

## “The Myth of the Latin Woman”

Cofer, who is an accomplished poet and novelist, says that in her travels around the United States to give readings, she tries through modeling and storytelling to change the negative stereotyping of Latin American women that prevails in our culture. This chapter from her book *The Latin Deli* extends that crusade into print. She demonstrates the confusion that results when the members of one culture judge those of another by their own idiosyncratic standards. Her example about Hispanic schoolgirls trying to dress for “Career Day” shows how unreasonable it is to ask people of color to conform to white American values. Her attempts to act British in London convince her that “the Island” travels with those who leave Puerto Rico; one should not attempt to abandon her own identity.

Cofer’s purpose is to prove that cultural stereotypes are damaging and wrong. She argues that “some people” who don’t bother to look beyond one’s “Hispanic appearance” misjudge the dress, demeanor, and potential of Latinas. Acknowledging her own good fortune and the providence of her parents who gave her a good education and “a stronger footing in the mainstream culture,” Cofer speaks for her many Hispanic “*campañeras*” who lack the social standing or language skills to speak for themselves. To subtly reinforce her thesis, she paints unsterotypical portraits such as those of the “Chinese priest” who performed a Spanish mass in New Jersey, the female Italian-American business-school student, and the Chicana Ph.D. student. Her essay ends with a quotation from one of her own poems about “Latin women [who] pray in Spanish to an Anglo God/ with a Jewish heritage. . . .”

Writing specifically for “those who should know better” but still succumb to the urge to “put others ‘in their place,’ ” Cofer recounts embarrassments she has suffered as the object of cultural stereotyping. She wants to curb the behavior of people like the patronizing man who sang to her on a British bus, the obnoxious one singing in a “classy metropolitan hotel,” the boy who expected her to “mature early,” and the woman at a poetry reading who mistook the Latina poet for a waitress. Cofer tries to correct stereotypes about Latin American women by educating her audience. It is “culture clash” that causes her Italian-American friend to observe that Puerto Rican girls’ jewelry looks as if they are “wearing ‘everything at once.’ ” Cofer describes the tropical heat, colorful environment, and strict Catholic morality that pervade Puerto Rico as a way of explaining styles of dress common to Latinas.

Cofer’s observation that what is called a “party” in the United States is really just “a marathon conversation in hushed tones” draws a sharp contrast between herself and her audience. Assuming that her readers have not visited Puerto Rico, she describes the *piropos*, or provocative poems that young men recite impromptu to women on the streets of the island. Their outrageous but never obscene poems contrast sharply with the “dirty song” invented by the man in a tuxedo who embarrasses Cofer and her colleague in their hotel. This book chapter is an answer to that man’s daughter, who expected the women to “laugh along” with her father’s inappropriate performance.

Narratives exemplify and strengthen every point in Cofer’s arguments against stereotyping Latin American women. The story of the young man who regaled Cofer with “an Irish tenor’s rendition of ‘María’ from *West Side Story*” introduces the essay’s theme. Recounting how she “agonized” about what to wear to school on “Career Day” proves that “it is custom . . . not chromosomes” that prompt Puerto Rican girls to opt for “tight skirts and jingling bracelets.” Cofer’s indignation at the behavior of the boy who escorted her to her first formal dance underscores the fact that Latinas are not promiscuous, as the young man thought. The behavior of the middle-aged man who delights his companions by taunting Cofer as “Evita” sharply demonstrates that race does not automatically determine one’s social class, even though the man would not similarly objectify a “white woman.” The narrative about the woman at the poetry reading who unwittingly orders a cup of coffee from the poet she has come to hear underscores Cofer’s point that Latinas are not simply “menials,” those relegated to jobs as domestics. Cofer’s best strategy, however, is an ethical one. She is a Latin-American woman who defies stereotypes by speaking out against them.