, reflects her identification with this heroine largely of her own creation. Cofer, too, remarks upon “entertain[ing her]self” by “mak[ing] up stories about the smartest girl [i.e., María Sabida] in all of Puerto Rico” (82), and the comparison to Kingston’s method illuminates the probability that Cofer cast herself as María Sabida in these fantasies.

In relating the histories of these women in their books, neither author is faithful to the original; both borrow from other legends in order to transform the story to suit their intentions. The training of Fa Mu Lan involves, for example, an episode in which a rabbit jumps into a fire to feed the young warrior, and Cofer reports that María Sabida spoke to the midwife just after being born, both of

which details are reminiscent of legends surrounding Prince Siddhartha, the man who became known as the Buddha. Kingston and Cofer are both thereby placing their characters on the level of such incredible historical and legendary figures as the Buddha. [2]

Similarly, too, Fa Mu Lan and María Sabida both take it upon themselves to seek out the source of their community's troubles in order to put a stop to the destruction. After dismissing her victorious army, Fa Mu Lan faces alone and kills the baron who drafted her brother and stole her family's crops. María Sabida confronts the man who has robbed her community of their livestock and who is apparently even having babies kidnapped from the town to be cooked in his stews. In contrast, however, she marries rather than kills him, asserting that "[i]t is better to conquer than to kill" (72). Although after failing in his attempt to kill his new bride, her husband "swear[s] that he would never kill or steal again" and is reported to have "kept his word [and] becom[e] . . . an honest farmer," the story still ends with the revelation that "María Sabida always slept with one eye open" (74).

In this difference between the two stories, the reader can see the difference in purpose. Kingston's goal is to present a successful woman warrior, a woman with the strength to defeat men in a society in which women typically have no power. But Kingston is also concerned about the effect of such fantastic legends upon her younger self, the girl who was overwhelmed by the hopelessness of ever becoming such a warrior and thereby making up to her parents for being born a daughter rather than a son. Ultimately she learns from Fa Mu Lan's story of vengeance that she, too, can avenge her people—though with words, rather than a sword. Ironically, Kingston's vengeance includes disclosing her family's crimes against her in particular, as well as their earlier crime against her aunt, and her culture's crimes against women in general, as well as crimes committed against her people by the Communist invaders of China and the dominant culture of America.

In contrast to Kingston's story and its message, Cofer's solution is, on the one hand, more realistic and, on the other, more troubling. María Sabida seems a more "believable" character in that her



combative method—fighting her oppressor from the inside as his wife rather than with superhuman strength—is more possible outside of the world of fantasy; however, it is disturbing to the reader that she must marry this man—thereby sacrificing herself—to tame him. And is the notion that she could change him any more credible, finally, than Fa Mu Lan’s incredible feats of strength? Like Kingston, however, Cofer seeks and finds in this story of a woman, who is viewed by her culture as heroic, a lesson for her own life: “María Sabida became the model that Mamá [Cofer’s grandmother] used for the ‘prevailing woman’—the woman who ‘slept with one eye open’—whose wisdom was gleaned through the senses: from the natural world and [in contrast to Fa Mu Lan] from ordinary experiences. Her main virtue was that she was always alert and never a victim” (76, emphasis added). Apparently, Cofer decides from the experiences of María Sabida, as well as of her mother and grandmother, that even if she must marry one of her oppressors, she will not allow him to victimize her.

Comparable, too, to Kingston’s application of the example of Fa Mu Lan in her own life is Cofer’s ultimate reaction to the stories she is told and the way she is treated as a girl. Frustration grows as a result of “the familial press of Mamá’s house . . . where an adolescent girl was watched every minute by the women who acted as if you carried some kind of time-bomb in your body that might go off at any minute; and worse, they constantly warned you about your behavior around men” (139-40). At fifteen, apparently in retaliation against the increasing oppression now that her “body [had] new contours and new biological powers” (140), Judith “resisted learning to cook, claiming to get dizzy in the heat of the kitchen” (142). The reader might be reminded here of Kingston telling about how “I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot” (47). With these acts of rebellion, each young woman began to defy gender roles.

\* \* \*

Now, as a writer, when I read a story by a Latin American, a Puerto Rican, a European or an American writer

and I am moved by it, I see it as a catalyst for my own thinking. When I read a story, perhaps by a Native American writer like Louise Erdrich, I think, “How could I write something as important as this about my experience as a Puerto Rican woman?” Literature excites me; it makes me feel that, as a writer, I can also create realities and move people. (Judith Ortiz Cofer, interview with Rafael Ocasio 731)

To my knowledge, Judith Ortiz Cofer has not named Maxine Hong Kingston as a role model; rather, she notes her admiration of Virginia Woolf as “a woman who was defying her time” (Ocasio 732). And Silent Dancing opens with several references to Virginia Woolf, “whose vision,” Cofer writes, “guided my efforts as I tried to recall the faces and words of the people who are a part of my ‘summer’s afternoon’” (11). It is Woolf’s ideas, not Kingston’s, to whom she compares her goals in writing Silent Dancing, in spite of the remarkable parallels between her work and Kingston’s. One might wonder if the conspicuous absence of any direct reference to Kingston a result of what Harold Bloom would call an anxiety of influence, which made Cofer attempt, through omission, to distance herself from her closest source of influence. But Cofer explains her choice of Woolf as “one of [her] literary mothers” in an interview with Rafael Ocasio:

Frankly, I had to use the models that I found. I did not grow up in Puerto Rico, I did not go through a Latino Studies Program, and I was exposed to the women writers of Spanish and Latin American traditions only after I became a writer. My degrees are in English literature. And so, in my studies of English literature, also male-dominated, I found a few models that I could adapt. (732)

Certainly it is likely that if she did not read Latina/o writers she did not read other ethnic American writers. And her study of more “canonical” (male-dominated) literature is certainly evident in the other direct allusions to European literature in Silent Dancing, including Homer’s Odyssey, Cervantes’s Don Quixote, and Shakespeare’s Hamlet. [3] Cofer compares herself “hear[ing] the dead and the forgotten speak in [her] dream” to Odysseus’s having “to listen to many of [the dead in Hades] before he can ask questions” (98); she calls her mother a “Penelope-like wife . . . always

waiting, waiting, waiting, for the return of her sailor” (152); she refers to her relationship with Vida as a “Sancho Panza/Knight of La Mancha relationship, with me following her while she explored the power of her youth and beauty” (102); and in the poem “En Mis Ojos No Hay Días,” Cofer answers the question, ““What drove [her father] mad”” by comparing him, implicitly, to Hamlet—“Remembering Prince Hamlet I reply, / ‘Nothing on earth””—who was, as her poem reveals about her father, haunted by the ghost of his father (123). There are also several allusions to Euro-American literature. Most directly allusive is Cofer’s reference to September being “the cruelest month for a child” (53, emphasis added). One may also hear an allusion to Frost’s “Fire and Ice” in Cofer’s description of her parents’ marriage, which “was the combining of two worlds, the mixing of two elements—fire and ice. This was sometimes exciting and life-giving and sometimes painful and draining” (39). Frost was suggesting possible ways the world would end; Cofer, in contrast, is describing how her world began—with these two people, the source, too, of her insecurity, which results from her father’s long absences and her mother’s ineptitude in America.[4] Also, one might think of Faulkner’s Quentin and Shreve in Absalom, Absalom! when presented the image of young Judith and her cousin trying to piece together the stories they overheard their mothers and grandmother telling: “Collaborators in search of answers, Sara and I discussed everything we heard the women say, trying to fit it all together like a puzzle that once assembled would reveal life’s mysteries to us” (19). Finally, the reader might recall Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus (a black character but the creation of a white author) when reading of how Cofer’s grandmother would petulantly stop telling her story if she were interrupted, “and no amount of begging would persuade her to finish the story that day” (75).

Of course, it is possible that none of these echoes of European or Euro-American texts are any more intentional than the echoes of the Asian-American text Woman Warrior, which Cofer has not mentioned in interviews and which would not likely not yet have made it into the reading lists of her classes. And yet, as the first section of this paper shows, the parallels between the two memoirs are remarkable, a testimony to the shared experiences of ethnic Americans. Further support for this

kind of collective unconscious is reflected, as well, in the numerous parallels that can be found between episodes narrated in Silent Dancing and episodes in works by African-American writers. For example, similar to lessons learned by two African-American writers at a young age, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, Cofer learned early “that language is the only weapon a child has against the absolute power of adults” [and] quickly built up [her] arsenal of words by becoming an insatiable reader of books” (66).[5] Douglass and Washington, of course, remarked similarly about the power of reading against white oppression. Also, parallels might be noted between the plots of Cofer’s stories and plots of the works of other writers of color. For example, Cofer’s story of Providencia, a woman living in her apartment building in New Jersey who had many different children by many different men (111-13), is reminiscent of the situation of one of the characters living in Brewster Place in Gloria Naylor’s novel The Women of Brewster Place. Similarly, Cofer’s story of her relationship with Vida includes one detail that may remind the reader of Toni Morrison’s Sula: Cofer refers to “erotically charged words spoken behind us in stage whispers” when she and Vida would walk on the street together (104), which may remind the reader of the thrill Sula and Nel experience when men begin making sexual comments to them when they pass the store. Finally, one might also note a parallel between the story of Marina, a boy raised as a girl, in Silent Dancing, and the play M. Butterfly by David Henry Hwang, another Asian American. In both the story and the play, the transvestite characters are ultimately perceived to be ideal lovers because they know from personal experience what the opposite sex most desires: Marina/o, because he was raised as a girl, knows how to make Kiki happy and therefore, the storyteller (Judith’s mother) surmises, he will be a good husband; Hwang’s Song, because he is a man himself, knows how to keep Gallimard blindly, unquestioningly satisfied during their lengthy affair.

These parallels with works by other writers of color are interesting and probably worth pursuing as well, but since I have already developed at length the similarity of Silent Dancing and The Woman Warrior, I would like to develop to such an extent a couple of European/Euro-American echoes in Cofer’s work. Just as the influence of Kingston illuminates the commonality of the bicultural

experience, regardless of heritage or ethnicity, so, too, do the echoes of European/Euro-American works of literature reflect the strong influence of Euro-American culture upon anyone living in this country, again, regardless of heritage or ethnicity. Yes, one might argue that the number of these European-based allusions reflects the pervasiveness and dominance of European traditions upon the author—and the use of the word “dominance” here reflects the negative side to this view. On a more positive note, however, and without denying this European influence, I would suggest that perhaps Cofer is, in scattering European and Euro-American intertexts throughout her stories and poems about the Puerto Rican and Puerto Rican-American experience, further developing her theme of the biculturalism of her life, the multiculturalism of her country.[6] Through examining the significance of the parallels between Cofer’s narratives and European or Euro-American narratives, the reader, particularly the reader unfamiliar with Cofer’s culture, may come to another realization: that Cofer’s life is not, after all, so different in its difference. Intentionally or not, the familiar intertexts within the stories she tells in her poems and essays provide readers with a touchstone—borrowing from T. S. Eliot, an objective correlative—that helps readers understand the seemingly unfamiliar work. As the editors remark in their introduction to Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures, “Ethnic writers have, over the years, heightened our awareness of these ‘other worlds’ by subverting traditional narratives in a variety of ways” (Singh et al 18). Following is an example of how an intertextual reading serves to illuminate further Cofer’s intentions with one of the poems and essays of her collection, as well as, perhaps, to provide a fresh new perspective upon two more familiar European and Euro-American texts: Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations and Katherine Anne Porter’s “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.”

In the poem “The Woman Who Was Left at the Altar,” which follows the story that young Judith’s grandmother often told her of a local character called María la Loca, Cofer alludes to Miss Havisham of Great Expectations and the title character of “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall: “Out of the lace she made curtains for her room, / doilies out of the veil. They are now / yellow as malaria” (22). The last line in particular emphasizes the connection to Miss Havisham, who often dressed in her

yellowed bridal clothes after being jilted on her wedding day. Neither Miss Havisham nor Cofer's María allows herself to "get over" her loss. They both surround themselves with reminders of a wedding-that-wasn't, and, just as Miss Havisham thereafter advocates vengeance against men, María, too, longs for revenge, as revealed by the poem's last lines. As she walks through town peddling live chickens, ". . . Dogs follow / the scent of blood to be shed. In their hungry, / yellow eyes she sees his face. / She takes him to the knife time after time" (22). Of course, ostensibly the "blood to be shed" is the chickens', but apparently María mentally kills her traitorous betrothed with each execution she performs upon a chicken. Porter's character, too, entertains revenge fantasies against her betrothed. Ellen Weatherall may have kept John, whom she later married, from killing George, her fiancé, after he failed to show up for their wedding, but her words reveal that she still wishes vengeance upon the traitor: "[L]eave something to God," she tells John (87). Also like María la Loca, Ellen (referred to through most of the story as "Granny Weatherall") takes her vengeance out on others (people, not chickens): though she is apparently a pillar of strength to her family, she is also a cold, hard woman.

Cofer reports in the sketch preceding the poem that as a young girl she had intuited from the story that her grandmother's point in telling it was to show how "a woman had allowed love to defeat her" (20). The writer's poem based on this story later captures that "defeat," still evident many years after the jilting. The comparison between María's not "wasting" her bridal lace and veil and Granny Weatherall's concern with waste illuminates another lesson, which the reader of these two texts may discern: the role that romantic notions passed down to little girls through such media as fairy tales plays in the respective fates of María and Granny. In Granny's story, what the protagonist has learned from the experience of being jilted is not to waste things: "You waste life when you waste good food," she remarks from her deathbed (84), supposedly referring to fruit, all of which she wants her children to be certain to harvest. In reality, as revealed by her subsequent recollection of the day she was jilted, she is alluding to the wasted wedding cake. As the story shows, Granny never dealt with her disappointment; she merely repressed it and went on with her life (in seeming contrast

to María and Miss Havisham), the subsequent development of her character revealing that she has, in fact, been severely affected by her experience: today one might refer to her as a “control freak.” On her deathbed, then, sixty years after being jilted, the repressed experience surfaces to haunt her, for in not dealing with her anger and disappointment, she has lost her soul to it: If her wedding did not turn out as she’d expected from hearing the “be a good girl and you’ll meet your handsome prince and live happily ever after” fairy tale little girls are told, then perhaps her death would not go as she had been taught either—that is, perhaps “heaven” is another fairy tale. What she lost on the day of her jilting was not only a husband; what was “not given back” (Porter 86) even after she married, was her faith. Once one’s world-order is rocked, the consequential disorder and insecurity may affect all of one’s beliefs.

Interestingly, in the story preceding Cofer’s poem, the author alludes to a fairy tale in introducing María la Loca as “a grotesque Little Red Riding Hood” (17). In contrast to Granny Weatherall, of course, María did not eventually have so much of what was denied her upon being jilted at the altar, as reflected in a simile in the poem, “. . . breasts huge / as reservoirs . . .” (22).[7] She has never had the chance to release the milk stored in them into the mouth of a baby. Again the sense of waste is emphasized: “. . . She once opened her blouse / in church to show the silent town / what a plentiful mother she could be” (22). María’s behavior reflects that, like Granny, she has been indelibly affected by her loss. She has been “shadow[ed by] Juan” (22) her whole life, as Granny has been (albeit less obviously) by George.

Ominously, Cofer reports in the story following the poem that she herself “was addicted to” fairy tales (24), and in the story about María la Loca she identifies with this town “eccentric”: “María la Loca interested me, as did all the eccentrics and ‘crazies’ of our pueblo. Their weirdness was a measuring stick I used in my serious quest for a definition of ‘normal.’ As a Navy brat, shuttling between New Jersey and the pueblo, I was constantly made to feel like an oddball by my peers” (17).[8] Unfortunately, her alienation leads to her reading fairy tales during her sojourns in Puerto

Rico and, when living in New Jersey, to watching situation comedies like Father Knows Best, The Donna Reed Show, and Leave it to Beaver (92), which are the contemporary world's fairy tales.[9] From both sources, the reader realizes, the young Judith receives the same messages that destroyed María la Loca and Granny Weatherall. That said, one should also note how Cofer's mother does not follow the typical fairy tale formula at the end of the story she tells about Marina/o. When her daughter asks her what ultimately became of Marino and Kiki, she responds, not with "They lived happily ever after," but rather with, "What happens to any married couple? . . . They had several children, they worked, they got old" (159). This more realistic ending—not unlike the fate of Ellen Weatherall—should not be surprising if one recalls that neither Cofer's mother nor her grandmother has made any promise of marriage being a blissful reward for good behavior. They merely consider it preferable to being a woman alone.

Such storytelling, with expected or unexpected, happy or unhappy endings, is the source of conflict for storyteller Judith Ortiz Cofer, as it is for storyteller Maxine Hong Kingston and as it is for many women. In spite of Jay Clayton's assertion in "The Narrative Turn in Recent Minority Fiction" that "the act of telling a story can be empowering" (379), it seems that in a variety of cultures, stories are told that ultimately serve to support the oppression of women. Even strong, heroic women like Fa Mu Lan, María Sabida, and Granny Weatherall are in the end forced into an oppressed position: Kingston reports that after her triumph, Fa Mu Lan returned to her family and resumed her "proper" roles as subservient wife, mother, and daughter-in-law; as already mentioned, Cofer's María Sabida married a murderer and pillager; and, after proudly withstanding the many triumphs and disappointments of a long life, Ellen Weatherall faces her death terrified of what lay beyond. Rather than do away with stories, however, which are also of great value in passing on knowledge of a culture's traditions and legends, one should learn from Cofer and Kingston, first, to deconstruct the stories one is told in order to find the most valuable lesson within them, rather than the lesson they are perhaps intended to pass on, and then, to consider how best to tell the story to the next generation in order to pass on this more valuable lesson.



## Notes

[1] For example, Debra Shostak opens her essay on “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Fake Books” noting, “Clearly, [Kingston’s] interest lies less in history per se than in events as they are remembered; that is, the past provides pleasure and meaning not insofar as it is reconstructed authoritatively (as if such reconstruction were possible), but rather to the degree that memories provide a record of human participation in recreating the past. That accounts of the past are multiple and contradictory is a testament to human invention instead of a failure of record keeping. (233)”

[2] That the Catholic-raised Cofer may borrow from a Buddhist myth reinforces the connection between these two writers and thus the theory that Cofer has been influenced by Kingston.

[3] It is interesting to note (and no more surprising for the traditionally-educated Kingston) that European and Euro-American intertexts can be found in Woman Warrior as well. For example, the episode in the “White Tigers” chapter of the crimes against her family being carved on Fa Mu Lan’s back recalls Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” which describes a torturous machine that slowly inscribes and reinscribes a criminal’s crimes on his back until he bleeds to death. And of course, one is reminded of The Scarlet Letter when reading “No Name Woman.” Like Hester Prynne, Kingston’s No Name Aunt refuses to name her baby’s father. Further, in one of Kingston’s proposed theories of how the No Name Aunt came to be pregnant, she implies a sexual rebellion upon the desertion of her husband. One might say that Hester’s affair is partially motivated by her similar situation of being deserted as a young woman.

[4] Teresa Derrickson also notes Cofer’s “fire and ice” metaphor for her parents: “That the speaker’s parents do in fact function as metaphors of the two cultures they inhabit is expressed through the

assertion that their marriage is a melding of ‘two worlds,’ a melding of the ‘fire and ice’ that metonymically refer to the climactic extremes of Puerto Rico and Paterson, New Jersey” (129).

[5] Teresa Derrickson examines Cofer’s imagery in this passage and suggests that her “use of the words ‘weapon’ and ‘arsenal’ . . . emphasizes the fact that one of the most defining realities of Ortiz Cofer’s border identity is that she must constantly fight for survival.” Derrickson continues, “Survival in this context means assimilation; it means the luxury of fitting in, of feeling at ease, of stealing control. It means assuming a character like that of María Sabida” (133-34).

[6] For a different focus on Cofer’s biculturalism as it is reflected in this memoir, see Teresa Derrickson’s article. Derrickson argues that “Silent Dancing breaks new ground in Latino/a literature by speaking specifically about the bicultural experience of Puerto Rican Americans, and by demonstrating the way in which this experience is fundamentally distinct from that found in Chicano/a literature” (122).

[7] It is interesting to note here, with this reference to a simile in this poem, Cofer’s remark during an interview with Edna Acosta-Bélen regarding writing in English rather than Spanish: “I can compare anything with anything in English, but ask me to compare a rose to something in Spanish and I would probably say tomato soup because its [sic] the first red thing that I can think of” (90).

[8] Although the juxtaposition of the reference to her own alienation against other “oddballs” reveals Cofer’s identification with María la Loca, as suggested above, at the same time, hearing of such exaggerated cases of “weirdness” apparently also helped her seem—to herself at least—to be closer to “normal” than she often felt among her peers. One might here be reminded of Maxine

Hong Kingston's reaction to awareness of her "difference" as she illustrates it in the story of how she once "tortured" another Asian-American child who reminds her of herself (in "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe"). The young Maxine lashed out at this mirror image in order to prove to herself that the other little girl was, after all, much different, much weaker, than herself.

[9] Cofer reports later that the adults she knew in Puerto Rico also routinely watched the novelas on television, soap opera-like mini-series that would probably qualify as another form of the contemporary world's fairy tales.

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