

The Myth of the Latin Woman: *I Just Met a Girl Named Maria* Judith Ortiz Cofer

On a bus trip to London from Oxford University where I was earning some graduate credits one summer, a young man, obviously fresh from a pub, spotted me and as if struck by inspiration went down on his knees in the aisle. With both hands over his heart he broke into an Irish tenor's rendition of "Maria" from *West Side Story*. My politely amused fellow passengers gave his lovely voice the round of gentle applause it deserved. Though I was not quite as amused, I managed my version of an English smile: no show of teeth, no extreme contortions of the facial muscles—I was at this time of my life practicing reserve and cool. Oh, that British control, how coveted it. But Maria had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool, the Island travels with you.

This is sometimes a very good thing—it may win you that extra minute of someone's attention. 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. As a Puerto Rican girl growing up in the United States and wanting like most children to "belong," I resented the stereotype that my Hispanic appearance called forth from many people I met.

Our family lived in a large urban center in New Jersey during the sixties, where life was designed as a microcosm of my parents' casas on the island. We spoke in Spanish, we ate Puerto Rican food bought at the bodega, and we practiced strict Catholicism complete with Saturday confession and Sunday mass at a church where our parents were accommodated into a one-hour Spanish mass slot, performed by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary for Latin America.

As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance, since virtue and modesty were, by cultural equation, the same as family honor. As a teenager I was instructed on how to behave as a proper *senorita*. But it was a conflicting message girls got, since the Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes our Anglo friends and their mothers found too "mature" for our age. It was, and is, cultural, yet I often felt humiliated when I appeared at an American friend's party wearing a dress more suitable to a semiformal than to a playroom birthday celebration. 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 I remember from my childhood.

I remember Career Day in our high school, when teachers told us to come dressed as if for a job interview. It quickly became obvious that to the barrio girls, "dressing up" sometimes meant wearing ornate jewelry and clothing that would be more appropriate (by mainstream standards) for the company Christmas party than as daily office attire. That morning I had agonized in front of my closet, trying to figure out what a "career girl" would wear because, essentially, except for Mario Thomas on TV, I had no models on which to base my decision. I knew how to dress for school: at the Catholic school I attended we all wore uniforms; I knew how to dress for Sunday mass, and I knew what dresses to wear for parties at my relatives' homes. Though I do not recall the precise details of my Career Day outfit, it must have been a composite of the above choices. But I remember a comment my friend (an Italian-American) made in later years that coalesced my impressions of that day. She said that at the business school she was attending the Puerto Rican girls always stood out for wearing "everything at once." She meant, of course, too much jewelry, too many accessories. On that day at school, we were simply made the negative models by the nuns who were themselves not credible fashion experts to any of us. But it was painfully obvious to me that to the others, in their tailored skirts and silk blouses, we must have seemed "hopeless" and "vulgar." Though I now know that most adolescents feel out of step much of the time, I also know that for the Puerto Rican girls of my generation that sense was intensified. The way our teachers and

classmates looked at us that day in school was just a taste of the culture clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and jingling bracelets as a come-on.

Mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes—for example, that of the Hispanic woman as the "Hot Tamale" or sexual firebrand. It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote. In their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated "sizzling" and "smoldering" as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America. From conversations in my house I recall hearing about the harassment that Puerto Rican women endured in factories where the "boss men" talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood and, worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to advances or being fired.

It is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink. As young girls, we were influenced in our decisions about clothes and colors by the women—older sisters and mothers who had grown up on a tropical island where the natural environment was a riot of primary colors, where showing your skin was one way to keep cool as well as to look sexy. Most important of all, on the island, women perhaps felt freer to dress and move more provocatively, since, in most cases, they were protected by the traditions, mores, and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality and machismo whose main rule was: *You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you.* The extended family and church structure could provide a young woman with a circle of safety in her small pueblo on the island; if a man "wronged" a girl, everyone would close in to save her family honor.

This is what I have gleaned from my discussions as an adult with older Puerto Rican women. They have told me about dressing in their best party clothes on Saturday nights and going to the town's plaza to promenade with their girlfriends in front of the boys they liked. The males were thus given an opportunity to admire the women and to express their admiration in the form of *piropos*: erotically charged street poems they composed on the spot. I have been subjected to a few *piropos* while visiting the Island, and they can be outrageous, although custom dictates that they must never cross into obscenity. This ritual, as I understand it, also entails a show of studied indifference on the woman's part; if she is "decent," she must not acknowledge the man's impassioned words. So I do understand how things can be lost in translation. When a Puerto Rican girl dressed in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place. The line I first heard based on this aspect of the myth happened when the boy who took me to my first formal dance leaned over to plant a sloppy overeager kiss painfully on my mouth, and when I didn't respond with sufficient passion said in a resentful tone: "I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early"—my first instance of being thought of as a fruit or vegetable—I was supposed to *ripen*, not just grow into Womanhood like other girls.

It is surprising to some of my professional friends that some people, including those who should know better, still put others "in their place." Though rarer, these

incidents are still commonplace in my life. It happened to me most recently during a stay at a very classy metropolitan hotel favored by young professional couples for their weddings. Late one evening after the theater, as I walked toward my room with my new colleague (a woman with whom I was coordinating an arts program), a middle-aged man in a tuxedo, a young girl in satin and lace on his arm, stepped directly into our path. With his champagne glass extended toward me, he exclaimed, "Evita!"

Our way blocked, my companion and I listened as the man half-recited, half-bellowed "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." When he finished, the young girl said: "How about a round of applause for my daddy?" We complied, hoping this would bring the silly spectacle to a close. I was becoming aware that our little group was attracting the attention of the other guests. "Daddy" must have perceived this too, and he once more barred the way as we tried to walk past him. He began to shout-sing a ditty to the tune of "La Bamba"—except the lyrics were about a girl named Maria whose exploits all rhymed with her name and gonorrhea. The girl kept saying "Oh, Daddy" and looking at me with pleading eyes. She wanted me to laugh along with the others. My companion and I stood silently waiting for the man to end his offensive song. When he finished, I looked not at him but at his daughter. I advised her calmly never to ask her father what he had done in the army. Then I walked between them and to my room. My friend complimented me on my cool handling of the situation. I confessed to her that I really had wanted to push the jerk into the swimming pool. I knew that this same man—probably a corporate executive, well educated, even worldly by most standards—would not have been likely to regale a white woman with a dirty song in public. He would perhaps have checked his impulse by assuming that she could be somebody's wife or mother, or at least *somebody* who might take offense. But to him, I was just an Evita or a Maria: merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe.

Because of my education and my proficiency with the English language, I have acquired many mechanisms for dealing with the anger I experience. This was not true for my parents, nor is it true for the many Latin women working at menial jobs who must put up with stereotypes about our ethnic group such as: "They make good domestics." This is another facet of the myth of the Latin woman in the United States. Its origin is simple to deduce. Work as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that's available to women with little English and few skills. The myth of the Hispanic mental has been sustained by the same media phenomenon that made "Mammy" from *Gone with the Wind* America's idea of the black woman for generations; Maria, the housemaid or counter girl, is now indelibly etched into the national psyche. The big and the little screens have presented us with the picture of the funny Hispanic maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm in a shiny California kitchen.

This media-engendered image of the Latina in the United States has been documented by feminist Hispanic scholars, who claim that such portrayals are partially responsible for the denial of opportunities for upward mobility among Latinas in the professions. I have a Chicana friend working on a Ph.D. in philosophy at a

major university. She says her doctor still shakes his head in puzzled amazement at all the "big words" she uses. Since I do not wear my diplomas around my neck for all to see, I too have on occasion been sent to that "kitchen," where some think I obviously belong.

One such incident that has stayed with me, though I recognize it as a minor offense, happened on the day of my first public poetry reading. It took place in Miami in a boat-restaurant where we were having lunch before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with my notebook in my hand. An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress. Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose. I know that it wasn't an intentional act of cruelty, yet of all the good things that happened that day, I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously. In retrospect I understand that my anger gave my reading fire, that I have almost always taken doubts in my abilities as a challenge—and that the result is, most times, a feeling of satisfaction at having won a covert when I see the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates that I have opened some avenue for communication. That day I read to that woman and her lowered eyes told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention. We shook hands at the end of the reading, and I never saw her again. She has probably forgotten the whole thing but maybe not.

Yet I am one of the lucky ones. My parents made it possible for me to acquire a stronger footing in the mainstream culture by giving me the chance at an education. And books and art have saved me from the harsher forms of ethnic and racial prejudice that many of my Hispanic *compañeras* have had to endure. I travel a lot around the United States, reading from my books of poetry and my novel, and the reception I most often receive is one of positive interest by people who want to know more about my culture. There are, however, thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the entree into society that I have. For them life is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic, or criminal. We cannot change this by legislating the way people look at us. The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level. My personal goal in my public life is to try to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities. Every time I give a reading, I hope the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes.

I once wrote a poem in which I called us Latinas "God's brown daughters." This poem is really a prayer of sorts, offered upward, but also, through the human-to-human channel of art, outward. It is a prayer for communication, and for respect. In it Latin women pray "in Spanish to an Anglo God/with a Jewish heritage," and they are "fervently hoping/that if not omnipotent/at least He be bilingual."

1. What is the effect of Cofe's opening paragraph on the reader? Does her anger draw you in or distance you?
2. Note the times when Cofe explains rather than denies the basis for stereotyping. For instance, rather than deny that Latinas prefer brighter colors, she explains this preference as reflecting the bright landscape of their homelands. Does this strategy work, or do you think that Cofe is playing to the stereotype?
3. Using a highlighter, note the sections of the essay that refer to personal experience. Do they comprise more than half? Explain whether you believe Cofe's reliance on personal experience weakens her argument or not.
4. How does Cofe broaden the argument from her personal experience to larger concerns and issues?
5. What do Cofe's experiences on the bus, in the hotel, and at the poetry reading have in common? Could she have eliminated any of them? Is her behavior toward the man in the "very classy metropolitan hotel" unnecessarily cruel?
6. What is the effect of Cofe's allusions to popular culture, such as "Martha," *Evia*, "La Bamba," and Rita Moreno?
7. Cofe uses only a few Spanish words in her essay. Would she have been more effective if she had included more of them? Why, or why not?

QUESTIONS ON RHETORIC AND STYLE

This essay can also be the occasion to discuss the labels we use to describe a particular group. Cofe refers to both "Latino/a," "Hispanic," and "Chicana," yet there is some controversy over the terms. "Hispanic," some argue—Sandra Cisneros among them—refers to a Spanish heritage that includes colonialism and is thus an inaccurate and/or undesirable label for natives of Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean. This discussion could easily be extended to language, including the concept of "Spanish," as the Spanish-speaking populations continue to grow in the United States.

Before such analysis, ask students to draw on their own experiences. How have they experienced stereotyping on the basis of their age, gender, ethnicity, religion, even dress? Another approach, or a follow-up to this one, might be to ask students to observe the images of Latinas in the media, particularly television, film, and music. Is *J-Lo* a departure from stereotyping, for instance, or an example of it? Salma Hayek? Jimmy Smits? The Cofe piece is ten years old, so starting with an assessment of whether or how things have changed is appropriate.

This essay, whose original version was published in the "Hers" column of the *New York Times*, is an excellent example of an argument constructed with narrative, in this case personal experience. As indicated in the headline in *50 Essays*, Cofe balances analysis with anger. One way to encourage students to discuss how she does that so deftly is to consider how she appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos. In the opening paragraph, for instance, she appeals to all three. Relating an experience of being stereotyped, she appeals to the emotions of readers and does not mince words as she describes her resemblance to a well-known Latina figure. Yet, at the same time, she establishes ethos by alluding to Oxford University, where she was "earning some graduate credits," clearly identifying herself as a serious person with academic credentials. The whole incident appeals to logos, as her readers share her reasoned opposition to stereotyping of any group, Latinas among them.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

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JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

8. Cofe ends by quoting one of her own poems. Is that an effective ending? Why, or why not?
9. Who do you think is Cofe's audience in this essay? Would it include the woman at the poetry reading who asked her for a cup of coffee?

SIMULATED AP ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. **Rhetorical Analysis.** In her essay "The Myth of the Latin Woman," Judith Ortiz Cofe points out the damaging effects of stereotypes. Write an essay analyzing the rhetorical strategies she uses to make her argument in paragraphs 11 through 15.
2. **Argument.** In paragraph 6 of her essay "The Myth of the Latin Woman," Judith Ortiz Cofe makes the following statement:

Mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes—for example, that of the Hispanic woman as the "Hot Tamale" or sexual firebrand. It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote. In their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated "sizzling" and "smoldering" as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America.

Write an argument explaining whether you agree or disagree with this assertion as it applies to the media today. You may work with Cofe's example of Latin American women, or you may choose another group (e.g., African Americans, older people, persons from the Middle East) to consider in terms of stereotypes that the media promotes. Support your opinion with evidence from your experience, observation, or reading.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

These multiple-choice questions refer to paragraphs 10–15.

1. Cofe uses all of the following in this passage EXCEPT
a. irony
b. figurative language
c. appeal to authority
d. objective reporting
e. allusion
2. What is the purpose of paragraph 12?
a. to introduce a new idea
b. to contrast with Cofe's personal experience
c. to comment on an exception to Cofe's argument
d. to support a point made in the previous paragraph
e. to present a counterargument
3. Paragraph 13 contains each of the following EXCEPT
a. parallel diction
b. a sentence fragment
c. subjective description
d. sarcasm
e. a periodic sentence
4. The incident at the poetry reading illustrates which of the following?
I. Cofe's self-discipline
II. the lack of appreciation most people have for poetry
III. the lasting impact of stereotyping

- a. I only
- b. III only
- c. I and II only
- d. I and III only
- e. I, II, and III only

5. What is the primary rhetorical function of the sentence "Yet I am one of the lucky ones," which introduces paragraph 14?
a. to reinforce that Cofe is an expert on this subject
b. to challenge the examples that Cofe has presented in previous paragraphs
c. to present a misconception that Cofe will clarify in her conclusion
d. to suggest that the general case is worse than the specific examples Cofe has related
e. to introduce another of Cofe's personal experiences

6. All of the following reinforce the author's thesis EXCEPT
 - a. "Work as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that's available to women with little English and few skills" (paragraph 11)
 - b. "She says her doctor still shakes his head in puzzled amazement at all the 'big words' she uses" (paragraph 12)
 - c. "Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose" (paragraph 13)
 - d. "I travel a lot around the United States, reading from my books of poetry and my novel; and the reception I most often receive is one of positive interest by people who want to know more about my culture" (paragraph 14)
 - e. "The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level" (paragraph 14)
7. The poem at the end of the excerpt serves primarily to
 - a. soften the criticisms Cofer has made
 - b. emphasize the inequities Cofer has revealed
 - c. broaden the main point Cofer has made
 - d. strengthen Cofer's credibility by attesting to her religious beliefs
 - e. show that Cofer can write in several modes
8. The author's tone in this excerpt can best be described as
 - a. humorous sarcasm
 - b. modulated anger
 - c. cynical indifference
 - d. defensive aggression
 - e. contemptuous hostility

SUGGESTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay in which you discuss the rhetorical strategies Judith Ortiz Cofer uses in this essay. Pay particular attention to the mix of personal anecdote and more direct analysis.
2. If you are fluent in Spanish, rewrite the essay using more Spanish terms. Use Gloria Anzaldúa's essay as a model. Consider how this revision would affect your audience. (See Connections.)
3. Both Cofer and Brent Staples, in his essay "Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space," center their arguments in personal experience but make a larger point. Compare and contrast the rhetorical strategies of the two authors.
4. Write a "myth buster" essay. That is, identify a specific stereotype (examples: women are bad drivers, the homeless are lazy, athletes are poor students) and then debunk it. Explain the origin, truth, and perpetuation of your stereotype. Develop your refutation with research.

CONNECTIONS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE 50 ESSAYS

INSIDE

The following essays also explore the experience of a Latino minority:

- "Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood" by Richard Rodriguez
- "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" by Gloria Anzaldúa
- "There Is No Unmarked Woman" by Deborah Tannen

OUTSIDE

- Two collections of Cofer's poems, essays, and short fiction are excellent sources of material for analysis and discussion: *The Latin Deli* and *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer*. Her humorous yet powerful memoir *Silent Dancing* is a fascinating study of growing up in New Jersey with a family firmly tied to its Puerto Rican homeland and culture.
- Cofer's Web site offers many resources, including interviews and bibliography. It can be found at parallel.park.uga.edu/~jcofer/
- Pat Mora's poems "Legal Alien" and "Illegal Alien" explore the ambivalence of the "hyphenated" American, who exists in a borderland between two cultures. These poems serve as counterparts to Cofer's theme of identity.