

# The Myth of the Latin Woman

## Judith Ortiz Cofer

Born in Puerto Rico in 1952, poet, essayist, and novelist Judith Ortiz Cofer has written extensively on being reared with her parents' traditional island culture while growing up in New Jersey. In an interview, Cofer described the contradictions in her cultural identity: "I write in English, yet I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience.... I am a composite of two worlds." A professor of English at the University of Georgia, Cofer has published essays, poems, and fiction. Her work includes *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer* (2000), *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003), *Call Me Maria* (2004), and *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish: Poems* (2005). The piece included here is from *The Latin Deli*, published in 1993.

- 1 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 I 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.
- 2 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 a tropical paradise but an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. As a Puerto Rican girl living 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.
- 3 Growing up in a large urban center in New Jersey during the 1960s, I suffered from what I think of as "cultural schizophrenia." Our life was designed by my parents as a microcosm of their *casas* on the island. We spoke in Spanish, ate Puerto Rican food bought at the *bodega*, and practiced strict Catholicism at a church that allotted us a one-hour slot each week for mass, performed in Spanish by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary for Latin America.
- 4 As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance by my parents, since my virtue and modesty were, by their cultural equation, the same as their honor.