

The Myth of the Latin Woman



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, Judith Ortíz Cofer moved with her family to the United States as a young child. Initially residing in Paterson, New Jersey, the family made frequent trips back to Hormigueros, and ultimately moved to Augusta, Georgia when Cofer was a teenager. Cofer primarily received her education in the United States but also attended Puerto Rican schools when she lived with her grandmother in Hormigueros. This experience of growing up between two cultures profoundly shaped Cofer's identity and creative pursuits. She became interested in literature, translation, and cultural comparison, and eventually received a B.A. in English from Augusta College and an M.A. in English literature from Florida Atlantic University. Cofer became a prolific and celebrated writer across multiple genres, including poetry, creative nonfiction, short fiction, children's literature, and memoir. Many of her best-known works, including *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women* (which contains "The Myth of the Latin Woman") and *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, blend multiple genres, including personal essays, poetry, and short fiction. From 1984 to 2013, she served as the Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia. She was diagnosed with a rare type of liver cancer soon after her retirement, and she passed away three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 20th century saw multiple waves of immigration to the United States from Latin-American countries, particularly Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Cuba. Many came to the U.S. to escape political upheaval and violence in their home countries and to seek better opportunities for education and employment. For example, Puerto Rico, Cofer's home country, became a U.S. territory in 1898 when the U.S. took control of the island from Spain after the Spanish-American War. New York and New Jersey in particular became home to large numbers of Latino people, and especially Puerto Rican, immigrant communities. U.S. colonial control made life on the island difficult for many Puerto Ricans: despite being U.S. citizens since 1917, Puerto Ricans have no federal voting rights, and much of the economic and political power on the island is concentrated in the hands of corporate elites. While many Puerto Rican and other Latino immigrants found jobs with higher wages in the U.S., they were still poor by U.S. standards. In addition, they faced racial discrimination and language barriers, and many became trapped in unskilled work.

Today, Latin Americans still experience higher rates of poverty and incarceration than white Americans. In recent years, many more Latino immigrants have arrived in the U.S. from Central America, Venezuela, and other areas for many of the same reasons that Latino immigrants have historically come to the U.S.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Cofer wrote across multiple genres and quotes her own poem "Latin Women Pray" (1980), which epitomizes the themes of translation and cross-cultural belonging that she explores in the essay. Cofer also mentions in the essay her experiences traveling back and forth between the United States and Puerto Rico as a child, which she recounts in greater depth in her celebrated collection of poetry and essays, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990). She also draws on these experiences in her works of fiction, including *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995), a collection of short stories for young adults that focuses on Puerto Rican teenagers in New Jersey. Cofer's work belongs to a larger tradition that emerged in the late 20th century of Latin American writers who have explored issues of immigration, assimilation, language, gender, and coming of age. Such authors include Julia Alvarez, a Dominican-American novelist, poet, and essayist, whose novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) chronicles four sisters who move from the Dominican Republic to New York City as children. Other notable works in this genre include Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996). Also related are works of feminist theory that analyze the experiences of Latina women, including Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story, Creative Nonfiction, Latino Literature
- **Climax:** At Judith's first poetry reading, she overcomes the embarrassment of being assumed to be a waitress.
- **Antagonist:** Anglo-American stereotypes of Latino immigrants
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Family Ties. Cofer's father, Jesus Lugo Ortíz, loved being a

student but dropped out to join the U.S. Navy. He was stationed abroad when she was born and only met his daughter two years later. Cofer, who credits her parents for her educational opportunities, was finally able to fulfill her father's dream.

All Kinds of Education. Before teaching at the university level, Cofer, who was fluent in Spanish, worked as a bilingual public school teacher in Palm Beach County, Florida from 1974 to 1975.



PLOT SUMMARY

"The Myth of the Latin Woman" recounts Judith Ortíz Cofer's experiences of stereotypes of Latina women in the United States, from her childhood as a Puerto Rican immigrant in New Jersey to her later life as a successful writer and professor. The narrative shifts back and forth from earlier memories to Judith's contemporary reflections.

While Judith is a graduate student in England, a man serenades her with a rendition of "**María**" from *West Side Story*, making her feel stereotyped and uncomfortable but unable to express her unhappiness. As a child in New Jersey and Puerto Rico, Judith recalls learning conflicting cultural messages about femininity and self-expression. Behavior that was considered appropriate in Puerto Rico was interpreted as sexual promiscuity in the United States; clothing considered formal by her family was considered excessive by her white peers.

Cultural stereotypes perpetuated by Anglo-American media create and reinforce an image of Latina women as fiery and hypersexual. As a result, Latina women in the United States often experience harassment and unwanted sexual advances. Another common stereotype is that Latina women are best suited to work as domestic servants or other menial jobs. This stereotype reflects the limited opportunities for advancement for immigrants with restricted skills and language abilities and prevents Latina women from advancing.

While experiences of discrimination and stereotyping are less severe for educated or professionally successful Latina women, Judith still faces discrimination as an adult because of these stereotypes. At a conference, another man sings lewd songs about Latina women to her, and at her first poetry reading, a woman in the audience assumes she is a waitress. These experiences inspire Judith's work as a writer, motivating her to change stereotypes of Latina women by depicting the complexities of their lives.

essay, describes her personal experiences of discrimination as a Latina woman and the historical and sociological origins of stereotypes of Latina women. As a child, Judith immigrates from Puerto Rico to Paterson, New Jersey, where she lives in a Puerto Rican community but has friends and classmates who are white. She struggles to fit in with her white peers because of her ethnicity and cultural heritage and feels that the forms of self-expression she learns from her Puerto Rican family do not translate well to the United States. Formative experiences of feeling out of place as a child engender her frustration with stereotypes of Latina women from a young age. After becoming a successful writer, Judith feels lucky to have received an education though gender and racial discrimination follow her into her professional life. Her anger at these racist stereotypes motivates her work, as she wants to use her writing to make the real experiences of Latina women accessible to broader audiences.

The Man at the Hotel – An older white man in a tuxedo encounters Judith at a professional conference. He repeatedly exclaims at her, shouting "Evita!" and singing multiple songs about Latina women, including one that is profane. His performance prompts Judith to compare the way he might have treated a white woman in her place.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Man on the Bus – A drunken Irish man sings "**María**" to Judith on a bus in England. He reminds Judith that stereotypes of Latina women exist not only in the U.S., but also throughout the whole Anglo-American world.

The Boy at the Dance – A boy at Judith's first formal dance makes her feel stereotyped as hypersexual for the first time. When he kisses Judith and she seems unenthusiastic, he expresses surprise because he believes that Latina girls are supposed to be promiscuous from a young age.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GENDER AND STEREOTYPES

In "The Myth of the Latin Woman," Judith Ortíz Cofer argues that stereotypes of Latina women as hypersexual, uneducated, and submissive perpetuate their marginalization in Anglo-American society. These narratives, Cofer argues, originate in cultural customs from Latin American countries, but they become powerful—and oppressive—cultural tropes that are



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Judith Ortíz Cofer – Judith, the writer and narrator of the

manipulated and promoted by the Anglo-American media. Cofer describes experiencing throughout her life instances of people with power (particularly those who are male, white, wealthy, or educated) making assumptions about her class and sexual desire because of her race, Puerto Rican heritage, and traditional style of clothing. These stereotypes are so pervasive that they persist across decades, national borders, and cultural environments. For example, Cofer mentions being serenaded with famous songs about Latina women both in England as a graduate student and later in her life and career at a professional event in the United States. Cofer details how, from a young age, Anglo-American men have harassed her, verbally and physically, because they make assumptions about her sexual availability. These stereotypes are not limited to sexualization by men, however: Cofer also recounts a story in which a woman assumes her to be a waitress at Cofer's own poetry reading, subjecting her to the stereotype that all Latina women work in menial service jobs—a stereotype that has developed because of the unfortunate reality that there are limited employment opportunities available to Spanish-speaking immigrant women. Ultimately, Cofer depicts how neither advanced education, nor perfect English, nor changes in appearance or clothing can protect Latina women from the stereotypes forced onto them when they leave their countries of origin.



BELONGING, ASSIMILATION, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cofer articulates a central tension in the lives of Latina women in the Anglo-American world:

namely, that being accepted into Anglo-American culture often forces them to disavow or abandon the cultural heritage and traditions of their native countries. For example, Cofer describes how, as a child and teenager, the Puerto Rican mothers she knew dressed their daughters in clothes that were excessively formal, mature, or ornamental by American standards. Cofer recalls wanting to dress like a conventional American girl after feeling left out at a birthday party because her dress did not allow her to play with the other children. She was also once treated as unprofessional at a high school Career Day event because her clothing and jewelry were considered too festive. As Cofer gains more professional success and, accordingly, becomes increasingly accepted within mainstream American society, she struggles to navigate the expectation of conformity to the culture. To that end, when she experiences harassment, she feels pressured to perform a certain kind of Anglo-American control of her emotions, worrying that she might confirm the stereotype of the fiery Latina woman if she were to respond to her own mistreatment with anger. However, Cofer's professional success—which she garners by writing poetry and fiction about Latina women and her Puerto Rican heritage—also allows her to retain a strong connection to



IMMIGRATION, EDUCATION, AND UPWARD MOBILITY

“The Myth of the Latin Woman” emphasizes the central importance of education, particularly in arts and culture, in advancing the status of Latina women in Anglo-American society. Cofer argues that education gives Latina women crucial tools to transform pervasive narratives about themselves and thus opens up new possibilities for upward mobility. Cofer describes some of the particular challenges faced by Latin American immigrants who come to the United States with limited English, little money, and few professional skills. These circumstances trap immigrants, particularly women, in menial and low-paid jobs, such as domestic service, waitressing, and factory labor. Because Cofer's parents were able to provide her with an education, her resulting professional success protects her from the more severe and restrictive discrimination that many Latina women experience because they have fewer opportunities to advance. These women, in contrast, more directly spend their lives struggling against the “myth of the Latina as whore, domestic, or criminal.” In Cofer's case, though, she has not only harnessed the power of a good education; she has also used her position as an artist and writer to promote alternative and empowering narratives about Latina women. Through her work, then, she is able to introduce mainstream American audiences to the nuanced “realities” of life as a Latina woman, thus defying the myths and stereotypes that perpetuate the marginalization of Latina women.



CULTURE, TRANSLATION, AND UNIVERSALISM

Much of “The Myth of the Latin Woman” is devoted to describing how Latina women feel uniquely excluded and marginalized in Anglo-American society. Behaviors, styles, and modes of expression that protected or empowered them in their native countries, Cofer explains, are often perceived differently in the United States. However, the essay argues that, though cultural customs can be distorted when translated into new contexts, people from different cultures often have more in common than one might think. In short, Cofer asserts that by exploring the experiences of Latina women and their attempts to translate certain cultural practices into a new context, she can speak to universal human truths.

For example, when describing her feeling of being left out as a teenager based on the clothing her mother made her wear, Cofer acknowledges that while the experience of exclusion was heightened for Latina women, most of her peers felt “out of step” regardless of their ethnicity or gender. Further, Cofer points out that cultural customs are not innate, but rather learned and imposed from history and tradition, implying a fundamental commonality between children of all cultures who grow up influenced by the habits of their families and neighbors. At the end of the essay, Cofer explains that she hopes non-Latino audiences will be able to appreciate and relate to her writing in a way that transcends her particular ethnicity, native language, or cultural heritage. Cofer sees the experience of translating across cultures as generative, permitting her to articulate some “bilingual” or universal human experience.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



MARÍA

María, one of the protagonists of the musical *West Side Story*, symbolizes the constructed image of the Latina woman in the Anglo-American imagination. *West Side Story*, a famous musical that debuted on Broadway in 1957, is one of the most prominent representations of Puerto Ricans in mainstream American culture. María is portrayed in the musical as passionate and fiercely romantic, reflecting stereotypes of Latina women. Cofer opens the essay with a reference to María: the first scene of the man on the bus sings María’s titular song to Judith, indicating that he only associates women of her ethnicity with a mythologized caricature of a Latina woman. Similarly, Judith believes that the man in the hotel sees her only as a “María,” or “a character in his cartoon-populated universe.” María, therefore, symbolizes the stereotype that must be destroyed so that Latina women can truly belong in the U.S. and be seen as real, complex human beings.




QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *The Latin Deli* published in 1995.

The Myth of the Latin Woman Quotes

☞☞ María 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.

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker), The Man on the Bus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

After being serenaded by the man on the bus in England at the very beginning of the essay, Judith reflects on her experience as a Latina woman across the Anglo-American world. Having grown up in New Jersey and Puerto Rico, throughout the story she often speaks about the experience of Latina women in a context specific to the U.S. However, Cofer reminds the reader from the beginning that the problem of racial and gender discrimination is not tied to her immigration status or occupation within the U.S., but rather is a social problem shared between the U.S. and other English-speaking—predominantly white—cultures.

Cofer also introduces here two other issues that she addresses throughout the essay: that of being unable to escape the difference marked by her appearance, and that of media representations of Latina women. Regarding the former, Cofer specifies that she is “obviously” of Latin descent because of her appearance. Her appearance therefore remains a constant mark of exclusion: even as she learns English, gains professional success, and achieves class mobility, she will always be seen as foreign in the Anglo-American world, as long as the “myth” of the Latin woman persists. To that end, Cofer brings up “Rita Moreno” as an example, ultimately suggesting that white men like the one on the bus are all too eager to assume that all Latina women are alike, turning to figures in popular culture as a way of categorizing people like Judith and thus failing to recognize them as individuals.

☞☞ 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.”

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker)

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cofer is speaking about her experience feeling inappropriately dressed for her school's Career Day as a child. She explains that what the Puerto Rican girls intended to be seen as formal and professional was actually interpreted as "hopeless" and "vulgar" by her white peers. Cofer thus shows how cultural signals can be lost in translation. In this context, things like "tailored skirts and silk blouses" become a sort of language, as Cofer's white peers seem to think that clothing choices say something important about a person's identity. Because Cofer isn't dressed like the white students, then, her intentions (which have to do with wanting to be seen as professional) go unacknowledged—or, even worse, her intentions are completely misconstrued. Clothing is a form of gender and cultural expression, and this is metaphorically translated in different contexts. While the Puerto Rican girls' clothing made sense in its original context, then, it comes to mean something else entirely in the U.S.

☞ It is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink.

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 150



Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cofer introduces the theme of universalism, or the commonality of human experience that she takes up more explicitly toward the end of the essay. Cofer is referencing the idea of nature versus nurture, or, in short, the debate over whether human behavior is determined by genetics or by environment. Cofer emphasizes the role of nurture, or environmental and cultural conditions in shaping preferences. Therefore, she undermines the Anglo-American stereotype that Latina women are inherently fiery like the color red—and in contrast, the implication that white women are delicate like the color pale pink. Instead, Cofer argues that there is no innate reason in Latina women's genes why they might confirm such stereotypes.

Rather, they are simply influenced by cultural traditions. Therefore, though all humans are influenced toward choosing "scarlet" or "pale pink" or some other color suggested to them by their cultures, fundamentally they are the same.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 151


Explanation and Analysis

Cofer is explaining here the customs that result in vastly different codes of conduct for men and women in Puerto Rico and the U.S. The phrase "lost in translation" represents how cultural signals, when displaced from their original context and transported to a foreign country, can be stripped of their intended meaning. In Puerto Rico, Cofer notes, the clothes that girls wear and view as "attractive" are not an invitation to be touched by men; rather, they indicate to men that they should show their affection and desire without making any advance, since such behavior would violate Catholic norms. In the U.S., however, where women are taught to dress more demurely—in the "tailored skirts and silk blouses" mentioned elsewhere in the essay—such clothing is interpreted as a sign of sexual availability by men from the "mainstream culture" (that is, white American men). This mistranslation results in a cultural "clash," or, as Cofer explains, an understandable mutual misunderstanding of intentions.

☞ [T]o him, I was just an Evita or a María: merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe.

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker), The Man at the Hotel

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

This quote—which references the man in the tuxedo who serenades Judith at the hotel with songs about Latina women—comes at a point in the essay where Judith comes to understand that not even professional success will protect her from the stereotypes about Latina women that pervade Anglo-American society. Cofer uses the symbols of “María” and “Evita” to illustrate the way that these stereotypes take on a life of their own. For this man, these images of Latina women are so powerful that they have replaced the actual Latina woman, Judith, standing in front of him, ultimately turning her into a “character.” Cofer speaks of this man’s “cartoon-populated universe” to describe the out-of-touch ways in which stereotypes of marginalized people, like those of Latina and Black women that Cofer describes, influence the worldviews of people with power and privilege: these stereotypes prevent them from seeing people from marginalized groups as unique, three-dimensional human beings.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

Cofer once again brings up the fact that her appearance is a permanent mark of difference and exclusion from belonging in mainstream culture. As she mentioned at the very beginning of the essay, she “obviously belongs to Rita Moreno’s gene pool,” which means that stereotypes of Latina women follow her wherever she goes, despite the fact that in her professional life she has defied many of those stereotypes. Such achievements, however, cannot be worn “around [her] neck” and thus do not set her apart from other Latina women in the eyes of white Americans.

Further, the “kitchen” here becomes a metaphor for marginalization. In the paragraph in which this quote is included, Cofer is not speaking of a literal kitchen but, much like “María,” the idea of the place Latina women belong. Being sent to “that ‘kitchen,’” whether literally or

figuratively, is a way of being reminded of her perceived inferiority—which seems as obvious to “some” as Judith’s Latina heritage, meaning that bigoted and problematic assumptions often seem to come almost automatically to people who have long lived with the many stereotypes that go unquestioned in American society.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cofer is speaking about how she envisions the significance of her work, and the power of art to change transform narratives and perceptions of marginalized people. While she has spent most of the essay describing how stereotypes and myths negatively impact the lives of Latina women, here she describes for the first time how people might challenge these stereotypes and make change. She describes this transformation happening person-to-person through art: such nuanced and detailed depictions of real, complex Latina women will show white audiences that Latina women are not merely caricatures, such as María and Evita, but are full human beings that represent a diversity of experiences. Only by confronting these kinds of representations will mainstream culture start to dismantle pervasive stereotypes. For this reason, Cofer approaches her own public readings as opportunities to convey something to her audience that transcends the identifiers that unfortunately tend to keep some people from seeing Latina women like her for who they really are.

☞ [This poem] 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.”

Related Characters: Judith Ortíz Cofer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

In this poem that Cofer shares in the essay's final lines, her "prayer for communication" suggests what, exactly, might be created in the process of moving between cultures, contrary to many of the examples she has shared of cultural signals getting lost in translation. This poem expresses the hope and promise of what a "bilingual" or multicultural society might bring about: it indicates the truth that emerges when people understand that while their cultures might be different, their fundamental human experiences are often the same or at least quite similar.

Further, this poem suggests the history of cross-cultural translation that predates immigration from Latin American countries to the U.S. By referencing prayers "in Spanish to an Anglo God / with a Jewish heritage," Cofer implies that Catholic religious tradition in and of itself is built on a cross-cultural theological understanding, since Catholics pray to Jesus Christ, and Jesus himself was of "Jewish heritage." In an essay that revolves around the idea of translating not just words but also ideas in different contexts, these lines ring especially true, as Cofer effectively elevates the idea of what it means to be "bilingual," suggesting that the act of translation and reinterpretation is itself sacred and something humans have been doing for a very long time.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE MYTH OF THE LATIN WOMAN

Judith, at the time a graduate student at Oxford University, is on a bus in England when an Irish man starts serenading her with the song “**Maria**” from *West Side Story*. She feels uncomfortable because of his uninvited stereotyping of her as a woman from “Rita Moreno’s gene pool.” She recalls her lifelong struggle to “belong” in Anglo-American culture, as well as her self-consciousness about being seen as different because of her ethnicity. She struggles to control her facial expression in order to conceal her displeasure at the man’s performance.

As a child of Puerto Rican immigrants in urban New Jersey, Judith was raised with a strong connection to her heritage, and her parents retained much of their lifestyle from the island. She grew up speaking Spanish, eating Puerto Rican food, and practicing Catholicism. She was also raised to adhere to strict gender roles, since female modesty upheld the family’s good reputation (and, conversely, female promiscuity reflected negatively on the family). These customs made it difficult for Judith to fit in with her white American peers, as she was made to wear clothes that they perceived as excessively formal.

Before a Career Day event in high school, Judith struggled to decide what to wear, as she did not have any models for professional dress for women outside of characters on television. Her only examples of formal wear were Catholic school uniforms, Sunday mass apparel, and family party outfits. Puerto Rican women’s notion of acceptable professional wear was considered inappropriately festive or ornamental by Anglo-American standards—as her Italian American friend commented, Puerto Rican women wore “everything at once.” While other girls wore “tailored skirts and silk blouses,” Latina women dressed in “tight skirts and jingling bracelets” that men interpreted as sexual advances. In the present, Judith thinks that although many teenagers feel “out of step,” this feeling is often especially pronounced for Latino teenagers.

*From Judith’s frustration, readers can gather that, throughout her life, Judith has had a lot of practice controlling her emotions and considering how others perceive her in Anglo-American environments because of the way she looks. The opening scene introduces “María” as a symbol for the image of the Latina woman in the Anglo-American imagination, alluding to the “myth” of Latina womanhood that Cofer explains and breaks down throughout the rest of the essay. The mention of “Rita Moreno’s gene pool” suggests that one of the central features of this “myth” is that all Latina women, despite their differences in heritage as well as personality, are viewed as the same in Anglo-American culture. (Rita Moreno is a Puerto Rican actress who appeared in the 1961 adaptation of *West Side Story*.)*



Cofer’s description of her upbringing introduces one of the central ideas of the essay: that immigrants often experience tension between belonging in their adopted country and preserving the traditions of their native country. Learning different cultural customs in the United States and Puerto Rico evidently gives Judith a sense of confusion about her identity. It is hard enough to be an adolescent anywhere, but there are difficulties particular to the experience of being an immigrant.



The Puerto Rican gender roles mentioned previously result in different customs of dress for Puerto Rican and white American women. Judith learns that her notion of formal wear is considered unprofessional, foreshadowing her argument later in the essay that Latina women are often stereotyped as unprofessional for reasons other than their dress. Though Puerto Rican women intend to convey respectability through their clothing, the unfortunate and unfair result is often that white American men view them as sexually promiscuous because of their clothing choices, even if these choices have nothing to do with sexuality. This is one of the ways that cultural signals can be mistranslated.



Stereotypes of Latina women have resulted from “mixed cultural signals”—such as differing standards of formal dress—that Anglo-American men perceive differently than Latina women. The media perpetuates a narrative of Latina women as “sizzling” or “smoldering,” just like the foods they often cook. These narratives create the stereotype that Latina women are sexually promiscuous. Further, they materially affect the lives of Judith’s family members and neighbors, who describe being sexually harassed in their workplaces and threatened with losing their jobs if they protest.

These stereotypes of sexual availability are created in Anglo-American society when Latina women are displaced from tropical environments governed by Spanish and Catholic cultural norms. In a warmer climate, Cofer explains, wearing bright colors matches the native flora and fauna, and revealing more skin allows for temperature regulation. Within Latin American cultural norms of Catholicism and machismo, different customs govern men’s relations with women: men are permitted to admire women’s beauty, but it is considered shameful and immoral to touch them. Thus, women are protected from sexual violence and harassment by their family and church communities.

Older Puerto Rican women often recall to Judith how, on the island, they used to dress up and parade around the city in front of men they liked, and the men would express their admiration in the form of sexually implicit, yet never obscene, poems called “piropos.” “Decent” women, in turn, were expected to ignore the attention demurely. Indicating how culture can be “lost in translation,” American men, in contrast, view Latina women’s clothing as an invitation to touch them sexually. Judith experiences an instance of this cultural clash when, as a teenager, a boy at a dance tries to kiss her and when she is unenthusiastic, he says that he thought “Latin girls were supposed to mature early.”

Cofer mentions the media here to clarify that Latina women do not create stereotypes of themselves and that such stereotypes do not emerge organically. Rather, they are created by people in power who view Latina women as fundamentally different and foreign. These stereotypes, in aggregate, create the “myth” that Cofer references in the title of the essay—the “myth” that all Latina women are like “Maria” or “Rita Moreno.” While being only a “myth,” these stereotypes become harmful in the lives of real Latina women, who obviously are not constantly sexually available or submissive, despite the fact that this is the unfounded assumption many people (and particularly white American men) seem to make. The “myth” therefore becomes part of the structures of power that oppress Latina women in the United States.



While these stereotypes do not reflect most Latina women, they are somewhat grounded in reality, Cofer argues. This is because of cultural and environmental differences between the United States and most Latin American countries, which are in warm, tropical climates and are predominantly Catholic—it makes sense to wear more revealing clothes in warm climates, but the Catholic traditions and strong communal sense of morality often provide a certain kind of protection to women. But in New Jersey, where Judith moves, it is much colder, so wearing revealing clothes attracts more attention, and this attention isn’t necessarily as constrained as it would be in Latin America.



Cofer certainly does not imply that the United States is liberal while Puerto Rico is regressive, or the other way around—she’s simply suggesting that the two are fundamentally different. While Catholic rules of honor constrain women, they also protect them; similarly, while gender roles in the United States might permit more freedom, they also permit racist and unwanted sexual attention. The “piropos” suggest the fundamental difference between the two cultures: such a display of sexual interest would be inconceivable in the United States, while it would be extremely inappropriate for a boy in Puerto Rico to give a girl an unwanted kiss.



As she gains professional success, Judith still experiences instances of harassment based on stereotypes of Latina women, though less frequently than she did before she gained such respect and recognition. At a hotel with a colleague, Judith is accosted by a middle-aged man in a tuxedo who is accompanied by his daughter. He shouts “Evita!” at her and loudly sings “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina.” When his daughter asks for applause, she complies, hoping it will end the performance, but he continues, singing a lewd tune in which he rhymes “**María**” with “gonorrhoea.” While his daughter wants Judith to laugh, she refuses, and instead tells the daughter to ask her father about his conduct in the army. Judith recognizes that the presumably wealthy, powerful man would likely not have treated a white woman like this, since he would have acknowledged her humanity. But he sees Judith as only a myth.

Here, Cofer brings back the symbol of “María” in order to show how such mainstream representations of Latina women become so prevalent that they come to shape perception of all Latina women, even those who share nothing in common with such characters. “Evita,” another one of the characters that the man stereotypically associates with Judith, references the popular musical of the same title, which focuses on the Argentine political leader Eva Perón (more commonly known as Evita). This reference, as well as the inclusion of the song “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina,” demonstrates how the “myth of the Latin woman” flattens and simplifies all Latina women into one homogenous category despite their differences. Judith is, of course, not from Argentina, but that does not matter to the man in the tuxedo, who sees her as a mere idea of what he thinks a Latina woman represents. Finally, when Judith tells the man’s daughter to ask her father about what he did in the army, she is referencing the reputation of American soldiers’ unsavory or objectionable sexual behavior while serving abroad—by saying this, Judith effectively flips the association of “María” with “gonorrhoea” on its head. In doing so, she points out the hypocrisy of the stereotype that Latina women are sexually promiscuous, suggesting that it is actually far more likely for a white American man to be hypersexual, especially when seeing a Latina woman or woman of color (i.e., a woman whose individual agency he completely disregards) as the object of his desire.



Judith understands that she escapes some of the discrimination that other Latina women face because of her education, professional success, and English language ability. Other Latin immigrants, including her parents, are subjected to the stereotype that they are only fit to be domestic servants, waiters, or factory laborers. This stereotype reflects the limited options available to many Spanish-speaking immigrants and is perpetuated by movies and television in a manner similar to the stereotyping of Black women exemplified by “Mammy” in [Gone with the Wind](#). Feminist Latina scholars argue that this stereotype perpetuates the limited class mobility of Latina women. However, even educated and successful Latina women are subject to the same stereotypes: a Chicana PhD student, a friend of Judith’s, recounts her advisor’s repeated surprise at her advanced vocabulary.

Again, Cofer argues that while these stereotypes of Latina women mostly obscure the truth of real Latina women’s lives, she explains here why they are, to some degree, grounded in reality because of the limited employment options available to many Latino immigrants in the U.S. In comparing these stereotypes to stereotypes about Black women, Cofer shows the similarity between the experiences of different racial minorities in the U.S. This is because similar conditions of poverty and limited professional opportunities can trap both Black and Latina women in low-paid work, which then creates a self-reinforcing narrative that such jobs are all these women are fit to do. This reality results in profound racial and gender inequality: to this day, Black and Latino people experience higher rates of poverty and are more commonly found in menial jobs than white Americans. Particularly for women of these groups, their experiences of racial discrimination are intensified because of their experiences of gender discrimination. Finally, Cofer explains that even when these stereotypes diverge from reality—i.e. when a Latina woman is professionally successful—these stereotypes still follow her and limit her upward mobility, because the vision of those in power is clouded by the idea of Latina women as hypersexual and uneducated, even when that is not the reality.



Even Judith, who has multiple diplomas, is sometimes assumed to be a culinary or service worker. She recalls an incident at her first public poetry reading at a restaurant in Miami, where an older woman called Judith to her table thinking she was a waitress—Judith, for her part, thought the woman wanted her to sign a copy of her book. Judith remembers that interaction more clearly than all the highlights of the event because it reminds her of the hurdles she has had to overcome to be taken seriously. She recalls that her fury at the woman impassioned her reading, and that her ability to appeal to and impress an audience that did not recognize her experiences made her proud. She references a poem she wrote, which she calls a “prayer for communication, and for respect.”

Judith has experienced such instances of being subjected to the “myth” of the Latin woman despite the fact that she has defied the “myth” in many ways throughout her life. However, as she suggests here, overcoming such adversity has profoundly impacted her writing for the better. In fact, the experience of moving and existing between cultures inspires much of her writing, which concerns themes of translation and the universality of human experience.





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