

**“Those Who Should Know Better”:
Teaching Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “The Myth of the Latin Woman”
at a Predominately White Institution**

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For several years, poet and writer Judith Ortiz Cofer’s essay, “The Myth of the Latin Woman/*Just Met A Girl Named María*” from her collection, *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women* (1993) has offered a welcome respite from the majority-white writers in my department’s required first-year composition anthology. Ortiz Cofer’s memoir details how the pervasive Hollywood stereotype of the “Spicy Latina” promotes sexual harassment of Latinx and Hispanic women. Her anecdotes and allusions help many of my predominantly white students confront the unexamined biases that accompany their white privilege. By contrast, women of African descent in my classes often notice the parallels between the sexualized foods men use to describe their own bodies and the ways in which Ortiz Cofer and her *compañeras* were and are “expected to ripen, not just grow into Womanhood like other girls” (879). In this essay, I offer some context and resources for faculty preparing to approach Ortiz Cofer’s essay in their first-year writing classes. This text works well for response or analysis papers, but it also serves as an excellent model for units on narrative and personal essay. Cofer’s work would be a valuable addition to courses on contemporary, American, or world writers.

For faculty who teach primarily Caucasian students, it is impossible to overstate the importance of background. Most students I teach cannot locate Puerto Rico on a map. They do not know that Puerto Ricans are U. S. citizens. Hence, a brief geopolitical lesson is a critical first step. Ortiz Cofer’s cultural references to *West Side Story*, *Evita*, *La Bamba*, and actor Rita Moreno are also unfamiliar. My students can easily parrot received knowledge that “stereotypes are bad” and that “you shouldn’t stereotype people.” Nevertheless, students often do not recognize the tropicalization that Ortiz Cofer decries in her essay also informs their own views of Latinx women.

Indeed, tropicalization in U. S. television and film exoticizes Latinx and Hispanic women, reducing their bodies to the cornucopia of fruits on Carmen Miranda’s headdress, an image that the Chiquita Banana Company still uses without irony or apology. (See <http://www.chiquita.com/our-company/our-story/miss-chiquita>.) Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman define tropicalization as a “means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” (8). Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman point out that tropicalization “from a privileged, First World location is undoubtedly a hegemonic move” that flattens cultural specificities and identities to fit a pre-determined narrative (8). From this perspective, Chávez-Silverman notes that one of the ways in which North American texts and visual media tropicalize Latina bodies is by making them “visible *only* as stereotypes,” one of which involves the “exotic, hyper-eroticized sexuality” (101). As Malgorzata Martynuska has argued, tropicalization “position[s] the Latina body as oversexed as well as sexually available” through “seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair or extravagant jewellery [*sic*]” (75). Here, faculty can emphasize that Ortiz Cofer’s memoir explicates the damaging impact of this stereotype so that writers like herself can “replace old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities” (882). Alerting students to this myth as a pre-reading strategy allows novice readers to notice the ways in which Ortiz Cofer effectively debunks and shatters this notion.

To counter my students' inadvertent acceptance of tropicalization, I begin our writing module by explaining privilege and the ways cis-/het-, white, English-speaking, and able-bodied persons can surmount academic and professional hurdles more easily than others. Students participate in a thought experiment from BuzzFeed Video by tossing paper wads into a trash can, which helps them visualize how distance from resources impacts success, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KlvmuxzYE>. I ask students to think about how their position in the room impacts the ability to make a basket and how their perspective (what they see and do not see) impacts their assumptions about their own success and the success (or lack thereof) of their peers in reaching the target.

Next, I engage students in a privilege scorecard, using questions adapted from a BuzzFeed Video privilege walk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>. I must stress, however, that faculty should protect students' anonymity in such an exercise. Students may be justifiably hesitant to display their absence of privilege openly in a walk. Instead, my students and I each add or subtract one point per question, adding one point for "yes" answers and subtracting one point for "no" answers. Students tabulate their overall scores anonymously, and I record those numbers on the board. I ask students to respond to these activities in writing. These tasks work best early in the semester, as an introduction to a variety of readings related to gender, race, class, and/or sexuality.

As students prepare to read Ortiz Cofer's text, I ask them to recall how *Modern Family's* Sofía Vergara, *Desperate Housewives'* and *Devious Maids'* Eva Longoria, and *Maid in Manhattan's* Jennifer Lopez portray Hispanic and Latinx women on television and in film. Here, I activate students' schemata and the stereotypes Ortiz Cofer's essay discredits. Although students may be bashful at first, their responses typically allude to adjectives like "curvacious," "loud," and "sexy." Then I ask, "If these characters were your *only* versions of Spanish-speaking women, what assumptions might you make?" Once students respond, I screen a video on the Hollywood origins of the "Spicy Latina" myth at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp8uBitvYPc>. (Because students can sometimes struggle with the concept of 'myth,' a definition may be helpful here as well.) Post-screening, many recent students expressed surprise that such stereotypes were not, in fact, accurate; others shrugged and admitted they had "never thought about it before." In this vein, educators do best to avoid berating students' lack of cultural exposure. Rather, I openly acknowledge students' difficulty admitting these deficits. The rejoinder, "Yes, it is often easy to _____ isn't it?" effectively invites additional discussion.

Because *West Side Story* is crucial to appreciating Ortiz Cofer's text, I offer a brief synopsis and show a clip of Richard Beymer singing "María" in Jerome Robbins' 1961 film from *YouTube* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpdB6CN7jww>. Most students are unfamiliar with this musical, and those students who know its music and choreography from high school productions remain unaware of the anti-Latin stereotypes it conveys. To help students understand Tony's fantasy, I ask students to distinguish between what viewers hear and what viewers see. After some hesitation, students usually point out that the viewer only sees Tony, *not* María herself. I affirm the realization, and I argue that María exists solely as Tony's idealized dream. Her life, her circumstances, and her culture are entirely absent. I point out that over time, Tony's song (and others like it) have emboldened Anglo-American men to view Latinx women as sexual objects to be serenaded at will. I remind students to pay attention to how this treatment looks from Ortiz Cofer's perspective as they read. Because class time is limited, I direct students' attention to additional clips from *West Side Story*, *Evita*, and *La Bamba* on our institution's learning management system.

As my students and I move closer to Ortiz Cofer's text, I also introduce terms whose definitions students may struggle to articulate, such as myth, memoir, allusion, anecdote, and audience. I ask students how Ortiz Cofer's genre impacts her evidence, which is drawn from personal experience. Because students know Ortiz Cofer identifies as Latina, they routinely assume her audience is also Latinx or Hispanic. In these situations, I clarify that she is addressing middle- and upper-class white men and women, and "those who should know better ..." than to make faulty and culturally insensitive assumptions (879). I remind students that Ortiz Cofer castigates the ways on-screen portrayals of sexualized Latinas permit Anglo-American men to engage in harmful, aggressive sexual behavior.

Once students have read Ortiz Cofer's essay, the next class begins with a ten-minute writing prompt that requires students to respond to the text. After a brief discussion, I divide students into small groups, assigning each one a reading question from their homework, which I include at the end of the first lesson plan. Students have ten minutes to pool their notes, generate an answer, and select quotations to present to the class. I sometimes write these questions (relating to Ortiz Cofer's purpose, evidence, use of allusion, or ethos) on large post-it sheets on the walls and ask each group to record their answers. In this case, I direct groups to circulate to another poster and add their own response to another group's work.

This time for peer-to-peer rehearsal facilitates a plenary discussion of the nuances of Ortiz Cofer's memoir. While most students focus on the indignities of the drunken serenades, they have difficulty identifying Ortiz Cofer's argument that "Mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes—for example that of the Hispanic woman as the 'Hot Tamale' or sexual firebrand" (878). My students frequently miss Ortiz Cofer's point about how media primes white men "to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal" (879). Rather, students' early drafts suggest that they view the cultural "clash" Ortiz Cofer describes (879) as Hispanic women's "failure" to wear students' versions of "appropriate" clothing. Other students struggle to understand how Ortiz Cofer's assertion that she does not "wear [her] diplomas around her neck" contributes to her ethos (881). These comprehension issues are not malicious or willful. Rather, they offer intrepid faculty valuable teaching moments in which to address sexual harassment, internalized misogyny, slut shaming, and bias. As students rehearse their ideas and draft their papers, I coach them to present Ortiz Cofer's text accurately in their writing, and I offer additional explication in class and in conferences.

One of the most rewarding aspects of teaching this text is seeing students reflect on incidents from their own lives that are similar to those that Ortiz Cofer describes. A student of African descent compared the humiliation of a man's admiration of her "chocolate" legs as a twelve-year-old to Ortiz Cofer's equally disempowering anecdote of a boy comparing her to a fruit at her first formal dance: "I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early" (879). Remembering the poetry reading where a listener assumed Ortiz Cofer was a waitress, another student recalled her own mother's assumption that a shopper of Hispanic appearance was a grocery store employee, not a customer like herself. Another writer connected the ways her high school peers shamed their less well-dressed classmates to Ortiz Cofer's sense of desolation when she and other Latina students became "negative models" to their Anglo-American peers on Career Day (878). These connections demonstrate intellectual and emotional growth as students link their experiences to Ortiz Cofer's memoir. The reading and cultural awareness issues that I address here may not be accurate for classes at more selective private colleges and universities. Yet as faculty, keeping a variety of zones of proximal development within students' reach facilitates their ability to appreciate the ways Ortiz Cofer's writing unfolds meaning for her readers.

The richness of Ortiz Cofer's essay rewards re-reading and re-teaching, and I find far more in her words than I can ever hope to convey in my classes. Her voice exposes students to the ways U. S. media normalizes sexual harassment and reduces Latinx women to tropical fruits for comedy in Anglo-Americans' "cartoon-populated universe" (880). As Ortiz Cofer's closing prayer for a "bilingual" God suggests (882), it is incumbent on us to help our students recognize how we fall short of the communication and respect that Ortiz Cofer and millions of women like her deserve and demand.

Works Cited

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Lesson Plan (Day 1 of 2)

Agenda/Objective: Introduction to Privilege and to Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Myth of the Latin Woman"

10 minutes: Introduction to Privilege

- **Activity One: Waste Paper Toss**

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KlvmuxzYE>)

Follow-Up: Why is this activity inherently unfair?
How does your distance from the basket impact your chances of success?
What do you see if you are seated in the back? In the front?
What assumptions might you make based on that perspective?

- **Activity Two: Privilege Questionnaire & Score Card**

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>)

Follow-Up: Look at the numbers. What do you see?
What would this class be like for a student who scored a 34/35? A -1/35?

5-10 Minutes: Daily Writing

- What are you thinking about in terms of our two in-class privilege activities?
- What are you realizing about yourself? Your peers? All of us?

10 Minutes: Terms

Myth	Purpose	Puerto Rico
Memoir	Genre	Hispanic
Anecdote	Audience	Latina/-o/-x
Allusion		

10 Minutes: Stereotypology Video (YouTube)

- **Pre-Viewing:** Ask students to recall Sofia Vergara's character on *Modern Family*. Mention Eva Longoria on *Desperate Housewives* and *Devious Maids* and Jennifer Lopez in *Maid in Manhattan*. Ask students what these portrayals suggest about Latinas.

- **Ask:** If these characters were your only point of contact, what assumptions might you make about women from Latin America or the Caribbean? Where do these stereotypes come from?

Show "Stereotypology: Spicy Latinas" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp8uBitvYPc>)

- **Post-Viewing:** Having seen this video, what are you thinking about? Was this information new? Familiar? Both? Neither?

10 Minutes: "María" (Richard Beymer, *West Side Story*, 1961)

- **Synopsis:** The film sets *Romeo & Juliet* in 1950s New York City with a gang rivalry between the white Jets and Puerto Rican Sharks. Tony, who is white, falls in love with María, who is Puerto Rican. Tragedy ensues.

- **Show clip at** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpdB6CN7jww>
- **Follow-Up:** Who is Tony singing about?
Who do viewers see and hear? Not see? Not hear?
What does María's absence from the screen suggest?

For Next Meeting: Read "The Myth of the Latin Woman/*Just Met A Girl Named María.*"
Answer the homework questions in your notes:

Sample Homework Questions

1. How do you see women from Latin America, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean? What images come to mind? Where do these images come from?
2. Identify Ortiz Cofer's genre, purpose, and audience. Refer to specific passages from the text.
3. What is the "myth" to which Ortiz Cofer refers? Why does this myth exist?
4. How does Ortiz Cofer combat this myth? What types of evidence does she use?
5. Where do you see Ortiz Cofer assert her *ethos* (her credibility as a writer)?
6. How does Ortiz Cofer's essay impact your view of Latin women?

These homework questions are models from which I encourage other faculty to depart. I offer them as starting points for planning. Faculty teaching a textual or rhetorical analysis might ask questions related to logos and pathos as well. Faculty using this essay in literature surveys might create more specific questions related to Ortiz Cofer's use of allusion, for example. I do not recommend asking more than six questions, especially in courses with first-year writers. I also encourage faculty not to require students to handwrite or type individual answers. Rather, ask students to take notes (and train them to do so effectively) early in the semester. As students complete independent or small-group tasks, teachers can circulate to check homework notes visually without collecting them, which students will appreciate.

Lesson Plan (Day 2 of 2)

Agenda/Objective: Understanding Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Myth of the Latin Woman"

10 minutes: Daily Writing

- Answer either of the following homework questions:
 1. Prior to reading Ortiz Cofer's essay, what images came to mind when you thought of women from Puerto Rico or Latin America? Why? Where do these images come from?
 2. How does reading Ortiz Cofer's essay impact your view of Latin women?

5 minutes: Talk Back

Collect students' writing and ask them to share briefly.

10 Minutes: Group Work

- Divide class into groups of 4-5 students. Assign each group a homework question related to a specific quotation, anecdote, or rhetorical strategy. Each group must provide at least one quotation to support its answer and present their work to the class.
- Circulate to check for questions and offer support/clarification.
- **Extension:** If students are writing their answers on chart-sized post-it paper, direct each group to rotate to a new question at the end of 10 minutes. Groups spend 5 minutes responding to another group's question on the same page.

15-20 Minutes: Group Reports and Discussion

- As group members report, clarify and extend students' responses. Point out specific quotations that students may have misunderstood or skipped.
- If time allows, ask another group to respond to the presenting group.
- Offer follow-up questions and add additional analysis where needed.

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