

Latin girl

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



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 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. 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. Growing up in a large urban center in New Jersey during the 1960s, I suffered from what I think of as a "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 in Latin America.