Judith Coffer’s Experience of Race

Judith Ortiz Coffer dramatizes the pain of racism in her story “The Story of My Body.” She explains that moving to the United States from Puerto Rico dramatically changed the way she was seen. “I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico,” says Coffer, “but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States” (132). As Coffer encounters the racism of America, her appearance is literally altered—her skin going from white to brown. Coffer also goes from tall to short (132), and from pretty to ugly (132). It is racism that makes Coffer darker, but a disease that literally scars her face. At the age of ten, Coffer writes that she, “scratched off my face, leaving permanent scars” (132). It’s almost as though racism works inside her body to make her as ugly to herself as she fears she is to racist Americans.

According to the Enciclopedia de Puerto Rico, the literature by Puerto Ricans in the diaspora tends to focus on, “cultural clashes encountered by different generations” (“Puerto Rican Diaspora in the United States” par. 24). Coffer experiences a clash between the comfort she knew in Puerto Rico and the pain of living in the United States. Coffer experiences a similar discomfort as an adult, but geographically reversed. In an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández, Coffer explains how she feels isolated and alienated from the writing community in Puerto Rico:

There is some hostility, yes. When I have done readings in Puerto Rico, in the Río Piedras or Mayagüez campus of the university, not one writer has showed up. I was hoping to meet them, especially the women writers…. I do feel some tension, a division. I hope at some point this is eliminated. (98)

Coffer wants to bring together the Puerto Rican and American communities, but finds that, even as an adult, she is still painfully trapped between two cultures.