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"There Was Also the Music": A Literary Analysis of Puerto Rican Identity in the Works of Sandra Maria Esteves and Judith Ortiz Cofer

Keyla A. Robles
University of Central Florida

“THERE WAS ALSO THE MUSIC”: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF PUERTO RICAN IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF SANDRA MARIA ESTEVES AND JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

by

KEYLA ROBLES

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ABSTRACT

Puerto Rican culture often includes music as a method of expressing cultural identity. For instance, music has been considered a symbol of resistance, identity, and performative culture for many Puerto Ricans. This thesis will heavily rely on the involvement of Afro-Latin music in literature to determine ways that Puertorriqueñidad can be defined. To do this, I will examine how Puerto Rican writers present their identity in their works to define what it means to be Puerto Rican. These writers include the poet Sandra María Esteves and author Judith Ortiz Cofer. Throughout their literary works, they express several connections to their Puerto Rican identity, and through close examination, I was able to compile these connections to music, feminist ideologies, and themes of resistance and oppression. Using the scholarship of Puerto Rican scholar Juan Flores' *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* and Chicana feminist theorist Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*, this thesis will contribute to the examination of music in literature as defying systems of oppression in Puerto Rican culture and explore the relationship between music and Puerto Rican identity.

DEDICATION

This is for all the women in my life that have shaped me into the woman that I am today. I would not be where I am if it were not for the strength, compassion, and intelligence that they have instilled in me.

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I would like to thank all the women in my life that have supported me throughout my journey. I was raised and taught by women and will continue to honor them in my works.

To my mother, Paola, who continues to inspire me with her kindness and resilience against all the obstacles she has faced as a single parent. She took on the role of two parents and excelled in every way possible. I also want to thank my grandmother, Rosa, who carries herself with dignity despite the harshness of life.

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Finally, I would like to thank my love, Jesse. His endless support throughout my undergraduate studies has meant more to me than he will ever know.

My thesis is created for all Latinx that may feel as though they are confused by their identity; I hope literature and music will guide them through their journeys of discovery and self-declaration.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Music has had the power to take me back to special moments like family parties, backyard barbecues, and even brings me back to smells of my relatives' cooking as I remember listening to specific songs in their kitchens. With music, I could envision euphoric moments of my family dancing, laughing, playing drums and güiros; it made every part of my identity mold together and formed an association between music, my family, and the Latin identity that I had suppressed as I grew closer to a more westernized American culture. However, last year, music ingrained itself into my identity as a more solid representation of my Latinidad. I had grown more aware of my mixed cultural and racial identity as a Peruvian and Puerto Rican woman. In this sense, music has reminded me of who I am and revived my sense of my inherited cultures.

Last November, my grandmother Felicita passed away, and she was Puerto Rican in every sense of the word. She could make anyone feel like they were at home with her. She radiated warmth and gentleness; I never once heard her raise her voice, and she only ever spoke of the things she loved in her life. Like many Puerto Ricans, she took great pride in many aspects of her life like cooking–which was unlike any other, watching Walter Mercado religiously to spread positivity, and her fondness of Afro-Latin music that was deeply embedded in her character.

Puerto Rican music was everything for her and her cultural identity. It made her feel like she was back in her homeland. The music never let her forget where she came from and who she was. So, when she was diagnosed with dementia and had to write everything she knew on sticky notes and attach them on every corner of her apartment or when her well-loved pastelón no longer held the same flavor and took on a bitter taste of random spices and unknown ingredients,

the music never left her. To her family, she was still a strong Afro-Latina who moved to drums in a way that no one else could and played a güiro that flowed with every beat and followed the music perfectly. Her attachment to bombas, plenas, and salsa was so intense that even her dementia could not let her forget it. A few days before she passed and her dementia had consumed her, I sat next to her and played a salsa classics playlist. As we both were transported to happier times with the music, I noticed that she would visibly connect to the rhythms and melodies of musical artists that she loved such as Víctor Manuelle, Héctor Lavoe, and El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. From this experience, I learned that music is used as an important means of remembrance; it cannot be forgotten. It strengthens a connection to a distant home and time. At that moment, I saw her Puertorriqueñidad shine. Through music, she was Puerto Rican, and I learned that I was too. My grandmother has left me with a defining characteristic of what Puertorriqueñidad signifies for Puerto Rican culture, and this was the incorporation of music, specifically Afro-Latin music.

The many genres of Afro-Latin music are crucial to the historical significance that music has for several Latin American countries like Puerto Rico. For instance, Puerto Rico has had a complex colonial history. It was brutally colonized by the Spanish and then the United States– they are victims of constant domination. Consequently, many of its inhabitants have African roots. For this reason, its history is essential to the topic of post-colonial and anti-colonial studies. Because of this long oppressive history, many Puerto Ricans continue to turn to music as a spiritual and cultural experience that compels them to recognize and celebrate their roots with rhythms and sounds. Afro-based music like bomba, plena, and reggaetón have all been immersed within the culture. Similarly, genres like salsa have evolved and fused with a multitude of

elements such as African, Spanish, and Cuban influences that became popularized by Puerto Ricans in New York. Due to this, music in Puerto Rico and mainland America is composed of several music styles coming from different countries in Latin America and the U.S. In many ways, Afro-Latin music is constantly evolving to fit the standards of modern anti-colonial resistance and to continue an empowering collective experience for its listeners. In an interview with Ned Sublette, on the topic of the emergence of salsa in New York as a unifying instrument, Juan Flores stated,

> There was a real elitist and racist attitude toward salsa in the '70s – but as it became internationally known and accepted, and became mainstreamed and became commercially successful, then it turned around completely the other way; "Salsa is our music."…the Puerto Rican pavilion was *Puerto Rico Es Salsa.* Just 15 years after it was considered garbage music, shit music, nigger music, whatever they wanted to call it, Nuyorican music, it was *not* Puerto Rican. Then it became eminently Puerto Rican, and became a symbol, an emblem, of Puertoricanness. This is how this kind of symbolism changes over time, depending on all these very powerful influences of commercial and international acceptance.
>
> (Flores)

It has followed a transformative path and become an art that allows people to commemorate their complex heritage. Since several of its elements are closely tied to African spiritual and cultural practices, salsa is one of the many genres that Puerto Ricans have made their own. Flores even goes on to emphasize the importance of Puerto Rico's African roots:

> The African dimension of the culture is the one that gets subordinated, ignored or paternalized, folklorized and treated in a way that's very subordinate, whereas we find when we look at the music, for example, that it's really the African dimension that's the foundation of the cultural expression of the island–even in forms that are supposed to be very Spanish.
>
> (Flores)

By determining the value of African influences on Puerto Rican music, it becomes a vital part of expressing and accepting ones' cultural identity. Through the music, its listeners can navigate and take pride in the intricacy of their heritage. Undoubtedly, this connection between the music and roots allows Puerto Ricans to embrace their differences by having a liberating experience through music.

My thesis will focus on the expressions of Puerto Rican identity through Afro-Latin music in literature by writers Judith Ortiz Cofer and Sandra María Esteves. Using the scholarship of Puerto Rican scholar Juan Flores' *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican culture and Latino identity* and Chicana feminist theorist Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*, my thesis will contribute to the examination of music in poetry as defying systems of oppression in Puerto Rican culture. Meanwhile, its defiance leads to the defining characteristic of Puerto Rican identity, which is Afro-Latin music. In addition, I will bring in my own experience with Afro-Latin music and Puertorriqueñidad as a means of cultural expression. The importance of music in the Caribbean can be noted to be as, stated in Silvio Torres-Saillant's *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, "conceptual ground for making statements about Antillean worldviews and the spiritual resources brandished by people in the region to cope with the demands of a challenging

present in impoverished societies" (29). In his work, he has stated that several scholars believe that music has the potential to "exert their resistance of status quo, a case made with particular emphasis when applied to subordinate or minority groups who through popular music seem to fend off the values and attitudes of the dominant culture" (29). However, Torres-Saillant challenges the idea of music as a source of resisting oppression and as an empowering means for people in the Caribbean, instead he declares "we glorify the rise of Caribbean music in large measure because the phenomenon soothes us, enabling us to cope with the anguish of defeat. The beat of those most enticing Caribbean sounds reigning supreme in the global music market offers a sort of consolation prize for the grief endured by people in the region" (49). Throughout my thesis, I will attempt to prove that Afro-Latin music means so much more than just entertaining music to Puerto Ricans; it has the potential to present a long history of island cultures and invites others to explore this with them. It provides the listeners with the resources to celebrate their cultural identity. Therefore, contrary to Torres-Saillant's argument that "[t]he economic, political, and cultural context that might explain the region's loss of intellectual self-confidence… perhaps also accounts for a regional decline that at a certain level involves even the music," is unwarranted (44). Afro-Latin music in intimate spaces like the backyard, kitchen, or even in a living room is transformative, political, and empowering. It is his belief that there has been a "disappointing decline of restorative political and economic options in Caribbean societies simultaneously with the insertion of rhythms from the region into the market corridors of the world music scene" (33). My thesis challenges this sentiment and seeks to explore and emphasize this type of impact that music has. Afro-Latin music, artists, or descriptions of musical importance in literary works by the writers that I will include in my thesis are defining

characteristics of their identity. It also offers the opportunity to challenge politically oppressive societies through engaging with the music. Caribbean music is intertwined with protecting and celebrating their experiences within their culture. Therefore, their works also have a significant meaning to a reader with an understanding of the cultural importance of music, the reader can engage on a personal level with the literary work. Consequently, Esteves and Cofer's experiences with music as a cultural identifier have created a powerful anti-colonial stance, whether they sought to accomplish this or not. In this case, through their engagement with music, Esteves and Cofer create a space in their works where oppressive or dominant cultures do not overtake their cultural identity as Puerto Rican women living in America. They can freely illustrate the connections they have to their roots through their works.

Once I began my research to discover how Puerto Rican identity manifests in writing by Puerto Rican authors working in English or Spanglish and based primarily on the mainland, I searched for representations of my own connections to Puerto Rican identity within these literary works. I attempted to assemble a more cohesive understanding of my identity through the different ways that I am Puerto Rican and Peruvian by using cultural characteristics that I could align myself with. Music, for instance, has never failed to make me feel Latina. It has always made me feel connected to my heritage as a mixed individual with roots in Afro-Latin Caribbean and South American cultures. Music plays a prominent role in the lives of most, if not all, Latin Americans, and most have their own folkloric and national genres that align with the history and culture of their respective countries. Although I have been raised within multiple cultures, my bond to music has always been through a Puerto Rican lens. However, when I was young, I never realized the impact that music had on my identity as a Latina in America. It seemed natural

to associate the music I had grown up with as an extension of myself. I used it as a means to express who I believed I was. For me, music is instrumental to how I relate to my identity as a Latina. It serves as a reminder of the fond memories of my childhood, where salsa and reggaetón were always present–all Afro-based and Caribbean musical genres. Hugo René Vargas-Viera's article "A son de clave: La dimensión afrodiaspórica de la puertorriqueñidad en la música popular*, 1929-1940*" describes the way music is ingrained in Puerto Rican culture as a social construct, he states, "En este sentido la música se vincula a las necesidades sociales, culturales e históricas del ser humano. Cada individuo ordena, distingue e interrelaciona el sonido según estructuras mentales que responden a las estructuras sociales" (59). In this respect, Viera emphasized that for each individual, music is deemed necessary for their identity within their community. For this reason, music is unifying because it forms a collective experience. Generally, for Puerto Ricans music is often created to express their identity in terms of social and historical representations. Thus, when used in literary works, music becomes a way to travel through time for the writer and the reader of the work. I have identified this in my own perception of music as a cultural identifier. Paired with music, in particular Afro-Latin music, Puerto Rican literary works become a powerful representation of Puerto Rican culture. Like Sandoval has argued, differential consciousness is apparent in these modes of expression. Specifically, on the matter of music, Sandoval states,

> Differential consciousness… is accessed through poetic modes of expression: gestures, music, images, sounds, words that plummet or rise through signification to find some void — some no-place — to claim their due. This mode of consciousness both inspires

> and depends on differential social movement and the methodology of the oppressed and its differential technologies.
>
> (139)

In her argument, Sandoval emphasizes that oppressed groups utilize these technologies to distinguish themselves from dominant western ideologies. The incorporation of music in literary works allows its readers to do the same.

Throughout my research for this thesis, I observed that many writers use music as a way of articulating their Latin identity. As I delved deeper into my research, I found that there was an abundance of Puerto Rican writers like Tato Laviera, Justin Torres, Pedro Pietri, Angelamaría Dávila, Julia de Burgos, Esmeralda Santiago, Jaquira Díaz, Jesus Colón, and Willie Perdomo that have embraced and celebrated their cultural identity through their creative works. However, because of the overwhelming amount of Puerto Rican literature from writers based in the United States, Puerto Rico, or more commonly, both, I thought to narrow my focus solely towards Puerto Rican women writers like Jaquira Díaz and Esmeralda Santiago. Due to the expression of Puertorriqueñidad that heavily influences their works, I found that my own experiences coincide with their experiences as Puerto Rican women. However, the writers I kept returning to were Esteves and Cofer. Their works tackle racial and cultural consciousness to define their Puerto Rican identities in urban areas of New York, New Jersey, and the tropical images of Puerto Rico. I chose to focus on these writers for my thesis because they have created works that have allowed me to see into myself and inspired me to attempt to define Puertorriqueñidad through music. As a result, I set out to read as much I could about Puerto Rican cultural identity through these specific Latina writers. I discovered the commonality of music in these and other works by

Puerto Rican writers, however, both writers expressed the function and place of music within the culture in ways that I want to explore further and analyze more closely.

By incorporating Sandoval's feminist methodologies of the oppressed, or as she classifies them as technologies, of differential consciousness and meta-ideology, my thesis will explore how music expresses identity in the works of Esteves and Cofer. Throughout their writings, it is evident that music and literature fuse together to demonstrate a Puerto Rican identity that is composed of spirituality, African influences, colonial resistance, and among other things. In their own way, each writer demonstrates an overt, or at some points, underlying longing for their heritage. Under these circumstances, Cofer and Esteves' rhetoric is used as an advantage against systems of power. In Sandoval's argument, these systems of power are dominant western ideologies that tend to dismiss the Latinx community in their feminist movements. As a result, the works of Esteves and Cofer contribute to the opposition of "supremacist forms of speech, consciousness, morality, values, law, family life, and personal relations" (Sandoval 117). Once uncovering the "differential consciousness" within their works, it is evident that this type of cultural representation is most defining when the works use, describe, or mention musical references. Music, poetry, and prose come together to become a powerful decolonizing strategy; they mix feminist ideas, cultural influences, and lived experiences to express their identity as women, specifically Puerto Rican women. Both Esteves and Cofer depict Afro-Latin musical experiences as a means of connecting with their cultural identity. By creating literary works that emphasize cultural expression, the authors then begin to engage in Sandoval's third and fourth technologies of the methodology of the oppressed, which are meta-ideologizing and differential consciousness. Sandoval illustrates these technologies as exhibiting, embracing, or pointing out

the differences of oppressed communities. For instance, Esteves' collection *Yerba Buena* demonstrates several poems that deal with these topics. One of its poems, "Esclavitud," makes the point of portraying her multi-cultural experience by emphasizing the culture that has been infiltrated by colonial institutions like slavery and living in a western country:

> Pienso mucho en mi cultura
>
> Siempre buscando los pedazos
>
> Y mas, siempre llegando
>
> Cerca a la mujer que soy
>
> …
>
> Pienso en los años que pasaron
>
> En cosas ingles y blancas
>
> Cosas del pueblo no-tropical
>
> Cosas que no eran
>
> De mujer, Latina, Africana, India.
>
> (19)

These lines amplify the idea of geographical cultural longing, as well as how she distinguishes herself from a dominant westernized culture. It is necessary to note that Esteves commonly writes her poems in English or a combination of both English and Spanish, but it is rare that her poems are written only in Spanish. By exclusively writing in Spanish for this poem, Esteves is making the statement of her Latinidad. Esteves decides that she is "Siempre buscando los pedazos" and with each piece is getting closer and closer to her cultural heritage as a Latina.

This is most notable in her inclusion of music throughout her collections, where music gives off a sense of geographical attachment for Esteves. In doing so, Esteves denounces dominant western ideologies by expressing and, in some instances, depicting her identities to incite social awareness and/or social change. She often looks back to island life and its characteristics as the way to regain a relationship with her Puerto Rican identity. Like Esteves, Cofer's works also detail diasporic and cultural experiences in memoirs and poetry collections that express a similar longing for the island. Both writers can utilize their literary works as a form of "decolonizing the imagination" (Sandoval 112). For this reason, literature and Afro-Latin music, separately or simultaneously, are used to express, what they consider as, their cultural identity.

CHAPTER TWO: "WEAVING": POETRY AND MUSIC AS A MODE OF META-IDEOLOGIZING

When Chela Sandoval, in her book *Methodology of the Oppressed*, declares the act of meta-ideologizing as a "liberatory practice," she identified the means to resist oppression with tools such as language and poetry (110). By configuring a form of resistance as a technology, Sandoval emphasizes her claim that "under the recognition of meta-ideologizing as a technology, poetry, silence, and all other technologies of resistance can be viewed as ideological weaponry" (113). Sandra María Esteves' poetry demonstrates this exact sentiment. Her works are testaments to the various characteristics of her identity as an Afro-Latina with a dominant Puerto Rican background and an American upbringing.[i] When presented in her poetry, her experiences as a Nuyorican are a prime example of how meta-ideologizing can be used to express cultural identity through a creative medium. In Esteves' chapbook *Diving Into The River of Language: Sink or Swim? Notes on Nuyorican Poetry, Culture and Language,* she defines the term Nuyorican as "inclusive, and cross cultural, yet at the same time rooted from a specific place, de la madre tierra, Puerto Rico" (8). Nuyorican poetry is composed of a seemingly limitless combination of different characteristics that have fused to form this creative expression that presents "liberation on the rise" (Esteves 9). Esteves claimed "Nuyorican poetry [is] infused with varying styles, from hip-hop, reggae, nueva cancion, didactic,…with a range of politics from conservative, to liberal, to progressive, to ultra-left; and sexual orientation from macho, to feminist (9). Through the act of meta-ideologizing, which Sandoval characterizes as, "[requiring] differential movement for its existence, first in the movement through perception demanded by the 'inner' technology of semiology, and then in the 'outer' and differential movement of identity itself

through social order in the effort to effect change" (113), Esteves acknowledges the differences that she has a Latina in America to bring about social awareness of the oppression that Puerto Rican women, as well as many other Latinx[ii], may face in a North American cultural setting. However, at the same time, Esteves demonstrates the unifying characteristics of Puerto Rican identity and culture, which she relays through music and poetry through her figurative concept of weaving. Along with Esteves' own weaving within her poetry, Sandoval also captures the extent to which the act of "weaving" goes for women of color she states,

> the political alliance made…between a generation of feminists of color who were separated by culture, race, class, sex, or gender identifications but who became allied through their similar positionings in relation to race, gender, sex, and culture subordinations. Their newfound unity coalesced across these and other differences… This political connection constantly weaves and reweaves an interaction of differences into coalition…differences within this coalition became understood and utilized as political tactics constructed in response to dominating powers."
>
> (192)

It is my perception that weaving has an elaborate use in many social and literary aspects. Esteves weaves together her own differences or generalizations of the experiences of other Puerto Rican women, or in some instances, the Latinx community as a whole through her literary works.

Thus, the association between culture and music creates the identity that Esteves seeks to display in her poetry–an identity with several influences and cultures. However, before she reaches the points of discovery or self-declaration in her poems, she looks back to her roots. Her

colonized and colonizer identity either liberates or oppresses her. For instance in the lines of her poem "Aguacero Inside Agua Que Va Caer," she writes:

> Growing up Puertorriqueña/Latina
>
> White/African/Brown
>
> In South Bronx, Loisaida
>
> El Barrio parts of town
>
> …
>
> Growin' up with labels
>
> Outta someone else's mouth
>
> Not me, not mine
>
> Not definitions of myself.
>
> (35)

The multi-racial and multi-ethnic (as a Afro-Latina living in New York) aspect of Esteves' Puerto Rican identity tends to pose an issue with her definition of how and what cultural identity is composed of. The speaker of the poem is torn between three different realities; one that is disconnected from life on the island, another that claims she is the outsider in America, and then her own perception of who she is. Because the speaker is "Growin' up always being misunderstood," she seeks to bring together characteristics of her cultural identity (36). She comes to the point in which she is "Growin' up refusin' to live a lie / Takin' the time, workin' to define / Makin' the space, claimin' our space" (39). Marisel C. Moreno's *Family Matters: Puerto Rican Women Authors on the Island and the Mainland* argues that Puerto Rican women

writers like Esteves, have chosen to create their own representations within their writing she states,

> the Nuyorican corpus was [previously] defined by its emphasis on street life in the urban ghetto… a great number of these text was also characterized by one-dimensional depictions of female characters. Therefore, when U.S. Latinas began to write and publish, they sought to offer alternative representations of female characters.
> (23)

As demonstrated in "Aguacero Inside Agua Que Va Caer," Esteves uses poetry to reimagine her Puerto Rican identity and to create a clear depiction of what being Puerto Rican entailed, according to her experiences and ideas. Her speakers are far from one-dimensional and seek to reclaim power over classifying their identity.

In relation to the music that encompasses African or indigenous rhythms with Spanish lyrics, these pose an issue as well that Esteves chooses collectively to embrace through her poems. Esteves can unify all the aspects of her identity through musical representations. As a result, Esteves' inclusion of music in her poetry describes a much larger social issue with Puerto Rican identity, but she navigates it in a way that resists the historical and present oppressive forces that make up Puerto Rican culture. Due to this, music is either mentioned or explored in some capacity in several of her poems. It would be nescient to say that music does not work alongside Puerto Rican identity, and how Esteves chooses to define it. She cannot escape, like many of the speakers in her poems, the implications that surround her identity, however, she welcomes her differences and the impact that constructs such as music have had on her expression of Puertorriqueñidad. So, Esteves' figurative weaving of all these parts of identity

like colonialism, spirituality, colorism, music, and history presents a blending of an incredibly complex cultural identity. As I have become more acquainted with her work, I found that Esteves' poetry embodies Sandoval's concepts of utilizing differential movement and meta-ideology to better express ones' familiar roots and liberate oneself through poetry. In addition to this, Esteves intertwines music and poetry to depict Puerto Rican culture as a necessary identifier of her Puertorriqueñidad. Esteves stated "my language was comprised of images and forms, colors and spaces, the pictures of emotions and the sounds inside unknown words. My language had to expand beyond words because my survival depended on it…words have a music all on their own; and language is the music of our thoughts expressing themselves" (10-11). She weaves language and music in her poems as a means of communicating her oppressed identity. In exchange, her speakers acknowledge their oppression, but also use words to resist it.

In her poem "Blanket Weaver," Esteves expresses a figurative weaving of songs as a way to interconnect her speaker's cultural identity through music: "weave us a song for our bodies to sing / weave us a song of many threads / that will dance with the colors of our people / and cover us with the warmth of peace" (Esteves). Not only does the speaker place importance on music to present significance within their culture, but it also leads the speaker to use music as a form of resistance against oppression. Esteves presents the idea of weaving a song as bringing comfort to the speaker that faces oppressive forces, weaving a song "builds upon our graves a home / for injustice fear oppression abuse and disgrace / and upon these fortifications /of strength unity and direction" (Esteves). Like "Blanket Weaver," many of Esteves' poems incorporate imagery of the natural world and freely declare her heritage as an Afro-Latina through the act of weaving these components together. These are the ingredients of social movement that Sandoval emphasizes

are necessary to engage in differential consciousness. Sandoval argues that this consciousness is composed of four other forms that she categorizes as "The Equal-Rights Form," "The Revolutionary Form," "The Supremacist Form," and "The Separatist Form" (55-57). [iii] By asserting a combination of feminist "oppositional ideologies" Esteves is weaving a space where her differences as a Puerto Rican woman are acknowledged as celebrated, mourned, and loved (57).

Similarly, in her poem "Take Some Dreams" from her collection *Undelivered Love Poems*, she describes weaving songs as a form of associating music to the speaker's identity:

> Dream Latina empowerment dreams
>
> …
>
> Rising out of darkness and walking in light
>
> Weaving different songs that bring order to strife
>
> …
>
> Identifying the threads of our past
>
> That form us into wholeness.
>
> (5)

The weaving of different songs symbolizes the differences that are evident within Puerto Rican culture.

As the two previous poems mentioned, Esteves' poem "Workin' It" blends music, spirituality, activism, resistance, and identity into the single act of weaving. The entire poem, also from her collection *Undelivered Love Poems* is dedicated to Esperanza Martell a Puerto Rican activist, educator, and writer; hence, detailing the intricacy of weaving. Esteves' choice to

dedicate the poem to a human rights activist and the symbolism that this presents for the poem intensifies the meaning of weaving for the speaker of the poem. In the poem, weaving is introduced as a method of interconnecting various spiritual experiences, emotions, and social actions that surround women. For instance, the lines:

> Weaving is a woman's thing/ Women weave cloth/
> Women weave spells/ Women weave lives into being/
> Weave souls into healing / Weaving threads together/
> Life lines/ Heart lines/ Blood lines.
> (42)

Literary works such as these present a space where cultural identity can be explored through music and song. For Esteves, the speaker's idea of weaving a song represents an activity that insists on "movement on eternity" (Esteves). As a result, Esteves is engaging in meta-ideologizing. According to Sandoval, utilizing this technology leads to "emancipatory, or revolutionary, activity…for the practice of this technology is transitively linked to the order of meaning that one intends to change" (109). Esteves is developing a space where her identity is not corrupted by oppressive forces. In her poems, there is healing and a sense of cultural togetherness.

In addition to the presence of weaving that combines Esteves' identity, Esteves places unique importance on her African and indigenous descent as a Dominican and Puerto Rican woman from New York in her poetry. She makes references to Yoruba spirituality and practices with imagery of the rhythms of African drums that are present in various Caribbean musical genres and songs such as Héctor Lavoe and Willie Colón's salsa hit "Aguanile" that incorporate

West African spirituality in salsa as a way to express their Puertorriqueñidad and its resistance in American, or dominant, culture. Interestingly, Moreno's work details the effects that salsa has had on Puerto Ricans in the United States and on the Island, she stated "music (salsa is considered the national music form, although it was produced in the United States)…[a]lthough a symbol of national pride today, salsa was originally looked down on as a type of lower-class (black) music" (25). Since Esteves often makes references to musical styles like mambo that use African spirituality and Yoruba to express Puertorriqueñidad, it is important to recognize the historical context that comes with this musical genre or specific songs for all Puerto Ricans, especially Afro-Latinos that have been created, implemented, and used music to resist oppression. In a similar manner, Esteves uses music in the same way as her ancestors. In her poem "Spirit Dance," from her collection *Portal*, she states:

> When the spirits dance Mambo
> Elegba opens the roads,
> Carnival colors fly in circles,
> Ancestors call our names
> Through drums that speak,
> Mixing cultures in rhythms of
> Spanish Saints with African slaves.
> …
> The essence of ancestors comes
> To dance the Black culture of resistance
> (7)

Esteves' lines on "Black culture of resistance" and the mixing of different cultural influences and rhythms are representative of the way music was intended to be used as a method of separating oneself from an oppressive force or culture. Consequently, these musical means of resistance have seeped into popular culture. Consequently, as Moreno claimed, had been accepted by both Puerto Ricans on the Island and the mainland due to its popularity. Flores also claims that popular culture has had a positive effect in terms of music for Puerto Ricans. He argued, "[r]ather than marking off boundaries and defining separate spheres of cultural practice, perhaps popular culture is about the traversing and transgressing of them and characterized by a dialogic among classes and social sectors, such as the popular and nonpopular, high and low, restricted and mass" (20). For Esteves, these genres are essential to the unity of culture in her poems.

In her poem, "Mambo Love Poem," from her collection *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo*, Esteves readily and effectively describes the unification of Taíno and African characters to imitate the immersion of African and indigenous musical influences that have produced various genres of music. This is evident in the lines:

> The light in their feet dancing the
> African beat
> With the singing African drum,
> The conga quintiando the African
> Tongue.
> Marking the warrior rhythm with
> The singing dancing drum.
> (303)

Again, weaving together her “colonized” cultural heritage to musical references. Flores also presents an in-depth idea of what music, rhythm, and dancing, physically and mentally mean for Puerto Ricans and their roots, he stated,

> Though live bomba and plena music is the central activity at the casita event, the musical porch / stage is situated spatially between two other performance areas, the dance floor / yard directly in front and the casita interior backstage, each of which stands in a different relation to the musical presentation. This space for dancing allows for immediate, kinetic interaction with the rhythm and flows emanating from the porch.
>
> (70)

Esteves creates this moment in “Mambo Love Poem” that Flores is describing. She describes an intense spiritual and musical performance of cultural identity, where the dance floor is a vessel for this expression, her speaker describes how,

> Rebecca y Carlos glide across the floor,
> and two become one in the land of salsa.
> The sweat of their bodies mingles
> with flute
> blowing high over splintered
> wooden floors,
> in notes that soar beyond the roof-
> tops of El Barrio.
>
> (24)

Through close examination of the poem, it appears that these two characters in the poem come from colonial struggles and oppressed environments. Esteves' language and word choices like "two become one in the land of salsa" emphasize that music and culture unite them: "They forget their pain in this land of joy… they flow magically into one" (25). Her poems produce, what Flores deems as an "intercultural togetherness, the solidarity engendered by living and loving in unison beyond obvious differences" (82). This poem immerses music, spirituality, and comparable experiences to become a unifying force for Puerto Rican culture. For this reason, Puerto Rican culture can be unified through creative mediums.

Like "Mambo Love Poem," her poem "Spirit Dance" presents a mixture of musical references that define Esteves' identity, she states:

> …chains that enslaved /that forbade them to dance, / in Oro Seco, where only the drum talks / in the language of Bata, Abakua, Arara / and Congo Rumba, giving birth / to Salsa, Son and Guaracha / through tamboreros in Matanzas / becoming mother of / Rap, Hip Hop, Jazz, Blues, Reggae, and Rock / in contact with the young avant-garde / of African thought.
>
> (8)

For the speaker, this fusion of music defines their multi-cultural identity. They are experiencing the music of two cultures that will present a new way for them to embrace and celebrate the multi-racial and multi-cultural Puerto Rican and American influence on their identity. According to Flores, African American and Afro-Puerto Rican styles of music co-exist because of their Afro-based influences, but also because of their similarities:

> the interplay of black and Latin festivity and culture, the playful mingling African American phrases and cultural symbols with those from Puerto Rican daily life. Musically the same message is carried across the collage-like mixing of familiar trappings from mambo and R&B styles.
>
> (82)

Although Flores is describing the combining of music between two cultures which is African American and Puerto Rican, Esteves is using them to distinctively depict cultural identity as a Puerto Rican in America that she decides is composed of this combination. She has claimed that this blending or "mixing" of both African American and Puerto Rican culture within the United States has had profound effects for Puerto Ricans, she stated in *Diving Into The River of Language: Sink or Swim? Notes on Nuyorican Poetry, Culture and Language* that through this mixing of culture is where

> Nuyorican poetry begins. Puertorriqueños developed a sensibility for jazz, rhythm-and-blues and sweet potato pie, while simultaneously, North American Blacks were dancing mambo, cha-cha-cha and eating rice and beans. This sharing extended itself into popular music, language, culture, and social politics…because of our commonality, our common suffering.
>
> (3)

Esteves blatantly uses music as a means of transporting the reader to significant moments that live in the speaker's identity as a Puerto Rican and all the different influences that come along with it. Flores states that

> The overall effect of the recording is one of collective celebration, gleeful partying where boundaries are set not so much by national and ethnic affiliation, or even language or formalized dance movements, but by participation in that special moment of inclusive ceremony."
>
> (82).

For her and her readers, music becomes an essential part of this collective experience: "When spirits dance Mambo / African and Hispanic traditions merge / into the new bloodlines / of God Love full of Light" (8). Esteves can identify with both of her cultural identities because, like Flores emphasized, with music, there are no boundaries. Esteves can embrace the merging of both cultures through her poem.

Ultimately, differential consciousness and meta-ideologizing appear in Esteves' poems as resistance from oppressed groups. Primarily, amongst what is considered the most oppressed group, women of color. In this case, Sandoval demonstrates that resistance is a prominent technology of meta-ideology. Resistance and acceptance and embracement of one's differences are two instrumental themes within Esteves' poetry. Through her poems, Esteves invites the reader to experience this resistance alongside her in a creative manner. Because the concept of figuratively weaving music and culture together is heavily ingrained into Esteves' works and makes appearances in many of her poems that involve her Puerto Rican culture, it is necessary to understand the value of her work and the importance of her weaving. As a result of Esteves' weaving within her poems is composing a multitude of elements together to create the ultimate form of expression. This type of weaving is essential to the conveyance of Puerto Rican identity

in literary and musical forms. As a poet, Esteves weaves together the stories of Puerto Ricans with musical elements to express empowerment.

CHAPTER THREE: HOW TO SILENT DANCE: MUSIC AS PERFORMATIVE CULTURE

In the preface of her memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, Judith Ortiz Cofer wrote

> I wanted to trace back through scenes based on my "moments of being" the origins of my creative imagination…Much of my writing begins as a meditation on past events. But memory for me is the "jumping off" point; I am not, in my poetry and my fiction writing, a slave to my memory. I like to believe that the poem or story contains the "truth" of art. (12)

Many of Cofer's works, much like *Silent Dancing*, are permeated with nostalgia. The essays within her memoir transport readers through a compilation of significant moments in her life that she calls "ensayos." When Cofer describes her life as essays, she uses the Spanish word because of its multiple meanings: she stated, "the Spanish word for essay, *ensayo*, suits my meaning here better–it can mean "a rehearsal," an exercise or practice" (12). According to Cofer, her life is composed of these rehearsals: "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…It was this winding path of memory, marked by strong emotions that I followed in my *ensayos* of a life" (13). These rehearsals include the rehearsal of her dual identity as a Puerto Rican in New Jersey and the rehearsal of strong emotions that carry on through her narratives–the strong emotion primarily attached to her work being love. As a result, cultural identifiers such as music, food, and even movements have the capacity to capture methodologies of the oppressed such as differential consciousness through Cofer's descriptions of sentimental memories.

Chela Sandoval explains that

> "love" as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures… can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement… It is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political "movidas" — revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being.
>
> (139-140)

Sandoval even goes on to declare that the French theorist Roland Barthes "was able to provide written descriptions of the passionate, artful, and even unspoken elements of this mode of consciousness, using the example of love" (139). Sandoval demonstrates just how important love is in facilitating resistance to oppression. However, unlike Sandoval's use of "Romantic" love as a device for differential consciousness, Cofer exemplifies differential consciousness through both familial and romantic love and her description of these loving moments. Her family, specifically her mother and grandmother, are engulfed by love-fueled language in Cofer's poetic memories of them. She expresses this type of "love" language through endearing poems in and outside of her memoir. There are scenes of her mother that demonstrate the way Cofer defines her mother's Puertorriqueñidad with a sweet and powerful disposition. For instance, in "The Way My Mother Walked," she states that her mother "was the gypsy queen of market street" with an "ebony fist" and "caramel-candy body" (94). In an interview with Rafael Ocasio, Cofer explains the emotional connection that her poetry has to the love she has for her family, she said: "Because I've lived physically isolated from the Puerto Rican community, my poetry has kept me connected emotionally. Even though I live in rural Georgia…I feel connected to the island

and to my heritage" (144). To that end, although Cofer does not outright declare a feminist stance using her Puerto Rican identity, she forms connections to display the acceptance she has for who she is. She acknowledges that she has felt either out of place or at home in both Puerto Rico and within the United States because of her multicultural identity. In her book *The Latin Deli*, Cofer describes these experiences of divided identity within her poetry and prose as representations of being "othered" in New Jersey. For instance in "Not For Sale," much like Esteves, she mentions the power of weaving, specifically the "stories woven" on a Scheherazade bedspread. She wrote "on my bed the Scheherazade kept telling her stories, which I came to understand would never end–as I once feared– since it was in my voice that she spoke to me, placing my dreams among hers, weaving them in" (21). Along with the stories that Cofer decides she is bound to lovingly weave, she is perplexed by her experiences as a Puerto Rican on the island and in the states, but her stories are representative of these experiences of confusion, love, or longing. Cofer declares herself a burdened medium through storytelling; she is the one who shares her own stories of love and the ones of those around her and is fated to detail these stories. For this reason, many of her works appear to depict a oneness between her own voice and the narrator's voice. She tells her experiences mixing in the "truth of art" that she adamantly clings to, on this topic, she wrote "I struggle daily to consolidate my opposing cultural identities" (121) but she finds ways to come to terms with her identity–one of these being her literary works. Essentially, Cofer is embracing her dual-identity as a Puerto Rican and an American woman through the writing of her culture and the practices that surround it. This relationship can be identified deep within the love of her heritage that she portrays in her literary works. Cofer also

vocalized that she used her own imagination of these cultural practices to form these moments of connection:

> Every time I sit down to write a poem about my grandmother, I have to call her back. In a sense, it's like being a medium. You sit down at a table and call back the spirits of your ancestors… I have been connected through my imagination… My poetry is my emotional and intellectual connection to my heritage."
>
> (144)

Cofer relays to what extent her poetry serves as a channel to her Puerto Rican identity. Similarly, along with the use of Merle Woo's claim, Sandoval states,

> Merle Woo asserted U.S. third world feminism as a new paradigm. She described it as an edifice of resistance that does not "support repression, hatred, exploitation and isolation," but which is a "human and beautiful framework," "created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit. It was the differential mode of oppositional consciousness that inspired and enabled this utopian language.
>
> (60)

Cofer incites this "utopian language" that cements the bond between her family and herself that Sandoval describes in the idea she depicted. Cofer's poem "Mother Dancing in the Dark" develops this language of love. She uses gentle terms to describe the speaker's mother dancing, she wrote:

> …She places
>
> the needle gently into the worn groove and a

Mexican tenor strains over the violins, Bésame,

Bésame mucho… a Mariachi band backs up his

Demand, as Mother sinks into the sofa.

…

I watch her rise over her black shirt

Like the ballerina in my lacquered music-box, Como

si fuera esta noche la última vez…lift her cheek to a

phantom kiss, Que tengo miedo perderte, bésame,

bésame mucho… then bound to the refrain she

turns, turns into the shadows where she is lost

(23)

By incorporating the song "Bésame Mucho" by Consuelo Velázquez in the background of her mother's dancing, it develops a freeing and intimate tone. The contrast between her mother "sinking" and then "rising" once she becomes enveloped in the music is imperative to the image that Cofer held of her mother not only as a Puerto Rican but as a woman. For Cofer, she sometimes had an "ebony fist," like previously mentioned, or she embodied a seemingly delicate and fragile nature like "the ballerina in [her] lacquered music-box" (23). Paired with the lyrics of the song, her words bring out the gentle portrait of her mother that she creates.

Cofer often depicts her love of her identity through the act of silence, music, her coming-of-age romances, or most importantly the island-like space that her mother created in their small New Jersey apartment. These scenes depict her love with memories and through the women that have shaped her life, or as she states, the "ensayos" of her life. These moments in which she

describes her mother are tender but powerful, and many times have included the mention of her Puertorriqueñidad concerning music and several other cultural identifiers like she does within her poems. For this reason, Cofer describes their apartment as a sanctuary-like environment, in which her culture is preserved and emerges,

> the building was a comfort to my mother, who never got over yearning for *la isla*. She felt surrounded by her language: the walls were thin, and the voices speaking and arguing in Spanish could be heard all day. *Salsas* blasted out of radios turned on early in the morning and left on for our company. Women seemed to cook rice and beans perpetually–the strong aroma of red kidney beans boiling permeated the hallways. (86)

In this scene, Cofer encapsulates the entirety of her Puerto Rican identity in this single apartment. Since "Differential consciousness is linked to whatever is not expressible through words [and] is accessed through poetic modes of expression: gestures, music, images, sounds," Cofer was able to capture Puerto Rican identity through the images of her mother (Sandoval 129). Specifically, the scene that captures her mother's love for her culture. Isolated from the outside influences, their apartment in New Jersey represents this love. The apartment mirrors their love for Puerto Rico and represents the equivalent of a "safe-space" for Cofer's family. She portrays the stairs leading to their apartment as her mother's "holy ascension / to a sanctuary from strangers where evil / could not follow on its caterpillar feet and where / her needs and her fears could be put away" (94). By looking back on these seemingly intensely worded moments, Cofer is performing differential consciousness. Her mother's embodiment of Puertorriqueñidad that is relayed by Cofer shines through the use of love of her mother and the spaces created in

her poetry in which she is allowed to love her culture. Sandoval argues that this type of methodology captures a valuable form of expressing resistance to an oppressive or unfamiliar and uninviting environment, so she states,

> The language of lovers can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and Love as a Hermeneutics of Social Change…But access to this unhabituated space
> and form of being does not altogether depend on a lover; the lover's image only provides one vehicle for the punctum. When one becomes engulfed by love, entry to this other place of meaning is permitted.
> (139-140)

Cofer concurrently uses language and love to access this "entry" to a liberating reality within her childhood home. The poem "Mamacita" from her collection *Terms of Survival,* also uses this type of language. Not only does the speaker have an affectionate tone towards the imagery of their mother, but their mother's humming represents a recital of this space in a Puerto Rican kitchen. The kitchen becomes a freeing reality. Cofer writes,

> Mamacita hummed all day long
> over the caboose kitchen
> of our railroad flat.
> From my room might hear her *humm*,
> crossing her path, I'd catch her *umm*.
> No words slowed the flow
> of Mamacita's soulful sounds;

It was her *humm* over the yellow rice,

and *umm* over the black beans.

Up and down two syllables she'd climb

and slide–each note a task accomplished.

From chore to chore, she was the prima donna

in her daily operetta.

(41)

This long scene becomes a performance. Even though the speaker's mother is singing and doing these daily chores, she is engaging in performative culture. "Mamacita" is the perfect Latina; she humms beautiful sounds as she cooks and cleans. The humming is "Mamacita's wordless song was her connection / to the oversoul, / her link with life" (41). Cofer's love for her mother's manners of expressing a diasporic Puerto Rican identity capture important defining characteristics of what Puerto Rican identity signifies for herself in her poetry, and especially in the coming-of-age theme that is presented in *Silent Dancing*. In addition to the familial love that Cofer depicts in her mother's movements, Cofer explores young love as a means of differential consciousness. Through her memories as a young girl, the boys that she thought she loved in Puerto Rico and New Jersey came to represent the unity between her life in Puerto Rican and Patterson. For her, there was no emphasis on culture when she found herself admiring these boys. Like Sandoval firmly recited, love creates moments that dismantle oppression and develop "a utopian nonsite, a no-place where everything is possible" (140). For Cofer, she was not constrained by the complexity of her identity when she began to admire a love interest.

Thus, music in *Silent Dancing* follows this continual interest that Cofer demonstrates through imagining scenes of performative culture and demonstrating the rehearsal of Puerto Rican identity through love. Due to this, Cofer's family apartment in New Jersey is such a necessary part of Cofer's Puerto Rican identity. It is the only place in New Jersey where she can openly be Puerto Rican, and she demonstrates this through the expressions of Puerto Rican culture that her mother poured into the apartment. For Cofer, the apartment is reminiscent of "la casa de Mamá;" her grandmother's home: "it is the place of our origin; the stage for our memories and dreams of Island life" (22). The apartment symbolizes and mimics their life in Puerto Rico. In the apartment, they engage in Juan Flores' definition of performative culture. One such moment of performative culture is depicted in a home movie of a family party, she describes this reoccurring experience of watching the movie as an analysis,

> We have a home movie of this party. Several times my mother and I have watched it together, and I have asked questions about the silent revelers coming in and out of focus. It is grainy and of short duration, but it's a great visual aid to my memory of life at that time. And it is in color -- the only complete scene in color I can recall from those years. (83)

Cofer intently watches, analyzes, and refers back to this home movie as she recreates the moment through her memories and understanding of what Puerto Rican identity consists of. She mentions the food, music, and dancing, she stated,

> Even the home movie cannot fill in the sensory details such a gathering left imprinted in a child's brain. The thick sweetness of women's perfume mixing with the ever-present smells of food cooking in the kitchen: meat and plantain *pasteles*…seasoned with the

> precious *sofrito*...It was the flavor of Puerto Rico… There was also the music. The long-playing albums were treated like precious china in these homes.… but the songs that brought tears to my mother's eyes were sung by the melancholic Daniel Santos...[and] Felipe Rodríguez... The five-minute home movie ends with people dancing in a circle. The creative filmmaker must have asked them to do that so that they could file past him. It is both comical and sad to watch silent dancing. Since there is no justification for the absurd movements that music provides for some of us, people appear frantic, their faces embarrassingly intense. It's as if you were watching sex. Yet for years, I've had dreams in the form of this home movie.
>
> (89-90)

There are remarkable contrasts between the atmosphere in New Jersey and Cofer's home movie. New Jersey is no longer the terrifying or bigot-filled place that it is in her memoir. Instead, their New Jersey apartment is turned into a vibrant Puerto Rican festivity through the music that Cofer cannot hear but knows is there. Both Cofer and her mother are engaging in the rehearsal of their Puerto Rican identity through this home movie. By repeatedly watching the home movie, they are once again in Puerto Rico and Cofer can continue to attach herself to the home movie as a remembrance of her Puerto Rican identity even if she is in New Jersey. Consequently, in this scene from her memoir, Cofer portrays the silent dancing in the home movie as an intimate experience. It details music that would bring tears to her mother's eyes due to their lyrics because they have reminded her of the culture that is no longer outside her door. This scene represents the silence that has the potential to say so much, especially for Cofer. That moment, in particular, brought her close to her Puerto Rican identity; she could transport herself to this

moment by envisioning the songs that were being played at this party meanwhile she details the excess of senses that come to her as she watches it or dreams of it. Juan Flores describes the importance of these types of shared experiences through music in Puerto Rican culture, he stated,

> There was none of the self-consciousness that sometimes prevails at dance clubs and even house parties, as people moved about in every which way, young with old, tall with short, gliders with hoppers, women with women, even, at some points, men with men… the energy of collective performance radiated outward from the incandescent wooden porch filled with waving *panderetas*, *güiros*, congas, and accordions.
>
> (71)

This moment in Cofer's memoir is what Flores determines to be a collective performance that is ingrained in Puerto Rican culture. Flores states "Community-based cultural experiences have come to be regarded as a sign of romantic nostalgia which flies in the face of contemporary realities" (18). So, when Cofer signals that "There was also the music," it ignites the collective experience of her family members as Puerto Ricans in New Jersey. She also reaches a similar point with her poem "To Grandfather, Now Forgetting" which deepens the connection between performance, music, and loving language. She stated:

> The day he first saw her,
> He was filled with music. The words
> To the song he'd write for her that night
> Came to him like grace after a prayer.
> ….

When she moved–her body became a bolero,

A seduction with violins. Looking at her

He heard his own voice echoing

(76)

In these moments of love and music, the speaker claims to their grandfather that through these two essential characteristics they can "lift you out of that shroud of silence, / and take you to that fiesta, where we can dance until the woman you / love catches your eye, and you can recall / the words to your song (77).

To understand the importance of the mention of music in *Silent Dancing* and Cofer's poems, it is necessary to understand that the roots of music styles like bomba for Puerto Ricans have been used as a means of resistance, especially for Black Puerto Ricans. Juan Flores states that music culture arises from the, usually oppressed local groups,

> Popular culture is energized in "moments of freedom," specific, local place of power and flashes of collective imagination. It is "popular" because it is the culture of "the people," the common folk, the poor and the powerless who make up the majority of society. The creative subject of popular culture is the "popular classes," and its content the traditions and everyday life of communities and their resistance to social domination.
>
> (17)

Since Cofer's family is displaced from their community in Puerto Rico, they seek to find these moments of culture in different ways. For Cofer, she expresses them through writing. It is through her memories that she can re-experience and relay the moments in which her Puerto Rican culture was fully present. Once combined, love, memories, and music are central ideas to

Cofer's perception of herself. Cofer once wrote in her work "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María" that

> you can leave the island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool, the Island travels with you…but with some people the same things can make you an island–not so much a tropical paradise as an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. (148)

Although Cofer sometimes found herself at odds with her Puerto Rican identity in her works, she was fond of it, she stated, "at Puerto Rican festivities, neither the music nor the colors we wore could be too loud. I still experience a vague sense of letdown when I'm invited to a "party" and it turns out to be a marathon conversation in hushed tones rather than a fiesta with salsa, laughter, and dancing–the kind of celebration from my childhood" (149).

Cofer's literary works are crucial to understanding the way she characterizes her Puerto Rican identity. As a young woman growing up in both New Jersey and Puerto Rico, Cofer presents unique transitions in her memoir and poems between island life and life in New Jersey. Since she is often taken away from these environments before she can form strong attachments to them throughout her childhood, it is essential to understand the way her apartment in New Jersey exemplified Puerto Rico. In many ways, the apartment was an extension of Puerto Rico itself. Not only does she often refer to performed culture in her memoir as the way it is presented in the home movie, but she also refers to the rehearsal of Puerto Rican identity that her mother compelled her to perform within that apartment. At the root of these gestures of Puerto Rican identity, "there was [always] the music" (Cofer 90).

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

To start this chapter, I thought it would be best to include a quote that I feel summarizes my feelings towards my identity as both a Latina and American. Toni Morrison wrote in her novel *Beloved* that "definitions belong to the definers–not the defined" (190).[iv] Although I have a very different context for this quote and a difference in the way that I interpret it in relation to my own life, I have found that clear definitions of what creates identity are different for everyone. No one should be subjected to another's definition of what constitutes their being, particularly, those who attempt to oppress and assert power over the people they subject to their definitions. I firmly believe that people live vastly different lives and no two experiences are completely the same. Therefore, in most cases, there are only unique experiences that some may relate to or not. In this respect, there are similarities between my use of this quote and Morrison's. I too believe that the definers have no right in defining others, and the defined can only be defined by their own accord. Otherwise, this would represent an oppressive definition that restrains a person from their ability to freely embrace who they know they are. Many Latinx/e people have been subjected to these corrupt definitions. Writers such as Sandra María Esteves and Judith Ortiz Cofer depict ways that Puerto Ricans, women, Latin Americans, or any other oppressed or underrepresented minorities can find outlets for their complicated identities. These writers celebrate their differences to accomplish accurate and positive representations of their culture and womanhood. I relate to their stories of empowerment and their self-declaring poetry and prose. For this reason, I have found solace in their works as I have strived to construct my cultural identity by analyzing my own experiences.

Esteves wrote: “it is through the process of language that we will be able to uncover our personal and communal successes, our uniqueness and our interconnectedness” (16). She claimed that through language, as writers we have a voice; a means of influence in which we can either “not [have] a voice, [take] the risk that another will speak on our behalf…relinquishing our power to self-determination and self-evolution” or we can “[claim] our voice in whatever language we choose…it means writing, speaking, searching out those metaphors that describe our possibilities…language, the music of communication… is a journey through the river of our lives. If we open our hearts we can choose to create it into a journey of love” (16). My thesis has sought to communicate the journey of these authors in their representations of Puertorriqueñidad. As I reached the end of my thesis, I have been able to clearly understand and claim my own journey as well. A journey that I believe has been, like Esteves emphasizes must be, surrounded by love and growth. The entirety of my thesis has sought to find and express commonalities amongst Puerto Rican communities either in mainland North America or in Puerto Rico itself by examining selected literary works. I wanted to present the importance that music has had in defining Puerto Rican identity, but not limiting its definition solely to music. I do recognize that music is only a portion of the multitude of characteristics that Puerto Rican culture has. I noticed this as I studied different literary works to come to terms with my idea of what Puerto Rican identity means for me, and possibly for others, along with the different cultures that I have been lucky enough to have passed down to me like my Peruvian heritage. I have realized that to define who someone is or what composes their identity is far more related to the way that they may view their own being, whether this identity deals with spiritual, cultural, gender, or social definitions. People can only authentically define themselves. So, my primary objective was to

create a strong link between Puerto Rican identity and Afro-Latin music. I whole-heartedly wanted to bring attention to certain characteristics such as music that have been used as a means of resistance and acceptance or love within Puerto Rican culture. I wanted to find ways that I felt more connected to my heritage and for others who may feel the same longing for who they are. I found these connections through Esteves and Cofer's works and continue to find them in my day-to-day experiences as a Latina. In this chapter, I will use my "voice" to convey my own experiences with music to demonstrate connections between music and cultural identity.

Throughout my life, many have tried to tell me who or what I am. As mentioned in previous chapters, there are implications when labeling and defining others. Like many, I have also had people attempt to "label" or define me based on their own assumptions or beliefs. It has occurred with strangers and even some of my "distant" Peruvian relatives (I say distant because these are not people that I believe I would consider having a familiar attachment to). They believe that I am not Peruvian because I was not born there, grew up there, or because I am not "fully" Peruvian. These relatives have made me feel that I do not deserve to claim that part of my heritage because of these reasons mentioned. At this point, I have asked the question "what does it even mean to be Peruvian or Puerto Rican?" I believe that it encompasses our collective experiences. We may all relate to certain ideas, mannerisms, or are bound by the implications that collective culture has imposed on us. I do acknowledge that I may not have the same cultural experiences as the people born in Latin America, but I do believe that I practice my heritage every day of my life. I eat the dishes that these places are so proud of, I sing their songs believing that I am every bit of what they are, I learn their history, and I travel there often. Although I do understand that these sentiments stem from ignorance, to impose a definition onto someone else

because of what they may believe without a basis for their ideas is still an unpleasant experience for everyone involved. They do not realize the potential, benefits, and beauty of a multicultural person. Multicultural, multiethnic, multi-racial people can celebrate such distinct parts of themselves that others may not have been lucky enough to experience. They are consumed with culture, if they desire to be. There is nothing wrong with a singular national pride, but I have come to accept that people can hold pride for all their cultures. I do not see the issue of Latinx jointly claiming their American culture as well as their parents' culture. I have come to accept this celebration of cultural mixing because of my immediate family. The only people that truly see the duality of my identity as a Puerto Rican-Peruvian-American woman are my mother Paola and my maternal grandmother Rosa. Because of them, I have learned that I am everything I claim to be and that I can carry the characteristics of our culture that they have passed onto me or have taught me as I matured. For example, claiming my Peruvian and Puerto Rican heritage as well as the African roots that my Puerto Rican side holds–I encompass several characteristics of my culture because that is how I define myself. It is my belief that I can confidently declare what I am or what I am not because of how they have communicated to me that I am who I want to be. They have allowed me to explore my own cultural identity by giving me the resources to understand my heritage. In my experience, the most important resource they have given me is music.

Like many people and the authors that I have explored throughout this thesis, I believe that music is special. Although "special" may be the most basic term to describe the intricacy of what music signifies for many people, I cannot think of a better word. Latin musical genres like salsa, merengue, vallenatos, and festejos have deep roots within their respective countries and for

the people that listen to them. For this reason, music has the potential to relay messages through history. Histories that entail slavery, feminism, and oppression. Similar to literature, it tells stories of and for the people. Therefore, it seems that it would only be natural that throughout my life music has meant so much more than a catchy rhythm or something that makes me want to dance. Growing up, I have always reached towards literature and music as forms of searching for my identity. Due to this, when writing my thesis I had no doubt that authors like Esteves and Cofer are essential to the Puerto Rican literary canon. I have looked to their impactful words to find myself within them. I can recognize how their works illuminate Puertorriqueñidad and illuminate my own path into how I view Puertorriqueñidad. Specifically, how we can all collectively experience similar moments that define what Puerto Rican identity means for us. So, when I read Lorraine M. Lopez's interview with Cofer, I truly held onto her words that "I write about the things I have known… the past really belongs to the teller [who is] basically a witness and a participant and not liable for getting everyone else's version of the past…I wanted to express that this is how I absorbed the events around me" (Cofer). Like Cofer, I wanted to write about the things that I understand or that I wanted to understand further in my own version of what my memories of my heritage signify for me. I wanted to figure out a way that I could retell my experiences by being true to myself and how I have experienced them. In my own way, I realized that, like Cofer and Esteves, I have engaged in differential consciousness throughout this thesis and practiced Sandoval's description of this action which is "the differential mode of social movement and consciousness depends on the practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations" (59). Growing up in white American spaces outside my home,

I believed that I lost my culture, my identity as a Latina. I soon realized that I only need to look to my immense collection of music to find it. I can find a song that helps me remember who I am, and I reclaim my space in these places. Like Cofer had once declared, "we carried the idea of home on our backs from house to house" (59). I find myself doing the same thing with music. When I want to feel at home, the music carries me to this place. I lived in California on and off for the past two years, I followed my husband across the country for his deployment. I was so removed and far away from my family. It was an overwhelming experience and I missed my mother and my sister. None of us had ever been apart. My mother has always been beside us. She had never left our side, but I had left hers. So, when I missed her and I could not call her, I listened to music, and it felt like I could hear her getting ready for work in the mornings. To feel comfort in her absence, I played reggaetón almost every morning to mimic these memories of her. I played mainstream artists like Zion y Lennox, Ivy Queen, Tego Calderón, Don Omar and the list is endless. My mother was a teen in the late nineties, so she is incredibly fond of reggaetón. I am sure it is because she has her own memories attached to the genre, but because of her, these certain songs or artists will lead me back to her. Similarly, my grandmother cooks every day listening to some rendition of "El Cóndor Pasa" to feel closer to Peru, or "mi país" as she calls it– the land that she tenderly loves and describes with such admiration. As I have mentioned before, music infiltrates our memories and brings us to different times and places, and it is easily at my disposal. In a way, my memory of my family lives within these songs.

It seems that with every passing year music implants itself in my life in different ways. As I mentioned in my introduction to this thesis, I delved into music to cope with the death of my grandmother. Although this thesis had begun for my late grandmother, it quickly turned into a

thesis for all the women in my life that have shown me that I am much more than my culture. Because of them, I carry music with me, but I also am much more than just music and the music of the past. My late grandmother deteriorated rapidly and slowly at the same time as though she was ready to leave behind her memories but could not bring herself to do so. She saved dates, phone numbers, addresses on sticky notes that filled every corner of her apartment all while attempting to maintain her routine. However, sometimes she could accomplish these daily tasks and other times she would wander aimlessly in the winter months. I am not sure what it must have felt for her to try to keep her mind and lose it all in random unprovoked instances. I do think of how terrifying it must have been to be present in life and then gone altogether–not knowing who or what you are. In the end, I think she was tired. She had heavy and dark eyelids that did not seem to have much life in them anymore, and I think she understood that she had to leave this world behind her. As a deeply religious woman, I hope her belief in a beautiful afterlife has been confirmed. I also do not know if she had felt loneliness with this disease nor do I know if she understood what was going on with her, but as she succumbed to her forgetting, I quickly sought to remember. When I think of the lasting effects that my grandmother's traumatic death had on me and the rest of my family, I cannot help but bury myself in the music that we listened to those days before she passed. Sometimes I cannot listen to the songs I listened to with her in that cold hospice room, and sometimes I can, and I am connected and relive that memory with her. The music can take me back to the days before she died and to the years before she lost herself. These glimpses of memory that I will never forget in which music was so important for the both of us. These memories may be grainy or distorted because a child has such a limited capacity to perceive reality without innocence or their own imagination; however, as Cofer said,

we have a responsibility to tell the story artistically, and I would like to bring her image back to life to the best of my ability. My grandmother had a small apartment in Chelsea, Massachusetts. It was not the most lavish of places but when I was little it was my favorite place to be. I looked forward to the sleepovers with her because I knew she would cook the best Puerto Rican food and we would listen to music or watch tv for hours together. She usually just watched me and smile; she never interrupted my absorption of the world around me. I cannot imagine her bedroom without thinking of the small poster of the Puerto Rican singer Chayanne. Because of that poster, whenever I hear "Un Siglo Sin Ti" I think of her. Now that she is gone the lyrics "y ahora que no estas aqui me doy cuenta cuanta falta me haces" take on a new meaning. It no longer belongs to a remorseful lover but signifies the memories I have tried to resurface since her passing. I also remember the guitar that she would keep in her closet that she promised to teach me how to play someday but never got to because we moved to Florida. These small seemingly insignificant moments, feelings, or objects remain in my image of her Puertorriqueñidad. She was a simply beautiful woman with a tremendous love of music.

Because she will never know the accomplishments and opportunities that I have received because of the thesis that she influenced, I figured that I should celebrate the women that I still have in my life that has exceeded anything that anyone has ever done for me. I have been surrounded by women my entire life. My mother and my maternal grandmother have nurtured and raised me into a capable person who can achieve anything that I want in this life. They helped me realize my Latinidad and gave me everything I could have possibly wanted and needed. They are the strongest women I will ever know and they have passed that strength onto me. I have lived in the epitome of a matriarchal household; the women of my family are

compassionate, stubborn, and never stop working to provide better lives for their children. I assembled this thesis as a love letter to my family, to music, and to my heritage as a Latina. Being a part of the Latinx community, I believe that we must engage in our cultures' music to find its significance or to simply remember these small moments of love.

NOTES

1. Sandra María Esteves comes from both a Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage. However, she identifies closely with her Puerto Rican heritage instead of her Dominican roots and has contributed exclusively to Nuyorican movements.
2. Throughout this thesis, terms such as Latinx and Latine will be used interchangeably. Both terms are used to include all Latin Americans or North Americans with a Hispanic heritage without the use of gender pronouns.
3. To find an in-depth explanation of the characteristics of these different forms, see page 55 through 57 in Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed.*
4. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses this quote to describe the relationship between a slave master and a slave.

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