

Latino Literature on the Life Issues:
Commentary on
Tato Laviera's "Jesús Papote,"
Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Silent Dancing,"
and *Bella*

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers literature written by American Latino authors who address any of the three life issues: abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. After surveying literary criticism of recent Latino literature, the paper focuses on works in three separate genres: Tato Laviera's poem "Jesús Papote" (1981), the prose passage "Silent Dancing" (1990) by Judith Ortiz Cofer, and the film *Bella* (2006). The paper explicates and critiques these works so that non-Latino audiences can appreciate the themes evoked in the literature.**

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ISSUES SURROUNDING THE LATINO POPULATION in the United States are fascinating. The chronology of events showing the dominance of the Hispanic or Latino culture involves a rapid sequence over the past century of publications of narratives, sociological studies, popular articles, and scholarly treatises analyzing the shift in ethnic power in the nation. The Latino dominance in the nation is predicated, of course, on a proud heritage that spans five centuries. Authors in the New World whose linguistic origins can be traced to Spanish (thus accounting for the variety of languages descended from that base) kept their language, ideas, and cultural artifacts alive over the past five hundred years either by maintaining Spanish publications, by creating a new dialect of English (Spanglish), or (ironically) by crossing over into English, the language of the conquering United States, especially after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The irony is evident when one considers that works by Latino authors in English are often peppered with Spanish phrases, sentences, or entire paragraphs and thus introduce an English-only audience to Spanish terms and ideas. Moreover, the ascendancy of Latino literature to its current position is impressive even though it became fashionable in academia to study Chicano/Chicana, Hispanic, or Latino/Latina literature only within the past four decades.

Census data showing that the minority Latino population in the United States is now the oxymoronic “majority minority,” surpassing the African-American population, is now part of common knowledge.¹ This shift in minority dominance confirms what many had speculated about the social and political implications of such a change in status of a minority group. Two examples can serve to illustrate these implications.

The first example concerns politics. Even though they are generally viewed as religious voters, Latinos supported Barack Obama, who was pro-abortion, much more than they supported his challenger for the U.S. presidency, Mitt Romney, who was pro-life. Percentages summarizing poll data fluctuate, and the percentages may change even more as the U.S. economy further weakens and as Obama’s positions on abortion and other issues become

¹ U.S. Census data shows that the Hispanic or Latino population reached 44.3 million in 2006. U.S. Census Bureau, “Population Estimates July 1, 2000 to July 1, 2006: Hispanic Population: 2000 to 2006,” Excel file (8 Feb. 2008) consulted 13 July 2012. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hispanic/hispanic_pop_presentation.html>.

more evident.² The second example, a striking sociological fact, bolsters this political one. Recent research shows that the number of babies born to minorities has now surpassed the birth rate of European-based Americans, and Latinos play a significant role in this demographic change:

Data for 2010 show Hispanic women give birth to 2.4 babies on average, compared with 1.8 babies for non-Hispanic whites, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. But the rapid growth of the Hispanic population isn't just due to higher birthrates: Minority women also are younger on average, so more of them are in childbearing years.³

Despite these academic, political, and social successes, the Latino population in the United States suffers a significant demographic challenge. The abortion rate for Latino mothers, although lower than that for African-American mothers, is still much higher than that for white mothers.⁴ Furthermore, except

² The political dichotomy between Cuban Americans and other ethnic groups within the category "Hispanic" or "Latino" is well-known. Abrajano notes that "the likelihood of Hispanic Americans identifying with the Democratic Party is influenced by the individual's age, political ideology, and position on abortion, and that Cuban immigrants are more likely to identify with the Republican Party than immigrants from Central America and South America." Marisa A. Abrajano and R. Michael Alvarez, "Hispanic Public Opinion and Partisanship in America," *Political Science Quarterly* 126/2 (summer 2011): 255-85. Another factor to consider regarding Latino political activity is sectarianism. Ellison and his researchers show that "Committed (i.e., regularly attending) Hispanic Protestants, most of whom belong to conservative groups, are more strongly pro-life than any other segment of the Latino population, and are much more likely than others to support a total abortion ban. Committed Catholics also tend to hold pro-life views, but they are relatively more likely to endorse an abortion ban that includes exceptions for rape, incest, and threats to the mother's life. Less devoted Catholics and Protestants generally do not differ from religiously unaffiliated Hispanics in their abortion views. There are also modest variations in the links between religious involvement and abortion attitudes across the three Latino subgroups. Religious factors are highly important predictors of Hispanics' preferences regarding abortion policies. Contrary to some previous discussions, it is committed Protestants, more so than Catholics, who are the staunchest opponents of abortion in the Latino population." Christopher G. Ellison, Samuel Echevarria, and Brad Smith, "Religion and Abortion Attitudes among U.S. Hispanics: Findings from the 1990 Latino National Political Survey," *Social Science Quarterly* 86/1 (March 2005): 192-208.

³ Conor Dougherty and Miriam Jordan, "Minority Births Are New Majority in Demographic Watershed for U.S., Newborns Among Non-Hispanic Whites Are Surpassed by Others." *Wall Street Journal* (17 May 2012). Web.

⁴ Research by Pazol et al. summarizes abortion trends up to 2007: "Among women from the 25 areas that reported cross-classified race/ethnicity data for 2007,

for pro-life activists working in pregnancy support centers, who wish to lower the abortion rate among Latino mothers, abortion may concern social scientists more than leaders of Latino organizations or academics.⁵ In fact, abortion may not be a concern to Latinos themselves, if credence can be given to the most recent compendium of Latino literature yet produced, *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*.⁶ This copious and weighty (literally, the hard-copy volume comes in at least four pounds) 2,700- page volume documents a variety of themes of concern to Hispanics and Latino citizens in the New World for the past five hundred years, and most of the entries can be placed under five

non-Hispanic white women accounted for the largest percentage of abortions (37.1%), followed by non-Hispanic black women (34.4%), Hispanic women (22.1%), and non-Hispanic women of other races (6.4%). Non-Hispanic white women had the lowest abortion rates (8.5 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44 years) and ratios (144 abortions per 1,000 live births); in contrast, non-Hispanic black women had the highest abortion rates (32.1 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15- 44 years) and ratios (480 abortions per 1,000 live births). Hispanic women had intermediate abortion rates and ratios; however, although Hispanic women had abortion rates that were 125% higher than non-Hispanic white women, their abortion ratios were only 34% higher.” Karen Pazol, Suzanne B. Zane, Wilda Y. Parker, Laura R. Hall, Sonya B. Gamble, Saeed Hamdan, Cynthia Berg, and Douglas A. Cook, “Abortion Surveillance: United States, 2007,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 60/1 (25 Feb. 2011): 7.

⁵ Social scientists’ recommendations for the Latino community are typical for a profession focused on high pregnancy rates as problems rather than the exercise of Latino reproductive choice. See, for example, the following articles: David K. Berger, Wendy Kyman, Gloria Perez, Manuela Menendez, Janice F. Bistriz, and Julia M. Goon. “Hispanic Adolescent Pregnancy Testers: A Comparative Analysis of Negative Testers, Childbearers and Aborters,” *Adolescence* 26/104 (Winter 1991): 951-62; Sean M. Bolks, Diana Evans, J. L. Polinard, and Rorert D. Wrinkle, “Core Beliefs and Abortion Attitudes: A Look at Latinos,” *Social Science Quarterly* 81/1 (March 2000): 253-60; Robert W. Brown, R. Todd Jewell, and Jeffrey T. Rous, “Abortion Decisions among Hispanic Women along the Texas-Mexico Border,” *Social Science Quarterly* 81/1 (March 2000): 237-52; Stephanie B. Teal, Tabetha Harken, Jeanelle Sheeder, and Carolyn Westhoff, “Efficacy, Acceptability and Safety of Medication Abortion in Low-Income, Urban Latina Women,” *Contraception* 80/5 (Nov. 2009): 479-83. Analyzing the circumstances of fifty-six Hispanic teenagers, Berger and his colleagues declare that “Most of the teenagers were at risk for unintended pregnancy; therefore, subsequent family planning counseling efforts should be directed at this population.” The abstract for research by Teal and her colleagues concludes that “Medication abortion can be a very appealing, safe and effective option in low-income, non-English-speaking populations.”

⁶ Ilan Stavans, general editor, *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (New York NY: W. W. Norton, 2011).

categories (in alphabetical order): (1) devotion to one's ethnic heritage, (2) difficulties of finding and performing work, (3) faith, (4) family, and (5) love of children as the future of the race. Thus, the life issues (abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia) are literary outliers in the canon of Latino literature.⁷

The above summary of just one volume is not meant to say that Latino literature does not concern itself with the life issues. While infanticide and euthanasia are, to continue the statistical metaphor, extreme outliers (being issues that are alien in the Latino universe, perhaps because intense devotion to family and children is central to the Hispanic worldview), abortion has been considered in several key literary works. Tato Laviera's poem "Jesús Papote"⁸ (1981) is neither excerpted nor mentioned in *The Norton Anthology*, yet in his review of Latino literature in *The Companion to Latin American Studies*, William Luis credits it as a major work.⁹ Although the mention of abortion is brief, the poem recounts not only an attempted abortion, as Luis suggests, but also a monthly analysis by the embryonic narrator as he becomes aware of his surroundings and the circumstances of his mother's drug addiction and how that would affect his own life. Another work that uses the device of an unborn narrator is Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn*,¹⁰ a major work addressing the

⁷ The rarity of abortion as a theme in Latino literature is suggested in another collection of Mexican women's writing. Of the twenty-two selections in the thin volume compiled by Marjorie Agosin and Nancy Abraham Hall, only one short story concerns the chronological time of a pregnant woman. Maria Luisa Puga's "Young Mother" could have been a vehicle to illustrate the anxiety of a mother challenged by the changes brought on by pregnancy; instead, the story is a fictional treatment of an actual postpartum case. The denouement consists of the death of the newborn child and thus concerns infanticide more than abortion. Maria Luisa Puga, "Young Mother" in *A Necklace of Words: Stories by Mexican Women*. Secret Weavers Series 11. Edited by Marjorie Agosin and Nancy Abraham Hall, translated by Nancy Abraham Hall (Fredonia NY: White Pine, [n.d.]), pp. 125-29.

⁸ Tato Laviera, *Enclave* (Houston TX: Arte Publico Press, 1985).

⁹ Luis argues that "If [Rodolfo] González's *I am Joaquín* provides a voice and a certain (albeit male) history for Chicanos, Tato Laviera's *Jesús Papote* (1981) is an epic poem that does the same for Nuyoricans." William Luis, "Latino US literature," *The Companion to Latin American Studies*. Web. While it excludes Laviera's poem, *The Norton Anthology* includes Gonzales's poem, noting that, while the book which contains the poem "was mainly political, it also has influenced some contemporary writers" (787).

¹⁰ Carlos Fuentes, Carlos. *Christopher Unborn*, translated by Alfred MacAdam and the author (New York NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989). Original: *Cristobal Nonato* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1987).

possibility of abortion.¹¹ *Silent Dancing* (1990), Judith Ortiz Cofer's collection of short stories, delves deeper into this first life issue.¹²

More recently, the 2006 film *Bella* raised the abortion issue with several surprising effects. That the film shows that abortion is an issue that could involve Latinos and not merely Anglos, is not controversial. Some critics may have found it incredible that the film could argue that even a life gone disastrously wrong (the main male character suffers a severe reversal of fortunes, moving from being a famous soccer player to a restaurant worker) can not only itself have – but also help others to see – that every life has purpose. Perhaps the reason why the film generated rabid criticism from some abortion activists is that the main female character chooses to give birth to her unborn child.

Literary Criticism of Latino Literature on Abortion

What literary criticism of abortion in Latino literature has been generated is scant. More importantly, literary critics may be more concerned with what they would like to find in the literature than what is actually present. Kristina Puotkalyte-Gurgel identifies abortion in her analysis of Ricardo Chávez Castañeda's *El día del hurón*, but the mention is merely casual, however humanizing her notation may be.¹³ Aída Hurtado summarizes what she perceives are current trends in Latino studies thus:

¹¹ See my commentary about this novel in "Breaking the Linguistic Permafrost of Current American Anti-Life Fiction: A Guide for Students of Literature," *Life and Learning VI: Proceedings of the Sixth University Faculty for Life Conference*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski (Washington DC: University Faculty for Life, 1997), pp. 215-33, available on University Faculty for Life conference proceedings at <http://www.uffl.org/vol%206/koloze6.pdf>.

¹² Judith Ortiz Cofer, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, 2nd ed. (Houston TX: Arte Publico, 1991).

¹³ In summarizing one section of the plot, one could consider that Puotkalyte-Gurgel rises above the standard language used by anti-life feminists regarding abortion as a choice when she uses the term "death," an interesting term which conveys humanity to the unborn child, the victim of abortion: "Vania makes a significantly different decision when faced with the prospect of apocalypse. Eight months pregnant, she is a potential victim of the fatal beatings often suffered by expectant women in Zagarra. While numerous terrified women line up in front of abortion clinics preferring the death of their fetuses to their own, Vania does not give into the panic." Kristina Puotkalyte-Gurgel, "Violence and Apocalypse in Ricardo Chávez Castañeda's *El día del hurón*," *Nomenclatura: Aproximaciones a los Estudios Hispánicos* (Spring 2012): 1-21 at 10.

Currently there is a flurry of academic and artistic production from Latina feminists who are making connections with Latina activists in the United States and in the rest of the Americas. Some of the most exciting work is being created by Latina feminists who are questioning the heterosexism of Latino culture and are beginning to document the lives of Latina lesbians. These scholars are also working with Latina feminists and women of color to form domestic and international alliances around women's issues. In the domestic arena are such organizations as the Women of Color Resource Center, which is committed to creating inclusive political agendas to span ethnic and cultural differences.¹⁴

Politically, Hurtado is more direct in enumerating the specific issues that, to her, drive the Latina community:

Latinas in the United States have been forced to resist gender subordination within their own communities as well as gender, class, and race/ethnic discrimination in society at large. Latinas' "triple" oppression has resulted in their earning less, receiving less education, and having more children to support than whites or than men in their own group. The core concerns of Latina feminists are material conditions such as employment, poverty, education, health, child care, and reproductive rights.

Since the language of this discussion is obviously politically leftist, doubt exists whether abortion, which in most leftist agendas falls under the euphemism of "reproductive rights," is a social justice issue that the larger Latino population, nurtured and living dominantly Roman Catholic religious and ethical values, would support.

What does the literature itself say about the life issues? What do Laviera's poem, Ortiz Cofer's short story, and the film *Bella* and its novelization suggest as the Latino approach to the first life issue? What follows are analyses of these three seminal works.

Tato Laviera's Poem "Jesús Papote" (1981)

The relevant passage in Laviera's poem pertaining to abortion is brief. Yet, not only the content but also its stylistic features support a position on abortion overlooked by criticism:

My name is jesús papote may month flowers she discovered
me making her green throwing up she wanted
abortion she took pill after pill she had to wait

¹⁴ Aida Hurtado, "Feminism and Feminisms," *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History*. Web.

syphilis infection i came between the habit she
 needed more i was an obstruction constant pressure
 wrinkled inside cars in out constant pounding those
 men were paying they had a right to hurt the habit
 stronger tricks longer she became oral more and more
 the money was not there one night nobody wanted her
 she decided to extricate me she pounded punch after
 punch like those men punch after punch abortion at
 all costs she tired herself i lost my voice....
 My name is jesús papote june....
 she threw up the world she greened
 she scratched-drew-blood nails on scars scabbing
 pores blood vessels eruptions hands on blood she
 painted open mental torture digging into wall's
 electricity cabled concussion paralyzing currents
 she wrote god let me die god let me die she fought
 we fought i was not an added burden i kept quiet
 i held if she survived detoxified normal life no
 more deserted streets no more pains no more misery
 she won grandma she won she smiled she ate she
 beat the odds. (15-16)

Presuming that the poetic narrator is reliable (the poem ends in his joyous birth, so the recollection of the abortion threat occurs at a safe distance), the depiction of the mother's life is one that surely engenders sympathy in the reader and, if the reader lacks a life-affirming philosophical perspective, certainly a justification for abortion. The drug addicted mother survives on the streets by prostituting herself, and she is pregnant. Would anyone suggest that such an environment is a worthy one in which any child should be born? The answer, of course, is yes, not only from the mother herself, but also from her child. (The father's reaction to the pregnancy is irrelevant because he is absent.)

The stylistics of the passage wherein the mother contemplates abortion cannot be ignored. The lack of punctuation and sentence structure could be attributed to the general "norms" of *vers libre*, where the absence of conventional meter qualifies any work as being poetry. However, the absence of terminal punctuation and orderly sentence structure is mandatory in Laviera's work for conveying the eclectic emotions and events occurring in both the mother's and the unborn child's lives. External events and the mother's spoken words and emotions threatening the unborn child must be delivered in a rapid-fire mode to convey the urgency of the situation and the chaos that is the mother's life. Note that the mother has no reference points for moral authority:

no religion, no person who values her beyond a sexual object, and no faith. Even the “god let me die” (written twice, not, presumably, in the throes of religious fervor as much as it may be the scrawl of a child being reprimanded after class) reads more as a mere interjection and not intercessory prayer to God.

What is most significant about the passage is not only the resolution of the conflict between abortion and the affirmation of life, but also the lack of traditional characters who are usually depicted in abortion narratives. No activist on the politicized issue of abortion intervenes. The lack of such a character is noteworthy since the politics of the issue were fresh in the culture at the time of the poem’s publication. The U.S. abortion decisions that legalized abortion throughout the nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever were eight years old when the poem was written. Besides there being no activist character, no individual doctor or abortionist intervenes to resolve this moment of crisis between characters. The characters themselves resolve the dilemma of life gestating in horrible conditions. The narrator’s affirmation that “she fought / we fought i was not an added burden” demonstrates that, having been devastated by the world, the mother chose to fight against her circumstances instead of surrender to them. The only person to help her was not the father of the unwanted child, but the child himself.

Concluding the poem with direct address to the grandmother is a life-affirming torque that any feminist on either side of abortion as a political issue would appreciate. The unborn child’s exclamation “she won grandma she won she smiled she ate she / beat the odds” is not merely a replica of what a child would say to his grandmother. Considering it from a feminist perspective, it is also an affirmation of the life-giving forces conserved by the women in the family. Given the devotion to the maternal and to the feminine that is purportedly dominant in Latino culture, how right and just it is, then, that, even though he has six more months to be born, the unborn child could see his future secure.

Judith Ortiz Cofer’s Short Story “Silent Dancing” (1990)

Silent Dancing, Judith Ortiz Cofer’s collection of short stories, has done much not only for setting the tone of Latino studies in the United States, but also for beginning a resurgence of such studies just as the multi-national category “Hispanic” began to achieve ethnic dominance in the country. While the original purposes of the collection may either have been superseded by

other concerns (Latino literature has become more prominent in the past twenty years since its publication) or has fallen victim to the now tired interpretation of feminist literature with its emphasis on patriarchal oppression of women, Ortiz Cofer's story offers a unique view of abortion in Latino literature that cannot be found elsewhere.

While critics discuss Ortiz Cofer's place in Latino literature and themes of her works in detail, discussion of abortion is absent. For example, R. Baird Shuman's essay summarizing the author's major works for college and university students in the Literary Reference Center database does not mention the abortion element in the short story.¹⁵ This lapse could be attributed to the presence of other, politically-correct themes (patriarchal oppression, clash of cultures, and so on). The one reference to abortion in the slim *Silent Dancing* volume occurs in the short story of the same name and poses many questions that future research needs to explore. For now, it is sufficient, first, to list what is absent in the short story when contrasted against its Anglo- or European-American counterparts; second, to comment on the high number of "removes" that the narrative establishes to distance the reader from the event; and, finally, to contrast the short story's perceptions of the mother who has aborted, the father of the child, and the unborn child him- or herself.

Authors may linger over love or sex scenes either for the salutary purpose of emphasizing the inherent beauty of sexual activity or for the salacious reason – a further bifurcation – of making the scene uncomfortable for the reader or of cheapening the beauty of sex between married persons by merely appealing to the reader's baser if not pornographic interests. Authors do not, however, linger over abortion procedures in their novels and short stories. The disastrous post-abortion effects may be evident throughout the balance of the narratives after the abortion has occurred, but the actual abortion is not provided in extreme detail (probably because any horrific event in a narrative needs to be passed over quickly to advance the plot). This feature of abortion episodes is the rule not only for novels of hundreds of pages where every page is lugubrious with detail (for example, John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*)¹⁶ but also in novels that, though they may consist of hundreds of pages, have sparse paragraph content, such as Audrey Thomas's *Blown Figures*, where

¹⁵ R. Baird Shuman, "Judith Ortiz Cofer," *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 9 May 2012.

¹⁶ John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (New York NY: William Morrow, 1985).

nearly 70% of the novel (373 of the 547 pages) are brief one-line statements.¹⁷ This rule of quick treatment of the abortion procedure is even more pronounced in the short story for the obvious reason of space.

Ortiz Cofer's account of an abortion in her short story "Silent Dancing" is consistent with this rule of quick reportage. Here is the passage:

I came to tell you that story about your cousin that you've always wanted to hear. Remember that comment your mother made to a neighbor that has always haunted you? The only thing you heard was your cousin's name and then you saw your mother pick up your doll from the couch and say: "It was as big as this doll when they flushed it down the toilet." This image has bothered you for years, hasn't it? You had nightmares about babies being flushed down the toilet, and you wondered why anyone would do such a horrible thing. You didn't dare ask your mother about it. She would only tell you that you had not heard her right and yell at you for listening to adult conversations. But later, when you were old enough to know about abortions, you suspected. I am here to tell you that you were right. Your cousin was growing an *Americanito* in her belly when this movie was made. Soon after she put something long and pointy into her pretty self, thinking maybe she could get rid of the problem before breakfast and still make it to her first class at the high school. Well, *Niña*, her screams could be heard downtown. Your aunt, her Mamá, who had been a midwife on the Island, managed to pull the little thing out. Yes, they probably flushed it down the toilet, what else could they do with it – give it a Christian burial in a little white casket with blue bows and ribbons? Nobody wanted that baby – least of all the father, a teacher at her school with a house in West Paterson that he was filling with real children, and a wife who was a natural blond.¹⁸

Although the cousin's abortion is briefly mentioned in "Silent Dancing" and therefore lacks the detail of a lengthier treatment in a novel or more extensive short story, what is more pronounced in the above text is the series of several removes from reality in which the abortion episode is related. Granted, one can argue that any text – written, verbal, or online – is removed at least once from the original source; the reader cannot immerse him- or herself in any actual abortion episode. The philosophical discussion of literature's removes from reality (or distancing) is not the concern here; what does concern this study is the cumulative effect of the multiple removes under which the abortion in this specific case is narrated.

There are at least six such removes. First, of course, is the obvious and previously stated removal (the text itself as the initial distance from reality). An

¹⁷ Audrey Thomas, *Blown Figures* (Vancouver BC: Talonbooks, 1974).

¹⁸ Cofer, pp. 96-97.

immediate categorization of the short story as a work of fiction, not as a non-fictional account of a historical event, qualifies as a second remove. The third remove involves the fact of authorship; the mother who aborted is not relating her account, but another person is. The fourth remove becomes obvious when several layers are uncovered. The reader needs to appreciate the distance involved in having the person relating the abortion matrimonially removed several times from the event; she is not merely a common law wife of a relative closer to Ortiz Cofer, but the narrator's "great-uncle's common-law wife." A fifth remove manifests itself when one considers the means used by Ortiz Cofer to relate the narrative of another woman's abortion; it is recalled not in standard narratological form of a plot in past or present time, but as a dream, where facts about the abortion episode can be altered either intentionally or not. The final, sixth remove is evident when the reader understands that the narrator within this particular episode of the short story (the great-uncle's common-law wife) does not quote the mother directly but instead offers her own evaluation of the abortion episode.

What is the contemporary reader to do with such narratological layers? Are they just meant to be enjoyed or, as all good literature from ancient times has striven to do, can some didactic value be obtained? Certainly, the short story is enjoyable; what began as reminiscence about a film archive of a particular family assumes greater poignancy when the silent faces moving in the camera being described for the reader become tragic characters, or at least characters with a *hamartia* consistent with ancient drama. The didacticism of the short story is enhanced when other passages in the short story collection are juxtaposed here. Ortiz Cofer adopts Virginia Woolf's dictum that fiction should contain "strong emotion. She further asserts in the initial pages of the collection that, even though some details may have been altered or emphasized, the stories are "based on real events."¹⁹

The juxtaposition of these two statements leads the reader to consider what he or she will read as, if not autobiographical, then at least biographical with an authorial liberty to change facts and character development, as Hawthorne asserted was the romance writer's privilege in the explanatory introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*.²⁰ Ortiz Cofer re-affirms such authorial

¹⁹ Cofer, p. 13.

²⁰ Hawthorne suggests this authorial liberty when he writes that "a familiar room" in romance writing may "become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue

privilege when she writes that one benefit of writing is that “hurtful parts can be edited out,”²¹ a clear affirmation that some topics such as abortion and others mentioned in the collection (adultery, abandonment of young women before marriage, and the vicissitudes of traveling to and from the homeland) cannot be written about without creating intense hurt. If the preceding tends to highlight the moral purpose of the short story, then a final note from Ortiz Cofer’s categorization is necessary. This and others in the collection are *cuentos*, which are specifically defined in the preface as “morality and cautionary tales.”²²

Besides considering the various removes from reality evident in this short story, one can also excavate a literary perspective towards the mother, the father, and the unborn child much at odds with those who support legalized abortion. The attitude toward the mother is intriguing because it contrasts with the amount of attention that either a mother who contemplates abortion or an aborted mother would receive in a fictional work written from a life-denying perspective. Although equal attention is given in the abortion passage to the unborn child and the mother, a condemnatory view could be applied to the aborted mother if the message of a subsequent passage in the anthology about mothers in general could be appropriated to her. If negativity applies to “a responsible mother [who] did not leave her children with any stranger,”²³ then the calculus of negativity could swing further against the mother who aborts, since she has “left” her child to the extreme (in the hands of an abortionist and thus abandoned the child to death).²⁴

The narrator’s attitude toward the father is apparent in this story. The father of the child is a typically self-centered American man who values sex more than his marriage commitment and who does not regard himself as a role model for his children. However, this is a twenty-first century criticism of the sexual excesses of the mid- to late twentieth century. Elsewhere in the

itself with the nature of the other. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: Text, Sources, Criticism*, edited by Kenneth S. Lynn (New York NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 21.

²¹ Cofer, p. 11.

²² Cofer, p. 15.

²³ Cofer, p. 92.

²⁴ The possibility exists, of course, that the attitude would be one of consolation for an aborted mother instead of condemnation, especially given that the mother was induced to consider abortion by the circumstances of the father’s neglect of her and of his child. However, nothing in the short story leads to this alternative interpretation.

anthology, Ortiz Cofer treats men and their sexual needs with a tolerant attitude. When she writes about her father, Ortiz Cofer apologetically states: “It was not his fault, after all, that every year or so he planted a baby-seed in Mamá’s fertile body, keeping her from leading the active life she needed and desired. He loved her and the babies.”²⁵ Whether the blame for too frequent pregnancies can be attributed to nature or the grandmother’s lust for the grandfather or vice versa, is left unsaid.

The author’s attitude toward babies in general is not as negative as one would think. Admittedly, having children deprived her grandmother of “the active life she needed and desired,” but this description may be filtered more through the granddaughter’s perspective than the grandmother’s. At no point does the grandmother resent having children, although she is firm in having decided that her husband would ultimately move to a separate bedroom. Moreover, the grandmother delights in having her children and grandchildren around the house. Reflecting on the film images in the short story, Ortiz Cofer further indicates the Puerto Rican attitude towards children:

*Here and there you can see a small child. Children were always brought to parties and, whenever they got sleepy, were put to bed in the host’s bedrooms. Babysitting was a concept unrecognized by the Puerto Rican women I knew: a responsible mother did not leave her children with any stranger. And in a culture where children are not considered intrusive, there is no need to leave the children at home.*²⁶

Ortiz Cofer’s example is trenchant, for the attitude thus illustrated is greatly at odds with the negativity or hostility towards children in Anglo culture.

Bella (Film 2006; Novelization 2008)

Although this study is concerned with the written aspects of the life issues in Latino literature, it is necessary to include *Bella*, which was released as a film in 2006 and novelized two years later.²⁷ Considering the film and novelization as one literary artifact is justified because of the importance of abortion as a core theme not only in this work, but also, as the work itself suggests, vis-à-vis Latino culture in the United States.

²⁵ Cofer, p. 26.

²⁶ Cofer, p. 92 (italics in original).

²⁷ *Bellamoviesite.com*. N.d. Web (consulted 23 May 2012):

<<http://www.bellamoviesite.com/site/#/film/images/>>. Lisa Samson, *Bella: A Novelization of the Award-Winning Movie* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

The plot for both film and novel is simple. Nina becomes pregnant, loses her job at an upscale New York restaurant, and considers abortion, but, thanks to the kindness of José, with whom she worked at the restaurant, gives birth to the child, surrendering the baby to José so that she can pursue her dancing career.²⁸ This severe reduction of the plot of a film that runs for one hour and thirty-two minutes and a book of 187 pages ignores some refined and crucial details (*Bellamoviesite.com*). José had been a star soccer player until he was convicted of vehicular homicide of a little girl. He is now employed as a humble restaurant chef. Nina is pregnant by one of the restaurant's management staff. Both José and Nina are suffering souls. Exasperated with her condition in life (she is considering abortion because she is a failure at virtually everything: her dancing career, the reason why she moved to New York in the first place, and now her employment), Nina exclaims: "I can't even take care of myself.... How am I going to take care of a kid?"²⁹ José's psychic burden is the killing of the little girl and its attendant consequences: ignominy, a life of penance, even a radical change in appearance; the most frequently noted physical characteristic of the character is his long and apparently unkempt beard – he calls himself "scruffy-bearded" at the denouement of the novel.³⁰

Details of the plot, however, are relatively unimportant when the functionality of the work is examined. *Bella* illustrates the effect of a life-affirming perspective on a situation that is common in American culture. When pregnant women lose their jobs in the "new normal" of the Great Recession of the past three years, and when those women are irreligious, have no support systems, and have no moral basis to distinguish between abortion, adoption, or giving birth, then abortion is an ineluctable choice. Nina is such a young woman. She has no family support, her beloved father died when she was a little girl, and her relationship with her mother is precarious. Her religious background cannot be determined. A possible indication of familiarity with Christianity, if not Catholicism, can be suggested by her feeble effort to make the Sign of the Cross when she dines at José's family's house: "Nina tried but

²⁸ The denouement of the film could be interpreted ambiguously, as though Nina has the abortion and, since the denouement proceeds in a dream-like sequence, to show what might have been. Although the novel makes it clear that Nina gives birth, the alternative perspective may be justified if the viewer retains the initial abortion sequence as the event in Nina's life that controls the rest of the narrative.

²⁹ Samson, p. 102.

³⁰ Samson, p. 181.

failed, sort of waving her hand in a circle in front of her chest."³¹ The father of the child would support her only by paying half of the cost of an abortion.

And then comes José and his family, of Mexican heritage, all of whom are imbued with a focus on family, good food, Catholic Christianity, and tolerance – even tolerance for a young woman who seems intent on abortion. Since the opening scene of the work shows Nina seemingly prepared for an abortion, the rest of the narrative (in both film and novel) follows what would seem to be an *in medias res* structure. Nina is strongly affected not only by the sense of devotion to family asserted throughout the work, but also by José's ethics.

Moreover, Nina wishes she could have a loving mother like José's. The matriarch of the family, significantly named Maria, plays a pivotal role in tending to Nina's social and physical needs (anything from helping her clean up after working at the family's house, to providing a meal for her, to relating the adoption of the first son in the family as a persuasive argument to assist her regarding the reproductive choice she faces). Similarly, it is Maria before whom José is able to release powerful emotions in a scene that evokes the image of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child:

She leaned over and put her arms around him as he sobbed, allowing something to release in him he never had before, something that watered the dried-up belief that he deserved to live a life that meant something, anything.

"*Cry it all out,*" she whispered, as if that were possible. He wrapped his arms around her waist from where he sat and rested his bristled cheek against her bosom.³²

Is the loving support and quasi-religious imagery of this Mexican-American family relevant in a study concerning Latino literature on the life issues? Yes, especially since ethnicity forms a crucial background of the plot.³³ After identifying himself as "RicoMex" (half Puerto Rican and half Mexican), José wonders about Nina's ethnic heritage in a passage that concentrates the narrative's focus on ethnic values:

José realized he knew so little about her. Obviously not Hispanic, what type of family did she come from? Irish? German? Or had they been over here so long they were

³¹ Samson, p. 155.

³² Samson, p. 148 (italics in original).

³³ Furthermore, disregarding the ethnicities evidenced by the surnames of Alejandro Monteverde (the director) and Eduardo Verástegui (the actor who plays José) would be as unfair as to discount the textual evidence that ethnic influences matter in this abortion narrative.

simply typical Americans with nothing left of their old countries in them?³⁴

It is the final rhetorical question that the rest of American society must answer.

The argument could be made that these three works demonstrate a shift in the Latino attitude toward abortion, a transformation that is most welcome as a response to the high abortion rate in that community. What is the poem “Jesús Papote” vis-à-vis the topic of abortion if not a documentation of American society’s attempt to affect the Latina mother in the most desperate way possible, to encourage her to abort her child? Similarly, what is the short story “Silent Dancing” if not an illustration that American society succeeded in affecting the Latina mother so that she aborted her child? Finally, but most encouragingly, what is *Bella* if not the Latina response to American society, a clear *si* to *la vida* and *no* to *aborto*?

Whatever the current literature shows, an abortion rate twice that of white mothers “will out” – will need to be documented in literature, whether written or visual, to satisfy the basic need of catharsis. Mothers cannot live with abortion in their history. Such a disruption of the maternal instinct has been documented well by commentators in literatures of other ethnic groups. Now that Latinos are the dominant minority in the United States, and now that Latinos are becoming much more integrated into American society, as the twentieth-century European immigrants did before them, one can expect a deluge of narratives on the first life issue of abortion. Moreover, as Latinos become further integrated into American society, their exposure to the remaining two life issues (infanticide and euthanasia) could follow the sociological trend of other ethnic groups – secularized, focused on material comforts, and bereft of their ethnic identities – that adopted infanticide and euthanasia positions contrary to those of their cultural and religious heritages. Alternatively, if Latinos retain their positive and life-affirming values, then the anti-life philosophy that seems ascendant in American society may find a worthy adversary in a culture that has promoted respect for family and life for the past five hundred years and has demonstrated no inclination yet to abandon those values.

³⁴ Samson, p. 166.