Racialized Identity: Perceptions of body in “The Story of My Body”

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Women writers have always emphasized the connection between their bodies and their experiences through writing. Latina writers, in particular, have done so with their experiences of immigration and identity formation. Many of these Latina writers have arrived in the United States at a young age while their bodies are still developing and their identities shifting. The dramatic changes in the surroundings impact their sensibility and their internalized perception of the world and of themselves. These internalizations occur because of the external environment that judges them and perceives them based on their appearance and their race, and not on the most relevant parts of the self, such as intellect and personal merit. These perceptions are based especially on the color of their skin and the shape and size of their bodies along with their looks. Such considerations are reflected in Latinas’ writings. The present paper explores the topics of the perceptions of body and identity in “The Story of My Body” by Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer. While it does not try to answer all questions on Latina identity formation, it does want to create an open space for discussion. How was the narrator’s body affected by the transition from her native country to her adopted land? How did she come to understand the privileges she had as a white girl in Puerto Rico if not by her experiences of color discrimination in the United States? How is identity affected by others’ concept of the body? How are Latina identities formed? Ortiz Cofer states: “I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States” (132). Thus immigration, identity and race become embedded through/in the concept of body.

Ortiz Cofer divides her story in four sections under the titles: Skin, Color, Size, and Looks. The four titles represent four parts of her identity that serve to categorize her
by fragmenting the four aspects of appearance. In each section, Ortiz Cofer describes episodes of her childhood that helped modify perceptions of herself and of her body. In her native Puerto Rico she had experienced her body as a Puerto Rican, surrounded by Puerto Ricans and their perceptions of beauty and race. However, as the story seems to indicate, after she left Puerto Rico with her family, her body began a process of “transformation”. This transformation was an ongoing process in which she became accustomed to the prevailing ideas of beauty and the body in the United States. Ortiz Cofer understands her body did not change because she left the island and arrived on a plane in a different country, but because of the people that surrounded her and the new country’s perception of beauty were different from those at home. Her identity, at such an important moment in her life, adolescence, was influenced by this shift in perceptions. In this manner, the body becomes that which reflects the experiences of immigration.

In the first two sections in Ortiz Cofer’s story, the ones entitled Skin and Color, the narrator describes how her skin color changed from white to brown when her family left Puerto Rico and arrived in Paterson, New Jersey. The skin serves as an outside layer on the body which separates the external world and the spiritual being contained inside. The narrator experiences color prejudice constantly in a Paterson supermarket, and becomes aware of what is no longer hers: the benefits white girls possess. She is also aware of her identity as a “colored” girl by the same Italian men that owned the supermarket. “Don’t come in here unless you gonna buy something. You PR kids put your dirty hands on stuff. You always look dirty. But maybe dirty brown is your natural color” (135). The narrator looked at her hands and considered whether her hands were dirty or not, but after washing them she discovered that the color did not change, but at
least they were not dirty. To the Italian brothers in the store, brown was a skin color not
desired, it was associated with dirt, but for the narrator it was associated with coffee and
milk, or in her case milk with coffee since she was a lighter-skinned Puerto Rican. So
her color becomes a reminder of home.

Another episode from her childhood that affected the narrator was being a victim
of chicken pox when she was ten years old. She accentuates the relevance of this story
by stating: “This was when I learned to be invisible” (133). Even though the references
to the chicken pox do not have any connections to race, the chicken pox marked her face
and made her desire invisibility, which she got but under different circumstances and for
other reasons. The visibility of white subjects and the invisibility of non-white subjects is
not a new aspect of race relations, on the other hand, it is a constant that has been studied
and which helps define benefits based on race.

In her third division of the story, Size, the narrator explores how her height and
the contours of her body shaped her identity. Ortiz Cofer states: “I wanted first a
powerful body” (137). Her shape was being dictated and was being promoted by others
outside of her group. She states that she already had a reputation as a “shrimp” and that
no other classmate wanted her on his or her team when playing sports. She states that she
wanted to be wanted and that she wanted to be chosen for the teams (136), but that she
came to realize that she was no athlete and most importantly, that she did not look the
right way to be an athlete.

As an adolescent, the narrator was undergoing change, not only a physical body
transformation in the sense of a growing body, but also a transformation of the aesthetic
values she had known. While the narrator had to learn the consequences of being a
brown girl she also had to readjust her own perceptions of beauty to fit the mainstream’s perceptions. When she describes her mother from a photograph she states: “…she is a stunning young woman by Latino standards: long, curly black hair, and round curves in a compact frame. From her I learned how to move, smile, and talk like an attractive woman” (emphasis mine) (138). She had grown to understand that Latino perceptions of beauty are different from those in mainstream United States society. She perceives Anglo aesthetic values to be different from those she grew up with while at the same time fights to adhere to the new ideas of beauty: “How was I to know that she and the others who called me ‘pretty’ were representatives of an aesthetic that would not apply when I went out into the mainstream world of school?” (138). She was “bonita, pretty” (138), but under the new perceptions of beauty she would no longer be pretty, instead she was considered “presentable”, “with a long neck and delicate features that resembled Audrey Hepburn” (139). She was not the only one who was affected by the mainstreams’ perceptions of the body since “…Puerto Rican boys had learned to respond to a fuller figure: long necks and a perfect little nose were not what they looked for in a girl. That is when I decided I was a ‘brain’” (139). Her classmates’ perceptions of body had also changed to fit into the United States perceptions. The narrator shifted her own concepts of beauty and her image of self to fit into the Anglo society she was incorporating herself into.

Furthermore, as a white girl in Puerto Rico, she had acquired certain privileges that were not obvious to her, but that did exist as she benefited from them. The move to New Jersey proved to her that her whiteness was being questioned; she was no longer a white girl but a brown girl, therefore, those benefits she had as a white girl were no
longer hers. Through her body, and the limitations of her body, she learned that she had privileges while being a white girl in Puerto Rico, but had lost them as a brown adolescent in New Jersey and later on in Georgia.

If one is to follow the history of the body in philosophy, one comes to an agreement in the idea of the body as a prison or a dungeon. Plato’s concept of the body comes from his claims that Orphic priests introduced the word “body”, where as part of their beliefs was of man as a spiritual being trapped inside the body (soma) as in a dungeon (sema) (Grosz 5). As stated in Grosz’s book Volatile Bodies, for Plato, the body is a prison for the soul, reason or mind. Following this concept of the body are Christian beliefs that the immortal soul given by God is associated with divinity and morality while the body is just a mortal, sinful, and lustful carnality (Grosz 5). This idea of the body as prison seems to be evident at the end of the story by Ortiz Cofer. For years, the narrator could not escape the perceptions of the body others had, her identity was tied to those notions of body and beauty, either in Puerto Rico or in the United States. As she matured, she understood that her body was just a container that held what was inside: the intellect. Ortiz states: “I had brains for sure and some talent in writing. These facts were a constant in my life” (142). Once she had realized that the body was only secondary to reason or intellect she was able to reconcile with her identity. The narrator was aware of her body as a variable that changed depending on her self-image, other’s aesthetic values, the location where she inhabited at the time and individual people she met.

As evidenced in the story by Ortiz Cofer and as argued by Joe Kincheloe in his article about whiteness, racial identities are volatile and ephemeral, which means that race, is constantly negotiated and transgressed. The narrator in Ortiz Cofer’s story, which
this paper considers to be the writer herself, passed through several identities and images of herself. First, she was a pretty white girl in Puerto Rico; second, she was a “little brown tadpole, which was ignored” (136); when in high school, she became the project of a future “Baptist missionary who practiced his anthropological skills on her family” (141), seeing the narrator and her family as cultural others, while at the same time she was trying to be the regular teenager living in a military base. In college, she became an “exotic woman to the men who had survived the popularity wars in high school, who were now practicing to be worldly” (142). In her adult life she realized that the body was just a container for what lies inside. Her intellect, her talents, her writing, her studies, and the respect she received as an individual were more important in defining her identity than all those variables of her younger years, which were racialized identities, perceptions of her body that were based in race, either by herself or by the society she inhabited at a certain moment.
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