CONSUMING THE IMAGE: HIERARCHIES OF BEAUTY AND POWER IN US LATINO, COLOMBIAN, AND DOMINICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

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Digital Object Identifier: http://dx.doi.org/10.13023/ETD.2016.215

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CONSUMING THE IMAGE: HIERARCHIES OF BEAUTY AND POWER IN US LATINO, COLOMBIAN, AND DOMINICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky.

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2016
ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

CONSUMING THE IMAGE: HIERARCHIES OF BEAUTY AND POWER IN US LATINO, COLOMBIAN, AND DOMINICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

This dissertation focuses on dominant contemporary depictions of women in order to investigate the related processes of producing and policing physical attractiveness and privilege in mainstream cultural productions. I examine how certain US Latina, Colombian, and Dominican female portrayals fit definite paradigms of ideal beauty and contribute to patterns of power within magazines, films and television, music, and literary novels. I explore the ways in which the majority of dominant representations in all three countries favor specific beauty ideals linked with an Anglo or Northern European archetype, thus limiting the acceptable model and excluding a great part of the racially mixed female population which fails to match this criterion. By studying the relationship between body image and messages that inspire anxiety for those women who fall outside of ideal beauty patterns, my analysis bridges sociological and anthropological studies within literary theories and visual culture and contributes to new perspectives on Latinidad and Tropicalism by including a trans-nationalistic approach. While much work has been done on the connection between the body and identity within the United States, scholarship within this area has been more limited within Hispanic literature and Latin American popular culture in terms of the role of power structures. While one perception of beauty is that it is merely physical, in reality racial classification and the recognition of “legitimate” beauty have tangible impacts on social matters such as access to employment, marriageability, perceptions of education, civilization, decency, and purity.

KEYWORDS: US Latino, Latin America, Latinidad, Ideal Beauty, Popular Culture.

Angela Marie Postigo
Student’s Signature

April 7, 2016
Date
CONSUMING THE IMAGE: HIERARCHIES OF BEAUTY AND POWER IN US LATINO, COLOMBIAN, AND DOMINICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

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April 7, 2016
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To my Mother, Lou Ann Rhodes, who is my biggest fan, and to my Father, Abel Gonzales, who has always believed in me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This doctoral dissertation would not have been completed without the guidance, support, patience, and love of others. I am especially grateful to have the Dissertation Committee that I do because every member has made an impact on my life and to my intellectual development at the University of Kentucky. First, my dissertation chair, Dr. Susan Carvalho, who not only supported and guided me through every step of this study, but also exemplifies the quality scholarship and professor to which I aspire. Dr. Susan Larson, who was DGS when I was accepted, and whose kind and encouraging words influenced my decision to attend the University of Kentucky – in addition, her influence in my decision to include 20th–21st century Spanish Literature as an area of discipline. Dr. Biglieri, with whom I took one of my first classes and who took the time to go over my final paper with me word for word. Dr. M. Cristina Alcalde, who inspired me to focus on gender and Latin America and whose input and suggestions as my second reader further enhanced my final work. And Dr. Lance Brunner whose expertise in music is a great contribution to this work.

On a personal level, the support and love of my family has been crucial to me achieving this degree. My parents have not only supported me in life, but have also encouraged me to become everything I ever dreamed of being, especially a PhD. In the midst of finishing my degree, I met my husband, Hernan A Postigo, who completes me and who gave me a daughter, Briana Amaris, who has made all of this worth it. Lastly, without the help of my Mother, my sister Cynthia, and Diane I could not otherwise be simultaneously mom and scholar.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement ........................................................................................................ iii  

List of Figures ................................................................................................................ v  

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 2: *Exótica es la palabra*: Hypersexualization and Imagery of Latina and Latin American Bodies in Cultural Productions ................................................. 29  

Chapter 3: *Accesorios grandes y poderosos*: Consumption of Luxury Goods and Ideals of Glamour and Beauty ................................................................................. 89  

Chapter 4: *Cuerpo perfecto desde todos los ángulos*: Cosmetic Surgery and the Age Factor ......................................................................................................................... 179  

Chapter 5: Conclusion ................................................................................................... 250  

Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 256  

Curriculum Vitae ............................................................................................................. 261
### LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure 2.1 | Cover of *Vanidades* September 2010 Issue | 34  |
| Figure 2.2 | Headshot Jolie | 37  |
| Figure 2.3 | Jolie 2 | 38  |
| Figure 2.4 | Advertisement Sidral Mundet Light *Eve* 2010 | 41  |
| Figure 3.1 | Cover of *A la Moda* 2011 Issue | 93  |
| Figure 3.2 | Model *Keratina Brazilian Formula* Advertisement | 98  |
| Figure 3.3 | *Vitaly* Advertisement | 101  |
| Figure 3.4 | *HK Derm* Advertisement | 102  |
| Figure 3.5 | *La Aplanadora* Advertisement | 103  |
| Figure 3.6 | *Dress Lab* Advertisement | 105  |
| Figure 3.7 | *Maxi-falda* Advertisement | 107  |
| Figure 3.8 | Cover *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* 2012 Issue | 110  |
| Figure 3.9 | Section *Cultura* Clash | 115  |
| Figure 3.10 | Fit for a Queen Advertisement | 117  |
| Figure 3.11 | Stylista Section | 118  |
| Figure 4.1 | *Almased* Advertisement | 187  |
| Figure 4.2 | *Slim Flash* Advertisement | 189  |
| Figure 4.3 | *Bosom Max* Advertisement | 191  |
| Figure 4.4 | *Forma Vital* Advertisement | 196  |
| Figure 4.5 | *Medicina Estética* Advertisement | 197  |
Despite notions that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” indisputable social standards for female physical attractiveness persist. The focus on the Latina and Latin American female body within popular culture has developed a clear obsession with “appearance” – whether it be physical (race, body type and characteristics) or conceptual (national preference). The present study will explore the ways in which body image is an aspect of identity, and how that identity can be shaped through the influence of cultural productions. Specifically, this dissertation will focus on the ways in which notions of race, socio-economic class and power intersect with paradigms\(^1\) of ideal physical attractiveness of the female U.S. Latina, Colombian, and Dominican body. As we review contemporary (2000 to present) representations of female attractiveness and sexuality in popular women’s magazines, narrative fiction, music, television, and film, we will explore the ways in which these frameworks are often designed to perpetuate notions of racial superiority, ideal physicality, and heteronormative expectations of female sexuality to convince women to spend money, to obtain cosmetic treatments or surgeries, and/or to reify established social hierarchies. At the same time, we will examine particular images that confront or actively deconstruct these paradigms, in order to carve out a broader arena for female autonomy, a broader notion of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women’s value.

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\(^1\) In other words, an example that serves as a model or pattern of ideal physical attractiveness.
The more I examined the imagery and representations of Latina and Latin American women within dominant mainstream media, the more I noticed similar patterns of power structures within popular culture, that transcend national boundaries. For example, I observed that the same network of practices (beauty regimes, diet and exercise, clothing), institutions (Hollywood, mass media, advertising), and technologies (globalization, photo-shop, poses) are present for U.S. Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women. The transnational approach allows me to examine how the coalescence of race, gender, and socio-economic class, as well as definite characteristics such as body shape, skin and eye color, hair texture/style/length, and facial features combine to define non-white women’s ability or inability to correspond to particular national beauty ideals and, thus, impact the anticipated success or failure of the Latina or Latin American woman. Examining the theories specifically surrounding the Latino and Latin American body and identity within the United States, I was surprised to encounter an array of concepts that harmonize with one another concerning the creation of a consistent condition for all Latinas/os and Latin Americans regardless of their differences. The most prevailing tropes operating are those that homogenize all Latinas/os and Latin Americans into one group erasing all aspects of cultural, lingual, or racial difference: Latinidad and its correlative idea of Tropicalism (overdetermined through the Caribbean), which will be explored in chapters 2 and 3 of this study. For example, under the trope of Tropicalism, attributes such as bright-colored clothing,

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rhythmic music, and brown or olive skins comprise some of the most enduring stereotypes related to Latinos and Latin Americans, a stereotype that also connotes excess and hypersexualization. Sexuality also plays a central role in the tropicalization of Latinas and Latin American women through the widely circulated narratives of sexual availability, proficiency, and desirability (Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 211). I came across the same network of practices reflected within literature and music as within visual culture. For the U.S. Latina, Colombian, and Dominican woman, stereotypical and archetypical, gendered, racialized, and national identities are intermixed in the construction of acceptable popular signifiers of female beauty and power.

A major component of this dissertation is to evaluate how beauty is racialized. Through my research I found that the acceptance of plastic surgery and the erasure of ethnic and racial features (rhinoplasty; skin lightening) is prevalent in Colombia and adjoining Brazil. This led to the addition of the Dominican Republic because of its significant racially varied population. As a result, the inclusion of two Caribbean countries provided a space where I could explore racially mixed societies and the importance given to the presence or absence of ethnic features.

With the intentions of exploring the various vehicles through which Latina and Latin American women measure themselves, each chapter of this study focuses on a distinct aspect of corporeal paradigms that have the power to reinforce or interrogate narrow paradigms of physical attractiveness. These include the popular women’s beauty and fashion magazines produced both in the United States and the Dominican Republic Vanidades (2010, 2012), A la Moda (2011), Eve (2010), and Cosmopolitan for Latinas (Premiere Issue Summer 2012); the narrative fiction of the Colombian novel Sin tetas no
hay paraíso (2005), the Dominican novel Ellas saben del amor (2010), and the U.S. Latino novels Sex and the South Beach Chicas (2006), and Dirty Girls Social Club (2003); the U.S. Latino film Tortilla Soup (2001), the Colombian Spanish-language soap opera Las muñecas de la mafia (2010); and the music from “La morena” by Dominican Toxic Crow, and “Las reinas del barrio,” from the soundtrack to the popular Spanish-language soap opera and film Sin tetas no hay paraíso. Each medium uses a different set of conventions as it interacts with the equation of beauty and value, either to strengthen or to complicate that equation. By focusing on how certain privileges are available to U.S. Latinas, Colombian, and Dominican women who are able to correspond to specific paradigms of ideal beauty, and on what messages are being sent to those who do not, I am able to assess whether each one validates the favored paradigm. In addition, I am able to consider when a cultural production instead presents a counter-narrative that allows the reader or spectator to question those assumptions, thus allowing for a broader definition of success. This framework of power is recognizable within each cultural artifact, by the value placed upon each character, image, or representation. Ultimately, this reinforcement or resistance is reflected through the success of particular female characters within a novel – mainly expressed through their ability to attract a love interest, – the preference for certain physical characteristics (eye and hair color, body type) within pictorial representations, or the popularity of a certain image of women within music lyrics and video. While many cultural producers generate cultural productions to create anxiety and encourage women to spend money on products, diets, or fashion, in order to fit said ideal, some producers push back in order to cross-examine
the assumed standards reinventing that ideal, and to question the narrow range of acceptable measures of success.

While I contribute to the scholarship of such critics as Dávila, Valdivia, Molina-Guzmán, Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman by examining the signifiers of Latinidad and Tropicalism that effectively communicate stereotypical and archetypical gendered, racialized, and national identities to audiences, I also narrow my research to focus on popular signifiers of female identity specifically related to beauty and power. Additionally, my research contributes to the contemporary discourse on the connection between the body and identity within the Humanities and Social Sciences by examining how the intersectionality of race, gender, and socio-economic factors influence and make implicit or explicit assumptions about the female body’s form, appearance, success and/or failure within cultural productions. It contributes to new perspectives on such tropes as Latinidad and Tropicalism by including a trans-national approach. By studying the relationship between, for example, body image and the overall messages that inspire anxiety for those women who fall outside of ideal beauty patterns, my analysis incorporates sociological and anthropological studies alongside literary theories, and theories of visual culture. While much work has been done on the irrefutable connection between the body and identity within the United States, such scholarship is of limited scope within Hispanic literary studies, and even more so in terms of Caribbean popular culture. Of those studies focusing on such an approach, the present study is the first to consider the role of power structures connected specifically to the correlation between beauty and anxiety within U.S. and Latin American popular culture for Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women. Additionally, the inclusion of the Dominican
Republic and texts outside of the canon places value upon a relatively un-studied territory.

Concentrating on the success and power of U.S. Latina, Colombian and Dominican female representations as aligned to the paradigms of physical attractiveness in literature, film, television, popular women’s magazines, and music, this study explores the representational dialectic produced through the linked practice of racialization and gendering. I examine contemporary representations and imagery of Latina and Caribbean women in order to survey and investigate the related processes of producing and policing Latina and Latin American female beauty and power in mainstream cultural productions through which these different types of media make implicit or explicit assumptions about the female body’s form, appearance, success and/or failure. In addition to observing that some cultural production is less nuanced in its representation, this work will explore ways in which other expressions are more nuanced, allowing for a more inclusive representation of varying Latina and Latin American beauty ideals. My thesis, then, is that fictional, pictorial, and musical depictions of women will either reinforce these equations of beauty and power, within particular cultural norms, or will interrogate them in creative and provocative ways.

The writings of both Naomi Wolf and Susan Bordo provide a crucial foundation on the theoretical discourse concerning the relationship between feminism, Western culture, and the body. Both authors agree that there exist complex power relations and societal control over the image of the female body. While Bordo does mention ethnicity briefly, she and Wolf both mainly consider white North American women as the basis for their studies. The current study, informed by their works and focusing on mainstream
media, will examine how these theories might be broadened to include consideration of Latina and Latin American women within mainstream cultural productions in the United States, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic.

Both authors reference the concept of the contemporary preoccupation with appearance as a backlash set in place to maintain existing gender constructions against any efforts to alter power relations. Naomi Wolf in the *Beauty Myth* (1991), avows that contemporary women are the focus of a violent backlash against feminism. This backlash uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement. Wolf defines “the beauty myth” as the belief that “beauty” is a quality that exists objectively and universally, that women must want to embody it, and that men must want to possess those who embody it. This narrow paradigm of embodiment, which is an imperative for women but not for men, has supposedly evolved, according to Wolf, because of natural, biological, sexual, and evolutionary situations: “Strong men battle for women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless” (12). Wolf then dedicates the rest of her book to debunking this concept, and instead analyzes how “beauty” is in fact merely a currency system, like the gold standard. Like any economy, states Wolf, this notion of bodily valuation is established by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that preserves male dominance (12). By maintaining this construct, society is able to control the female body through commodification of its worth, based on set values of beauty. As Wolf summarizes, by assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, the beauty “myth” is an expression
of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves (12). According to Wolf, there is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty myth – it is nothing more than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to launch a retaliation against women. The beauty myth – composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression – is not about women at all. “It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” (Wolf 13).

Susan Bordo also studies a broad range of issues connected to the body and appearance within today’s society related to weight, exercise, media images, movies, advertising, and eating diseases in her book entitled *Unbearable Weight* (1993). Bordo also recognizes that the modern obsession with appearance – which, she states, still affects women far more than men – “may function as a backlash phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations against any attempts to shift or transform power relations” (166). Differing with Wolf, she asserts that, throughout history, the discipline and normalization of the female body has to be acknowledged as a remarkably lasting and flexible strategy of social control. One way in which this social control manifests itself is through the “pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity – a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion” (166). According to Bordo, through this pursuit female bodies become docile bodies “– bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (166). By invoking the idea of docile bodies and power relations, Bordo borrows from Foucault’s concepts of social bodies. She explains, that following Foucault’s concepts of modern power, “we
must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another; we must instead think of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain” (167).

In her study of the body and the reproduction of femininity, Susan Bordo affirms that “Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress – central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women – we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification. Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough” (166). The most palpable evidence of the suggestion of self-modification is found within popular women’s magazines. Countless advertisements and articles encourage a transformation that consistently follow a narrow prototype of ideal beauty.

For Latinas, Colombian, and Dominican women that may not already resemble that ideal, this paradigm pressures them to make changes, such as lightening skin color or undergoing cosmetic surgery in order to fit national preferences of physical attractiveness that many times include the ideology of blanqueamiento. Thus, the beauty myth rests on the assumption that the body is malleable and therefore susceptible to criticism. It is precisely the paradox between the feelings of inferiority arising from the advertisements and the ideal self conveyed by the images that creates desire and sells the products, fashion, lifestyle, and promotes invasive and non-invasive cosmetic surgeries and procedures. As a result, and as Bordo reminds us, through the pursuit of an ideal femininity and beauty, female bodies become docile bodies under the pressures of
“practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain” (167).

A precursor to the motifs of Latinidad and Tropicalism is the term “Latin Look” coined by Clara E. Rodríguez, who examines issues of identity and cultural representation through Latino images in feature films, television, and the news in her book *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (1997). *Latin Looks* – the title referring to a homogenized Latino physical appearance in effect produced by the entertainment industry – is about the history of race and ethnicity in the United States as projected by the media. Rodríguez studies the representations of class, gender, color, race, and the political relationship between the United States and Latin America to determine how Latinos are portrayed in movies, television, and other media. Focusing on English-language television and films produced in the United States between 1900 and 1994, she argues that 1) US Hispanics\(^3\) are underrepresented and misrepresented in the media; 2) US Latino images in Hollywood films have become more negative with time; 3) the similarities in the portrayals of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and other Latino groups far outweigh the differences; 4) the quality of Hollywood’s presentation of Latinos has fluctuated with the larger political and economic relationships that the United States has had with Latin America; and finally Rodriguez shows how the movies produced by

\(^3\) Clara E. Rodríguez (as does Arlene Dávila) uses the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably, and since I am paraphrasing, I have kept consistency with her text. The reason some critics use these terms interchangeably stems from the entertainment’s practice of initially using the term Hispanic to refer to anyone of Spanish or Latin American descent. At first, the desire to be associated with Spain (Hispanic) was more prevalent, then the term Latino/a, that associated a person in the United States with Latin American descent, became popular. Throughout this dissertation, I specifically use Latino/a to refer to people living in the United States who have either origins in Latin America or Latin American heritage. (See Arlene Dávila, *Latinos Inc.: The Making of a People* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001)
alternative filmmakers represent a creative response from the Latino community to the issues of exclusion, discrimination, and stereotyping.

The more contemporary studies of such scholars as Isabela Molina Guzmán, Angharad N. Valdivia, Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, and Arlene Dávila, among others, also focus on patterns of identity and representation with popular culture, media, current events, marketing strategies, film, and literature. Molina Guzmán, in her book Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media (2010), outlines the visibility of the Latina body in the media and popular culture and examines the media’s role in shaping public knowledge about Latina identity and Latinidad, and the ways political and social forces shape media representations. Dangerous Curves charts the changing representational geography of U.S. and global media productions “where racially ambiguous but ethnically marked feminine bodies sell everything from haute couture to tabloids, ad where the lives of ethnic women are the focus of news, media gossip, movies, and online audience discussions” (2). The case studies within Dangerous Curves point to the contemporary production of Latinidad as a mediated form of social, political, or economic capital and positions the Latina bodies in the media landscape as both culturally desirable and socially contested, as consumable and dangerous. In another study, Angharad N. Valdivia in A Latina in the Land of Hollywood and Other Essays on Media Culture (2000), writes about gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and regional origin from what she calls a “multiculturalist/Latina feminism” perspective (5). Her analytical lens in the chapter on “Visions of Desire” has been particularly useful when considering the advertising industry and issues related to gender and class. Here Valdivia considers the space provided in mail-order catalogs for both working-class and
middle-class women’s lingerie. She states how the explicit differentiation between the distinct catalogs provides cultural critics an opportunity to study the social construction of socio-economic class. Looking at how lingerie and sexuality are closely related in our culture, she explores how the catalogs demonstrate that sexuality itself is inflected by notions of class. Valdivia asserts how “We construct our identities by drawing on this vast reservoir of gender values whose definitions of what is sexy are inextricably linked to our class position” (19). Particularly valuable is Valdivia’s analysis of pose, which I apply to pictorial representations of Latinas and Latin American women within popular women’s magazines throughout this study.

*Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001) by Arlene Dávila, examines the Hispanic marketing industry and its role in the construction and advertising of contemporary definitions of Latinidad. Looking at Hispanic marketing, Dávila reveals the relationship between culture, corporate sponsorship, and politics. Furthermore, she illustrates how commercial representation may shape people’s cultural identities as well as affect notions of belonging and cultural citizenship in public life among Latinos and other U.S. minorities. Dávila focuses on the political-economic interests and processes involved in the production of Hispanic marketing and their consumption by the people to whom they are geared, in order to “suggest that such representations are in fact produced in conversation and often in complicity with – rather than as a response or challenge to – dominant hierarchies of race, culture, and nationality” (5). Dávila’s frameworks are useful in this study to identify how the culture of consumption fuels the beauty myth, and vice versa.
Also foundational for the present discussion is the volume of essays in *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (1997) edited by Frances R. Aparicio and Susan Chávez-Silverman. This collection establishes a space for “discursive dialogism in which both dominant and marginal subjectivities are at once given voice and constantly relativized in an analysis that attempts to transcend the old binary of self/other” (1). The essays in this volume position and reposition center and margin, subject and object, self and other in an ideological and discursive polyphony in an attempt to avoid the pervading binarism and colonial gaze that essentialize and fetishize subaltern cultures and privilege dominant ones. An important aspect of these essays is a conceptual framework which allows for the incorporation of the dynamics of the colony, from the space and the viewpoint of the colonized. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman state that they “conceptualize tropicalizations precisely as a tool that foregrounds the transformative cultural agency of the subaltern subject” (2). Following this line of thought and reflecting upon my analysis of the cultural productions included in my dissertation, I have opted to expand my scope to consider primary and secondary works produced about and within Latin America, rather than relying only on North American cultural production.

An obvious starting point is television, because it is the one media that reaches across so many generations, socio-economic classes, and genders. Omar Rincón’s critical lens in his article “Narco.estética y narco.cultura en Narco.lombia” focuses on the influence that the drug culture in Colombia has had on society. Rincón asserts that drugs are not simply something to traffic or a business, but that they are also an aesthetic that traverses and interweaves with Colombia’s culture and history. This aesthetic manifests
itself through music, television, the language, and architecture. Rincón shows how
Colombia – through various cultural productions – has come to incorporate the prevalent
drug culture, including its commodification of women. He argues that “la narcoestética
es el gusto colombiano y también el de las culturas populares desposeídas que se asoman
a la modernidad y sólo han encontrado en el dinero la posibilidad de existir en el mundo”
(148). Rincón points out the importance of silicone breasts throughout television
programming and the fact that, without them, women cannot act on soap operas or
present on television programs dedicated to entertainment (160). Accordingly, such
programming imposes strict physical attributes, forcing an ideal body image with which
women must align if they want to appear on television as an actress or presenter.
Another valuable resource was Pasarela paralela: escenarios de la estética y el poder en
los reinados de belleza (2005) edited by Chloe Rutter-Jensen. The chapters in this
compilation analyze the representation of Colombian beauty queens and pageants in
order to explore their influence over the female body and Colombia’s national identity.
The essays cover such themes as race, sexuality, gender, socio-economics, and politics.
An important aspect of the present study that emerged from this resource was how race
affects the beliefs about beauty in Colombia.

When analyzing body type, gender and race within Latina and Latin American
popular culture, the historical circumstances that combine to shape gender and race
relations in Latin America cannot be disregarded. Norman E. Whitten Jr and Arlene
Torres in “To Forge the Future in the Fires of the Past” analyze blackness, culture,
communities, and regions in Latin America and the Caribbean; they avow that during the
ethnic construction of the circum-Atlantic structure of European domination, three
invariable racial reference points were the racial categories of white (European) in superior relationship over the black (African) and the native (Indigenous) (25). These definite hypostases established by phenotype and pigmentation constitute, as an undergirding basis, “a multitude of ethereal and even fantastic classifications that people took to be ‘real’ 500 years ago and still take to be ‘real’” (25). Discussing structures of domination, Whitten and Torres briefly introduce the ideal that people are “signified by signifiers as they become parts of categorical webs of signification in modern nations.” In other words, “being ‘signified’ or ‘represented’ as ‘black’ in a white-dominated world is to be stigmatized to a position of ethnic disadvantage in a discourse of racial asymmetry” (26-27). Since white is seen as superior, skin tone is regarded as a vital factor when determining not only character but beauty and power as well. Accordingly, within the mixing of races “ethnic or cultural ‘lightening’ may occur as an ideological feature among people” (Whitten and Torres 9), as seen through *blanqueamiento* and *mestizaje*. By analyzing specific advertisements, imagery, and the layout within popular women’s magazines, we see that the most prominent messages are linked to specific beliefs about beauty and race. Thus, depictions of Latina and Latin American women will either reinforce these recognizable equations of beauty and power or will challenge them.

Other resources that helped frame my exploration of the racial aspect were “Policing Boundaries: Race, Class, and Gender in Cartagena, Colombia” by Joel Streicker, and *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (2001) by David Howard. Both of these works examine the connections among socio-economic class, race, and gender within Colombian and Dominican societies. As the authors note,
normative class and gender identities in the respective societies are partly determined by race and appearance. Streiker argues that popular socio-economic class residents of the neighborhood of Santa Ana in Cartagena discriminate racially precisely in the process of forging their class identity; he proves this by showing how language embodies the normative ordering of social relations and identities. He affirms that “assertions of an oppositional popular class identity are also statements about gender and racial identity. In other words, race is embedded in class and gender discourse” (67). Howard analyzes race, racism, and identity within the Dominican Republic. A particular important chapter of his study considers race, gender, and ad images of the body. Howard avows that “Darker-skinned women in the content of a highly racialized and patriarchal society would predictably suffer twice from racist and sexist subordination” (85-86). He goes on to explain that a common masculine conception of ideal female beauty is a women who has blonde hair, blue eyes, and white skin. Such a racialization of sexuality establishes a popular male and female preference for lighter skin and reverence for the “beauty of the blanco/a, yet popular sexual myth imbues the negro/a or mulato/a with vigor and skillful prowess” (89-90). Howard states that these beliefs infiltrate most popular images, advertising, employment announcements, and folklore. Streiker’s and Howard’s critical lenses are mutually important for this dissertation, as I have considered the inclusion of race within mass media’s creation of beauty within Latin America.

Frequently during the course of this study, I have also relied upon Erynn Masi de Casanova’s “‘No Ugly Women”: Concepts of Race and Beauty among Adolescent Women in Ecuador.” Masi de Casanova’s 2004 study was particularly useful because she analyzes a cultural context in which both U.S. and Latin American cultural products
are consumed, and the study compares girls from different socio-economic backgrounds, allowing for assumptions to be drawn about the role of class in the perception of beauty. She examines the intersection of race, body, and beauty as a site of conflict and daily negotiation for women of Latin American descent. She argues that “although teens are influenced by socio-cultural ideals and media images of feminine beauty, they adapt these to their everyday lives and are frequently able to examine them critically” (288).

Masi’s investigation is particularly important because it incorporates actual interviews. However, although she concludes that the girls frequently are able to critically examine socio-cultural ideals, she underscores the possible consequences and negative repercussions if the woman’s physical appearance is not socially acceptable. She argues that “The successful performance of gender entails walking a fine line between style and exaggeration, both in behavior and appearance” (300). Masi’s findings helped me to explore how the imagery and representations of ideal feminine beauty within cultural productions, can produce feelings of anxiety to conform and insecurity for many individuals who do not possess certain standards of physical attractiveness.

The magazines chosen for each chapter’s analysis are typical of an array of magazines examined for the present study that are aimed specifically at Latina, Colombian and Dominican women living in the United States and the Caribbean. Since the magazines all follow the formulaic pattern of popular women’s fashion and beauty magazines, I selected four issues that my research showed were typical, in order to conduct a thorough analysis of these issues. Some magazines that follow similar patterns within the U.S and abroad include Vanidades, Cosmopolitan en español, Eve, and
*Cosmopolitan for Latinas*; in Colombia we find *InFashion, Ellas, Aló*, and *Fuscia*; in the Dominican Republic we see *Oh! Magazine* and *A la Moda*.

Beginning with the cover of *Vanidades* and an advertisement within *Eve*, both fashion and beauty magazines that are produced and published abroad and in the United States for a Latina and Latin American female readership, this study considers the how race, color, rhetoric, fashion, and stance – among other techniques – in combination with imagery and articles are used to represent beauty and culture. I show that there exists a celebration of Anglo or Northern European physical beauty which excludes ethnic characteristics, except in order to exoticize and hypersexualize them. In fact, when physical traits that denote ethnicity are exalted, it is always done in a manner which reinforces a stereotypically exotic or sensual nature. A parallel analysis of the cover of *A la Moda*, a fashion and beauty magazine produced and published in the Dominican Republic, illustrates how the same components of race, color, rhetoric, fashion, and stance are used to establish competing cultural demands that expect the Dominican woman to imitate Anglo or Northern European beauty, yet be more exotic. In other words, the imagery and advertisements reinforce an ideal different than the Anglo or Northern European woman, yet still promotes a narrowly defined standard: a provocative yet feminized white standard of beauty within a noteworthy racially mixed population. Additionally, a vital comparison emerges from the cover of *Cosmopolitan for Latinas*, a fashion and beauty magazine published in the United States for Latina and Latin American women, when it depicts Afro-Latina actress Zoe Saldana, whose parents are from the Dominican Republic. As we shall see, the conclusion that emerges from this comparison – and through the advertisements in the magazine – is that within the United
States race is celebrated as marker of variation among Latinas and Latin Americans. However, it is consistently limited to narrow definitions of ideal ethnic beauty highlighting those features that align with dominant Anglo or Northern European beauty, thus marketing a specific Latina and Latin American female body. Turning my focus to the segments within the magazines aimed at cosmetic surgeries and procedures, as well as body shaping, it becomes apparent that the assumption of the malleability of the female body is used to create an anxiety among consumers to fit within certain paradigms of ideal physical attractiveness, and consequently the desire to purchase products or undergo medical and non-medical treatments that will enable them to do so.

Another cultural production which can be used to create a paradigm against which women may evaluate themselves against is that of narrative. Each chapter of the present study includes a section which examines how the main protagonists navigate the competing cultural beauty ideals (as articulated in the popular women’s magazines) and whether these female characters conform to those demands or challenge them. I consider both genre fiction (or popular fiction) and literary fiction. “Genre fiction” is defined as fictional works written with the intent of fitting into a specific formulaic genre, in order to appeal to readers already familiar with that genre, and it is generally distinguished from literary fiction. Chick Lit, which became popular during the late 1990s, is a subset of genre fiction, which foregrounds issues of modern womanhood. Most often set in the present-day world, the genre features a woman whose womanhood is heavily thematized within the plot. In contrast with the somewhat-similar romance novel genre, in Chick Lit the heroine’s relationship with her family or friends is often just as important as her romantic relationships. Although the genre of Chick Lit is frequently dismissed as light
or low culture, it is a useful category of cultural production to consider in this study because it is about women, by women, and for women, was developed from popular culture, and has a large readership; thus, it is a strong producer or resister of beauty myths. Katie O’Donnell Arosteguy, focusing on how several North American Chick Lit texts question the norms that create and maintain popular standards tied to white femininity, elevates the critical evaluation of this genre by stressing the importance of the ways in which Chick Lit’s heroines and authors often negotiate the complexity of restrictive societal norms that contain and maintain gendered, racial, and class identity, through moments of tension in the plot that openly address contemporary understandings of gender and race (3). O’Donnell highlights the genre’s narrative focus on realism: “Unlike the romance, which is clearly from the start make-believe, the Chick Lit genre expects the reader to identify so closely with the heroine’s human flaws and desires that the text becomes almost her own diary, her own life. In this manner, Chick Lit effectively appeals to anxieties felt by many different women” (5). Since my study carries this analysis into the sub-genre of Latina Chick Lit, I have found that both the negotiation of restrictive societal norms that police gendered, racial, and socio-economic class identity and the anxieties and tensions revealed throughout the novels become pivotal. Chica Lit – a Latina subset of Chick Lit – conveys messages about the Latina and Latin American protagonist’s navigation of the social pressures to consume and meet a narrowly defined standard of beauty.

The novels chosen for each chapter represent all three countries (US, Dominican Republic, and Colombia), and vary in their acceptance or rejection of the dominant mass media beauty ideal for Latina and Latin American women. Of the two U.S. Latina novels
we will examine, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* reinforces equations of beauty and power liking certain hypersexualized physical characteristics, body shape, and lifestyle imitating the hypersexualized portrayal found in fashion and beauty magazines; while *Dirty Girls Social Club* rejects a narrowly defined sensual beauty by promoting physical and educational difference among Latinas and Latin American women, and proposing alternatives to the beauty paradigm as a means to acquire and exercise power.

The Colombian and Dominican novels in this study provide the opportunity to analyze many spectrums of Caribbean women’s reality: age, race, and socio-economic status. The Colombian novel *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* questions paradigms of ideal physical attractiveness by emphasizing the perils that exists within the Beauty Cult for women, and how the Cult can affect those who do not possess the physical characteristics that are regarded as the ideal beauty. The fourteen-year-old protagonist of this novel personifies Colombian society, and serves as a demand or call for action against the dictatorial nature of the beauty expectations in that country which, as represented in the novel, pervades all socio-economic and age levels. The Dominican novel *Ellas saben del amor*, contrasts with *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* and other youth-focused productions by inverting the age and socio-economic level of the main protagonists – by featuring older and already-successful female characters. In this novel, the pronounced lack of action against the anxiety created by the dominant Dominican beauty ideal is offset by the inclusion of the main protagonists in not only the upper socio-economic class but also the national racial preference.\(^4\) The security created by these two circumstances allows the

\(^4\) According to David Howard the issue of race is fundamental to the discussion of Dominican nationalism which centers on the exclusion of an African past and the manipulation of a European colonial legacy and indigenous heritage. See David Howard, *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001) 1-2.
novel to simultaneously resist and sustain certain aspects of the Dominican paradigm of physical attractiveness. Thus, as we shall see, the aging female characters in *Ellas saben del amor* resist the age and perfection ideal of beauty by abstaining from cosmetic surgeries – which they all could easily afford – yet they still uphold the cultural and racial favoritism through their European heritage and their membership in the elite ranks of society.

An analysis of the messages being sent about Latina and Latin American beauty and power within popular culture would not be complete without taking into account the influence of the small screen. According to Menéndez-Alarcón television is the least expensive means of spending leisure time, and watching it is a major source of pleasure in the lives of Latin Americans – especially for people from the middle and lower socio-economic class. Menéndez-Alarcón affirms that “television has a basic importance in the people’s representation of the world. (…) [P]eople tend to believe that television generally portrays the ‘normal’ way of living. Indeed, overall television transmits a particular way of life with which most people (…) compared themselves” (96). In this way, “[television] characters are perceived by the audience both as individuals offering opportunities for identification and as bearers of social and moral values” (Menéndez-Alarcón 99). Given that the majority of the imagery and representations of Latina and Latin American women within North American, Colombian, and Dominican mass media productions promote a hypersexual perfection of the female body, said archetype can be interpreted as the consummate femininity that women are presumed to model, and can also trigger feelings of anxiety for women who fail to meet this normalized ideal. This practice can be seen not only on-screen, but also in magazines, advertisements, and
billboards. One televised space, in particular, that reinforces a specific perfected image of the female body is that of beauty pageants. Through this type of competition, women’s bodies are given the responsibility of symbolizing the ideal beauty of their countries. Exploring the influence that this event has on Colombian female spectators, Bobby Rosenberg asserts that “en Colombia, la mujer de la calle es ‘muy hecha’, buscando representar los mismos ideales encontrados en el reinado. Más que mostrar su naturalidad, trata de mostrar su capacidad de mantener una imagen perfecta” (41). Rosenberg’s critical lens gives an example of the influence this imagery has, particularly on Colombian women, to imitate what they internalize as the ideal prototype of their national gender. Another space where the perfection of women’s bodies is apparent is that of Spanish-language soap-operas. The main female protagonists in these soap-operas consistently replicate the physical standards perpetuated through popular culture and beauty pageants. The boundaries between the real and dream worlds become permeable, as the perfection of the actors’ and actresses’ bodies and lives is displayed in a manner that projects ideals that all of society may interpret as attainable and desirable. In terms of ideal beauty, these television series – and mass media as a whole – inscribe a culturally specific ideal on the Latina and Latin American female body, standardizing the beauty myth and thus fueling bodily alienation, propagating the idea of “flawed beauty” for those who fall outside of the narrow paradigm.

Large-screen cultural productions are also considered in the present study. The U.S. Latino film Tortilla Soup, a remake of the 1994 Taiwanese film Eat Drink Man Woman, is an example of a film that reinforces the paradigm of physical attractiveness in connection with ideal beauty and the hypersexualization of Latina women. Although all
of the female characters are physically and symbolically evaluated based on their age and physicality, the most significant message is embodied through Leticia’s character, the middle-aged daughter, who transforms herself to exhibit a more alluring appearance in order to be successful in attracting a man. Thus, the plot and characters both uphold the standards created in dominant U.S. mass media for Latina women. The U.S. media’s privileging of particular performances of Latina identity and culture as naturally alluring, foreign, and consumable allows for a racialized femininity that is safe yet exotic and sexualized. Similarly, within Colombian media, an evident requirement for the greater part of female presenters, actresses, and performers appears to be a hypersexualized and perfected body and age requirement. A prime example of this is the Spanish-language soap-opera Las muñecas de la mafia. This Spanish-language soap opera belongs to a recent pattern of television programs, fashion, music, and culture that glorifies the Colombian drug culture. The plot of this serial juxtaposes two age groups of women, and their involvement with the Colombian cartel. By focusing on how the combination of sexuality, the perfected bodies, and youth gains the young female characters favor and contributes to their success over the older female characters, I show how Las muñecas de la mafia reinforces the partiality toward youth and perfection as the ideal beauty for Colombian women.

Finally I turn my focus the lyrics and pictorial representations of popular music. In chapter 3 I explore the lyrics and imagery of the song “Las reinas del barrio,” from the soundtrack to the popular Spanish-language soap opera and film Sin tetas no hay paraíso. Like the imagery present in beauty and fashion magazines, the girls in the music video, the various versions of the Spanish-language soap opera, and the film all fit a Northern
European or Anglo beauty ideal of white skin, straight long hair, thin bodies and petite nose and lips. The blending of sexual and economic desires is shown through the cosmetic surgeries that the girls – from the soap opera and film – undergo. The general message manifested through the imagery and lyrics encourage the intentional reshaping, refashioning and aesthetic manipulation of the body as a method of projecting qualities of empowerment onto the self very similar to what is experienced in beauty and fashion magazines. Thus, the message within this particular song and video’s imagery serve to further cement specific beliefs about beauty and race, reinforcing equations of beauty and power for Colombian women. Along similar lines, in chapter 2 I analyze the music video “La morena” by Toxic Crow. This song forms part of the genre of denbow or Dominican urban music which is similar to reggateon. Focusing on the lyrics and imagery which demonstrates an overt hypersexualization of the Afro-Hispanic woman (la morena), I explore the ways in which the song reinforces dominant racialized and gendered representations of ethnically mixed Latin American women by equating their idealized identity with promiscuity and purely male sexual satisfaction.

Chapter 2 “Exótica es la palabra: Hypersexualization and Imagery of Latina and Latin American Bodies in Cultural Productions” underscores the link between beauty, power, and hypersexualization. I focus on the incessant portrayal of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women as sexually available, proficient, and desirable by exploring the different representations of exoticness and hyperfemininity shown through emblematic sexuality. An important component within the analysis is considering how the prevalence of this stereotype of the Latina and Latin American woman sanctions the acceptance of this representation as a true archetype. This truth claim can create the real
probability of feelings of anxiety for those cultural consumers who do not fit the hypersexualized image.

Chapter 3 “Accesorios grandes y poderosos: Consumption of Luxury Goods and Ideals of Glamour and Beauty” highlights the connection between beauty, power, and consumption. I specifically consider how the pressure to fit a certain paradigm of ideal physical attractiveness and lifestyle bolsters feelings of anxiety when the women are not able to align their bodies with these beauty expectations. Thus, creating a pressure to consume the products (hair straighteners, skin lighteners, eye color contacts, clothing and jewelry) that promise to transform her into the ideal image.

Chapter 4 “Cuerpo perfecto desde todos los ángulos: Cosmetic Surgery and the Age-factor” spotlights the correlation between beauty, power, and physical transformation. By concentrating on the value placed upon youth and physicality of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican female bodies, I expose the assumed malleability of their bodies through diet, non-medical cosmetic treatments, and invasive cosmetic surgeries. I show how the assumed belief of the malleability of the Latina and Latin American female body – supported through ubiquitous visual and textual messages – attempts to influence women to feel inadequate when they fail to fit the very specific paradigm of physical attractiveness.

When examined across so many genres, popular culture is clearly shown to be a powerful source of influence about the body and identity among Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women. The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to articulate what strategies of representation within popular productions are used to instill certain values and stereotypes about race, socio-economic class, and gender. And how those factors are
manipulated in order to either create anxiety to make women spend money, undergo cosmetic treatments or surgeries, or to push back against the dominant beauty ideal and thus allow for a wider paradigm of success. The importance placed upon fitting certain cultural and national paradigms of ideal beauty and identity translates into real power experienced by those who are able to correspond to those standards, and also a real adversity by those who do not. Sociological studies, such as Howard's and Masi de Casanova's, show how the implications of the value of "looks" can affect many aspects of one's life including employment, promotions, marriageability, perceptions of character, and more. Similarly, Deana A. Pollard's article on unconscious bias and self-critical analysis states that "unconscious bias is rampant and may precipitate most discriminatory actions" (2). Her critical lens in this study aligns with my conclusion from the popular culture imagery, that most-favored status is awarded to those women who follow dominant ideals of beauty and that anxiety can be felt by those women who do not fit the paradigm of physical attractiveness. Pollard explains how it is inherent within human nature to act with partiality: "Some social psychologists believe that stereotyping is a manifestation of 'in-group/out-group' dynamics and the human instinct to identify with a group or clan" (3). She goes on to declare that part of the nature of "in-group/out-group" dynamics is the propensity to see members of one's own group as individuals, but other group members as an identical, stereotyped mass.

One manner in which the standard of physical beauty is shaped and defined is through dominant mass media images and representations of women. Naturally, the more one is exposed to a certain image or representation and recognizes the valuation of that image as ideal, the higher the possibility of internalizing the standard as valid and as a
reflection of the epitome of feminine beauty. April Fallon, in her study on sociocultural determinants of body image, affirms that “Culturally bound and consensually validated definitions of what is desirable and attractive play an important part in the development of body image” (80). She goes on to state that the body is experienced as a reflection of the self. One’s body image consist of his/her perception of the cultural standards, his/her perception of the magnitude to which he/she matches that standard, and the perception of the relative importance that members of the cultural group and the individual place on that match (80).

Cultural productions act as institutions that govern ideal paradigms of physical attractiveness and propagate the categorization of Latina and Latin American women into a synonymous, stereotyped group. Beauty ideals, governed by media artifacts, for Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women are indicative of the complex and complicated issues surrounding U.S. and Latin American ethnic and racial aesthetic preference, model femininity, and representations of socio-economic class. When women who can fit this standard are given more superiority and privilege, it creates an undeniable link between the body, identity, and power. Thus, when the eyes overrule the ears or mind, appearance can become the make-or-break determinate of our reality and success.
CHAPTER 2

Exótica es la palabra: Hypersexualization and Imagery of Latina and Latin American Bodies in Cultural Productions

This chapter studies the symbolic value and probable reception of the imagery of Latina and Latin American female bodies in the United States, the Dominican Republic and Colombia. The symbolic value assigned to Latinas and Latin American women in the media landscape remains simultaneously familiar and strangely new. The convoluted demands on ethnic women’s bodies to stand in for their specific ethnic communities and serve the economic interests of globally integrated media industries are undeniable. As we continue to live in an age when women function as a sign, a stand-in for objects and theories ranging from nation to beauty to sexuality, the continuous trend of hypersexualizing Latina and Latin American female bodies within mainstream cultural productions becomes a powerful resource for the spectator and readership to evaluate not only a culture, but also possibly themselves. This construction of hypersexuality is transmitted primarily, though not exclusively, through the mainstream media and popular culture. As Naomi Wolf summarizes in The Beauty Myth (1991), beauty acts as a currency by “assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard” (12). Accordingly, the majority of the female representations on screen, in the plot of a novel, in the fashion shoot of a magazine, or in a music video also fit into this idea and feed the fantasy of beauty’s significance, thus producing an unrealistic image that the spectator or reader may internalize as the ideal and normative reflection of her gender. In the depiction of Latinas and Latin American women in popular media, perceived sexual attractiveness is an important factor in not only the
potency of a woman’s beauty, but also her potential success and/or failure. The female role is consistently portrayed by young and archetypically beautiful actresses, characters or models and frequently the scenario will revolve around their ability to attract the male objects of their affection.

Focusing on the imagery of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican female bodies as portrayed in selected North American and Caribbean products of popular culture, this chapter explores the different representations of exoticness and hyperfemininity shown through emblematic sexuality. By concentrating on the depiction and approval or rejection of certain body types, skin color, and behaviors, this chapter examines the associations that can be derived by the iconicity of ethnic bodies in each culture’s media practices. First, I examine Vanidades and Eve, popular women’s magazines produced both in Latin America and in the United States for a Latina and Latin American female audience, to explore the juxtaposition of ethnic women versus Anglo women. As we shall see, the ranges of beauty ideals for Latinas within North American mainstream media is limited. Next, I study how these ideals can be implicitly policed, as in the film Tortilla Soup. I then move on to narrative fiction, where I show how the representations progressively get more explicit in both the U.S. Latina novel Sex and the South Beach Chicas, and the Colombian novel Sin tetas no hay paraíso. My focus ultimately turns to the imagery present in a Dominican popular music video. Within dominant cultural productions, the fictional, cinematic, and musical depictions of Latina and Latin

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5 This particular copy of Vanidades was printed in the United States and this particular copy of Eve was printed in Mexico but purchased in the United States. Both of these magazines are produced and published both abroad and in the United States.
American women will either reinforce equations of beauty and power, within particular cultural norms, or interrogate them in creative and provocative ways.

I. Popular Women’s Magazines

An explicit illustration of the hypersexualization of Latinas and Latin American women is found in popular women’s magazines published both in the United States and Latin America, where modernity as expressed through beauty and fashion is intertwined with appearance and consumption. Readers are implicitly and explicitly encouraged to copy the style and appearance of celebrity women and models, from hairdos to nail polish. All of these characteristics enforce a specific “appearance” that revolves around age, socio-economic status, attractiveness, and a consumer consciousness that – if said traits are not natural – will provide you with the tools to acquire them at a price. The assumed identity of the reader is a woman of middle to upper socio-economic status, who is modern and familiar with North American culture. This is apparent not only by the identity of the featured celebrities – often U.S.-born Latinas or Anglo celebrities – but also by the array of specific advertisements and the assumed consumer power of the reader. In this part of the analysis, I am only using specific issues of selected magazines, which I have found to be typical of the genre as explained in the introduction.

If the 1980’s was, as media marketing professionals declared, the decade of the Latinos, then Latinas and Latin Americans have so far owned the 21st century.6

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Demographic shifts, along with the globalization of deregulated media markets, have dramatically increased the size of Latina/o audiences. The representation and imagery of Latinas and Latin American women, from commercials to movie screens and magazines, have not simply mirrored “real” Latinas and Latin American women; rather, they have been imaginative reconstructions – from quite selective viewpoints – of equations of beauty and power, within particular cultural norms. Within the media practices of magazines, visual representations of Latinas and Latin American women have “sold” the hypersexualization of a racialized femininity. By focusing on the perpetuation of ideas of exoticism, sexuality and hyperfemininity, this analysis explores how persistent themed depictions of Latinas and Latin American women, paired with aggressive marketing and promotion strategies, push a dominant beauty ideal through the linked practices of racialization and gendering.

*Vanidades* (2010 No. 11 año 50 Estados Unidos) and *Eve* (2010 No. 31 año 3 México)

At first glance, the cover of *Vanidades* (Septiembre 2010), which features Odette Yustman, promises a deep connection with Latin American culture and beauty ideals. Although Odette comes from a Colombian and Cuban background and is fluent in Spanish, her success as an actress within the United States is likely what secured her position in the magazine (see fig. 1). The modeled identity for Latinas and Latin American women throughout the representations and imagery in *Vanidades* plays to a

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8 Born May 10, 1985, Odette Yustman was born in Los Angeles, California. Her mother is Cuban, and her father, who is of Italian and French descent, was born in Bogotá, Colombia and raised in Nicaragua. Yustman, fluent in Spanish, debuted at an early age, playing a young student in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) and later moved on to various television shows and movies.
hierarchy of socio-economic status and success within the United States. Upon analysis of the representations and imagery throughout the magazine, it becomes apparent that said images and representations in Vanidades play a major role in delimiting a Latinas’ and Latin American women’s range of options about their appearance by displaying a consistent depiction of them which fits dominant equations of beauty and power, interrelated with a hypersexual representation. As women continue to function as a very powerful sign for identity and nation, these Latinas and Latin American women continue to prominently sign in for class, sexual and racial difference, and excess. The Latinas and Latin American women portrayed in the magazines are a clear indicator of the tensions that correlate to binary constructions of identity and perceived beauty. As Stam and Shohat (1994) have noted, this binary is often coupled with other Cartesian binaries, such as rational/irrational, mind/body, and culture/nature. Within feminine magazines, there is a resulting tension of the culture/nature or civilized/uncivilized binary based on the process of racialization, through which some groups are categorized as different or outside the dominant U.S. classification of social identities and attractiveness, yet in keeping with media’s construction of Latina and Latin American female identity and culture as inherently exotic, foreign, and consumable (Molina-Guzmán 2010). The tension springs from the simultaneous performance of dominant Anglo-Saxon beauty
ideals and racialized femininity associated with Latina and Latin American female bodies.

Figure 2.1. Cover of September 2010 Issue. Source: *Vanidades*

For instance, Odette’s look is simultaneously anglicized and hypersexualized. Her appearance conforms to many Anglo or Northern European standards of beauty: she is thin, with long flowing hair and Caucasian features. Yet the largest print on the page reads: *Estampado animal: La tendencia más hot para este otoño-invierno*, which plays into Latin American exoticism and the tendency to equate woman to nature. Her hair is tousled, giving her a more primitive aspect, roughly translating to eroticism as opposed to purity. Yet it is important to point out that, at the same time, her hair is also lightened, and her clothes are modern and chic. In contrast to the magazine cover shoot, an internet search of earlier images of Odette reveals that she had previously emphasized more of an ethnic look, with darker hair and darker skin tone. This contrast in skin tone, among the other details
within the magazine, reveals a pervasive tendency to look toward Europe and, more recently, the United States for the beauty ideal. Molina-Guzmán, discussing the ethno-racial dimensions of the North American trope of Latinidad, affirms that “Even as the ideology of racial mixture and democracy is celebrated among many Latinas/os, whiteness and white notions of beauty (*blanqueamiento*) still reign supreme” (5). Accordingly, throughout feminine magazines that target a Latina and Latin American female readership, there is a consistent valorization of the white/European/First World in place of an autochthonous *mestizo* and the dark/indigenous/American “other,” reflecting the legacy of colonialism. As a result, contemporary U.S. media often depict Latinas and Latin American women as not quite white but rarely black, instead occupying a pan-ethnic identity space of racially ambiguous and commodifiable brownness (Molina-Guzmán 5). What is significant about the racialization within the cover of *Vanidades* is that, although some Latina and Latin American women do naturally possess these Anglo or Northern European features, the full range of racial and physical characteristics are not represented, favoring a specific look while exoticizing the other. Thus, Odette’s ethnic other-ness is clearly downplayed by the lightness of her hair and skin while simultaneously being marked by magazine cover photo conventions such as the text and a more aggressive gaze persistent in more erotic iconography.

Angharad N. Valdivia in “Visions of Desire,” focusing on class and femininity in lingerie ads, explains how pose is important because “it indicates or suggests a level of action, and one of the ways we determine class representation is by the relative passivity of the middle class as compared to the activity of the working class” (78). She clarifies this distinction by its relation to the amount of work that each class mythically does – in
other words, the middle class does more mental labor, whereas the working class engages in manual labor. In a joining of socio-economic class and gender representation, these dominant beliefs about femininity position ideal women as passive and active women as deviant (78-79). Very similar to lingerie ads, magazine imagery and advertisements shadow these same types of poses and photo conventions. Following this reading, Odette’s cover posture is more aggressive as she gazes into and models for the camera from a cropped view of her body from waist up – aware of being seen by the spectator.

The interior pages that cover the Exclusiva of Odette display three similar photographs of her: one, a full body shot of the cover photo, another with her beau, and the largest imitating the body-cropping objectification of the cover image. The full-body shot of Odette shows her in a mini-skirt, thigh-rise boots, tousled hair, and starting straight at the camera. She stands instead of reclining, both feet firmly on the ground, legs apart, and hands on her hips, staring straight into the camera. All three representations of Odette challenge the femininity of subordination by her directness, similar to pornographic iconography in terms of agency (Valdivia 2000). As a result, her posture upholds U.S. dominant media’s practice of hypersexualizing representations of Latina and Latin American women.
In contrast, the magazine also offers an *Exclusiva* of Angelina Jolie, a North American actress (see fig. 2.2). However, in her headshot, her gaze is not straight at the camera; rather she slightly looks away (gaze aversion) and her gaze could be classified as demure as opposed to the directness of Odette’s gaze. Moreover, the majority of these photographs of Jolie position her next to her husband and children, and have her looking away from the camera. This highlights her traditional and conservative female role and, as a result, invokes a perception of Odette as accessible, consumable and exotic.

![Headshot of Angelina Jolie](image)

*Figure 2.2. Headshot Jolie. Source: *Vanidades*

Only one photograph of Jolie resembles the standing position of Odette, yet it is very small and is associated with the cartoon character seen in the picture, for which she performed the voice in *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) (see fig. 2.3). Although Jolie is often
objectified as a sexual object in popular media coverage, when juxtaposed here with Odette she assumes a less sexual position.

Valdivia avows this type of distinction as suggestive of different standards of sexual allure (81). Whereas Valdivia only looks at representations of socio-economic class and femininity, her theory is useful in decoding racialization and gendering as well. For example, according to Valdivia’s analysis of posture, Odette’s steady gaze and powerful stance exhibit the directness and agency exhibited by lower-socio-economic class ethnic sexuality, while Jolie’s gaze aversion and assumption of motherhood and wife roles exhibit more of a ritualization of subordination and relative passivity of the middle/upper-socio-economic class Anglo sexuality. Such portrayals of Latina and Latin American women within popular women’s magazines, juxtaposed with North American women,
serve to maintain widespread conventions of Latin and Latin American identity as inherently hypersexual, foreign, consumable, and with less financial and social power.

While the juxtaposition of Latina and Latin American women to Anglo or Northern European women is significant, it is also important to point out that the majority of advertisements and representations in this issue of *Vanidades* are of white women. And, when Latinas or Latin American women are featured, they are mainly women who fit anglicized ideals of Latinas and Latin American women. Erynn Masi de Casanova argues in her 2004 analysis of popular women’s magazines in Ecuador that: “Women are encouraged to imitate (primarily N. American) celebrities through diet and exercise. The ‘perfection’ of models’ bodies is emphasized, and suggestions are given to help readers move toward this goal: women are told how to get flat stomachs, tight buttocks to show off in *tanga* swimsuits, and thighs that do not touch” (97). In this fashion, a conditioning takes place throughout *Vanidades*, for the female reader to ultimately judge herself against the images and lives of other (Anglo) women, and she is presented with products and “health” tips to enable her to attain this same image. Hence, in the first part of *Vanidades*, the reader is able to examine body shapes and read of the behavior of celebrity women; in the second half of the magazine she is provided with the opportunity – at her expense – of assessing and reshaping her own body. If we take into account that the image that the Latina and Latin American female reader is judging herself against is (mainly) that of white women, then the pressure to copy becomes even stronger for her if she belongs to the large percentage of Latina and Latin American women who possess the physical characteristics associated with *mulata* or *mestiza* identity. In other words, if these physical imperatives are true for Anglo women, then another nuance takes place for Latinas and Latin American
women, reinforced by that fact that they are not as homogenous in physicality and culture as dominant mass media portrayals of them would like us to believe. Thus, they are not only subordinated to the dominant culture, but they are concurrently supposed to imitate a specific physical attractiveness and femininity, while simultaneously being represented through specific distinguishing traits and tropes – such as dark skin, hair, eyes, curly hair, and curvaceous bodies – that expect that they be sexier than the Anglo or Northern European woman.

The evidence of these ideas is provided in women’s magazines through the innumerable advertisements – aimed at women – of hair products, fashion clothes and the models that wear them, make-up and skin products, and images of perfect bodies followed by advertisements of products that will “help” you attain those bodies. Although beauty and fashion magazines are produced for women, readers learn to evaluate themselves and others based upon what is believed to be attractive to men. Beauty becomes competitive, and judgment is manipulated as a powerful instrument for advertisement and product manufacturers. These ideas are explored in a collection of essays titled *Ways of Seeing* (1991), based on the BBC television series with John Berger, which analyzes imagery and texts in advertisements and art. In the chapter on ways of seeing women, Berger attests to how a woman’s identity splits into two: the surveyor and the surveyed and how she “comes to consider the – surveyor and the surveyed – within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (46). Berger continues to explain how men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at, which determines “not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the
surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (47). Although Berger does not explore issues of race, his study is useful in showing how a Latina’s or Latin American woman’s identity within beauty and fashion magazines can be determined by them surveying the imagery and then “surveying” themselves according to what they are shown, and further, how race is lightened, or else exaggerated to express a primitive or hypersexualized aspect. A perfect example of this is an advertisement in *Eve* (Mayo 2010)\(^9\) for *Sidral Mundet Light*, a decaffeinated beverage (43) (see fig. 2.4).

Figure 2.4. Advertisement Sidral Mundet Light. Source: *Eve*

The woman in the ad appears to be on a modeling shoot, evidenced by the camera and lights that surround her. She is in front of a tropical backdrop – sea and palm trees included –wearing a golden swimsuit that complements the sunset behind her. The

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\(^9\) This particular copy was published and printed in Mexico but purchased in the United States.
setting of this particular advertisement links the woman to European perceptions of non-European landscapes and cultures, and to the rhetoric of tropical exoticism or the trope of Tropicalism; in other words, the belief in the primitivism of tropical settings and the uncontrolled sexuality of people of color (Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman, 1997). In this fashion, this woman is also represented by the iconicity of Caribbean symbols of tropical vegetation and water, which are deployed to signify her primitive hypersexuality and willingness to be objectified as exotic Other. In contradiction, the tone of her skin is very pale, evidence of the conflictive co-existence of two standards: Latin American (exotic, hypersexual, curvaceous body, darker skin, eyes and hair) verses an Anglo or Northern European standard of beauty (light skin, eyes, straight hair, delicate facial features).

Adding to the ambiguity and the constant competing cultural norms that Latinas and Latin American women embody is the fact that the woman in the ad is reclining in posture, leaning on one hand behind her, in a submissive position, knees bent, turning her body just right to accentuate her body’s curves and sensuality. Thus, she personifies through the pose a submissive Anglo sexuality, yet symbolizes through the background an exotic primitive hypersexuality. The caption reads: *Lo fashion está en lo que tomas. Igual de rico, pero light* (43). According to Berger, the purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with her present way of life. Here we see this through the possible hungering for the vacation scene and perhaps an envy for the perfect body of the model. Berger states that the dissatisfaction is not with the way of life of

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10 Tropicalism was first associated with people of Caribbean and Latin descent. It has now become inclusive of all Latin American cultures and regions.
society, but rather with the spectator’s own way of life within it. The message suggests that if the spectator buys what the ad is offering, her life will become better. Basically it offers her an improved alternative to what she is (142). For the Latina or Latin American reader of Eve and Vanidades living in the United States, and seeking to identify with representations of her culture and beauty, the overall message being taken from these magazines is one of a celebration of Anglo or Northern European physical beauty which excludes ethnic characteristics except to exoticize and hypersexualize them.

II. Narration

Sex and the South Beach Chicas

Likewise, Sex and the South Beach Chicas (2006) follows a typical romance novel plot with a Latin American twist, consistent with the sub-genre known as “Latina Lit” and “Chica Lit.” Based on the novel’s main conflict – relationships and sex – I do not consider Sex and the South Beach Chicas a serious work of literature, but rather an extremely popular fiction. As such, the probable intended audience is young Latina women, along with a more inclusive audience due to the growing marketing success of Latinos and Latinidad. Compliant with the formula fiction of a romance novel, the main focus is on the relationships and the development of romantic love between two main characters. In addition, novels of this genre ultimately offer an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. Sex and the South Beach Chicas presents three protagonists who are young, successful, and beautiful, and are involved with men. The fourth character, Juli, undergoes an evolution in order to fit a dominant beauty ideal projected within the

11 As noted in the introduction, Latina Lit and Chica Lit are sub-genres of Chick Lit.
novel and become involved with a man. The male characters are also described as masculine, gorgeous and successful. This idealized plot is further supported by the tropical and glamorous South Beach location. The hot and humid climate of Miami Beach adds to the image of primitive sexuality for the female characters. The title overtly promises erotic scenes, and the use of *chicas* instead of “chicks” identifies them with the expectations of racialized hyperfemininity and exotic sexuality that repeatedly exists within mainstream media productions in relation to normative white heterosexuality. For Latinas, the gendered media practices that surround sexual exoticness, racial flexibility, and ethnic ambiguity position them as globally consumable and docile bodies subject to the erotic and voracious gaze of the United States (Molina-Guzmán 13). In this fashion, the popular TV show *Sex and the City* is reproduced in this novel as four thirty-something Latinas – Victoria (Tori); Sylvia; Adriana; and Juliana (Juli) – who have been friends since college and are now living as adults experiencing transitions in life and love. The novel’s plot, character descriptions, and behavior emphasize the consistent hypersexualization and the equation of power and beauty by which Latinas are measured.

Frances R. Aparicio, in “On Sub-Versive Signifiers: Tropicalizing Language in the United States,” (1997) analyzes a distinct, more radical type of tropicalization that emerges from the cultural productions, political struggles, and oppositional strategies utilized by some U.S. Latinos/as. Here, Aparicio acknowledges how the recognition of Latinos has economic motivations, capitalizing on the consumer power of an ever-increasing Latino/a population. She proclaims that within these hegemonic representations of Latinidad the voices of Latinos/as assume those very same constructs, at times subverting them as strategies for empowerment; in other words, the tropicalized
simultaneously become tropicalizers (195-98). In this fashion, the author of *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*, Caridad Piñeiro – born in Havana, Cuba and now living in New York – actively participates in the tropicalization of Latinos/as by reinforcing the most alluring factor – the hypersexualization of the ethnic characters. This reinforces equations of beauty and power for Latina women that persistently project certain characteristics of thin and curvaceous bodies, long straight hair, and sexually alluring poses. After the initial chapter where the reader is introduced to the female protagonists, each subsequent chapter is dedicated to one woman narrating her individual life. Each female character symbolizes a feminine fantasy commonly repeated in formulaic genres, such as the romantic comedy and the romance novel, which are intended to appeal to women. For example, “finding true love and happily ever after” is represented by Tori’s one-night stand that ends in satisfying sex and marriage; the “childhood friends to lovers” trope is played out by Adriana who finally confesses her love to Riley; the “rebellious princess syndrome” is performed by Sylvia – the extremely attractive and desirable yet cynical character – who falls for the man at the center of her reporter investigation. Juli’s character is the most significant, however, because Juli is the one character with whom most readers will identify. Juli represents the “ugly duckling finds love and acceptance” theme, requiring that she must assume the responsibility of physical modification before she can experience love. This analysis exposes the more explicit assumptions about the Latina body’s form, appearance, success and/or failure that are produced within the novel. By focusing on the presumed success of the female protagonists that manage to fit into a hypersexualized paradigm of ideal beauty, it becomes apparent that for Latina and Latin American women, the novel perpetuates this equation of power and beauty.
The first descriptions of the female characters at the beginning of the novel reveal hypersexualized Latina women who physically reinforce equations of beauty and power. For example, Adriana wears “an absolutely gorgeous dark green suit that perfectly accentuated her curvaceous but slender physique. Her precisely trimmed auburn hair framed the clean oval of her face, emphasizing her hazel green eyes” (4), while Sylvia “made heads turn, in an eye catching golden gown that accented her every asset. Long blond hair swung in a curtain to the middle of her back, its silky texture reflecting a hue of gold and paler blond highlights” (4). The fact that these images are the first descriptions of the women marks the immediate importance the author gives to physical attractiveness and allure. In marked contrast, the first mention of Juli’s body and clothing rings an almost-absence of presence as she stirred “with a weak shrug that barely moved her oversized tunic top” (9) reacting to a derogatory comment made by Adriana about Tori’s telenovela-watching sister. The connection that is made by Juli’s reaction to the activity of watching telenovelas also implies that she is merely a spectator of these glamorous actresses – and her friends – and does not partake in the lifestyle or power that the beautiful women exert on-screen or around her. To this end, the author suggests in a subtle manner, that this lower form of Latina is physically less attractive and feminine than her fashion-conscious, well-coiffed and manicured friends. The consistent hypersexualization of the other female characters throughout the novel directs the policing of Juli’s body into an anticipated hyperfeminized and sexualized beauty. Her journey is the most explicit in the novel because it adapts her to dominant bodily expectations, consistent with cultural norms of the paradigm of physical attractiveness for Latinas within dominant media representations of them.
The fact that no character resists this policing in the novel is important and shows the implied author’s acceptance of the imposed representation of Latina identity and, synchronously, beauty, as shown through the description of their bodies and commodification. In *Dangerous Curves* (2010) Isabel Molina-Guzmán examines the gendering and racialization of Latina bodies in U.S. mainstream media. She explains how “each individual body has its symbolic value or worth relative to national discourses of beauty and desire, rendering some bodies more vulnerable to discipline or more potentially valuable than others. As such, Latinas embody the twenty-first century project of discipline, productivity, and docility through ways in which class, race, ethnicity, and gender intersect in media discourses about them” (13). Accordingly, explains Molina-Guzmán, dominant media portrayals of Latina and Latin American women are primarily typecast as inherently exotic, foreign, and consumable. They are often gendered as feminine through discourse about their inferred domesticity, subservience, fertility, and sexuality, among other traits. This disciplined and homogenized depiction of Latina and Latin American women from diverse national backgrounds as similar is the process through which the trope of Latinidad renders them all analogous. The tropicalization – a constituent of Latinidad – occurs within the novel through the hypersexualization of the main female protagonists. The combination of this hypersexualization with the success the characters experience when able to fit certain paradigms of physical attractiveness serve to perpetuate dominant media representations of Latina and Latin American women. Within the novel, immediate reinforcement of equations of beauty within the descriptions of Adriana and Sylvia transpire through the use of words such as: “precisely,” “perfectly,” “assets,” “curvaceous but slender.” The
pressure on Latina and Latin American women to possess these qualities is even expressed through Tori’s character who “couldn’t help but glance at her own five-four, size six body, trying not to feel intimidated by her less than ample – but still perky – breasts and curves” (5). Tori, however, is not scrutinized within the novel like Juli is, because she is capable of achieving a sexual relationship with the opposite sex.

Identifying more so with Juli, the Latina reader may be compelled to inspect her own body, associating it with the body that does not live up to the implicit value assigned to the more hypersexualized bodies that reinforce equations of specific physical attractiveness which equal success and power for Latina women within the text.

One example of how the female protagonists are assessed within the novel is through the language and description of their behavior which repeatedly references their sexual potential either metaphorically or physically. For instance, Tori’s unrestrained sexuality is expressed as she “exerted gentle pressure to urge [Gil] onto his back and slipped her body over his (...) as she moved her hips” (62). Sylvia, having already met Carlos – the mysterious bad boy – dresses up to investigate the illegal activities in one of South Beach’s hot spots for the magazine for which she works as the After Dark and Gossip reporter; with intention she “added some extra sway to her walk, wanting to be noticed. The dress she’d chosen (...) advertised her real estate quite well” (75). Once Adriana and Riley confess their love for one another, they supplement Tori and Gil’s sexual encounters throughout the novel with a few of their own. In bed with Riley, Adriana responds to him when he says “‘Touch me Adriana,’ (...) and she encircled him, caressed him slowly” (197). Even Juli by the end of the novel – once transformed – is described wearing a “deep v of the neckline [that] showed off (...) full cleavage” (182). All of the
protagonists are either able to exude sex appeal, or are described participating in the sexual act itself. It is important to point out, however, that Juli participates in this characterization only after her makeover. The necessity of Juli’s physical transformation is foregrounded throughout the novel by the descriptions of her appearance and her friend’s views of her. Juli’s alteration is also highlighted by her juxtaposition with her friends and through her make-over by Adriana. When the women are first described at the beginning of the novel by Tori, Juli’s physique is elided in favor of a suggestive metaphor: “Adriana was the brains of the business, while Juli’s amazing culinary creations were the heart of it. A heart that rarely ventured into public, and when it did, like tonight, seemed drab and tasteless” (4). This is the first juxtaposition between Juli’s character and that of her three glamorous friends. Juli’s character is implicitly devalued, thus marking her subsequent transformation more significant because it is not until she sheds her average appearance that she is given an equally important role in the novel’s main theme: triumphing in love (read: being attractive enough to appeal to a male mate).

Specifically at issue here is the process by which the Anglo-dominant discourse about race and ethnicity in the United States continually works to contain and edit the perceived undesirable aspects of Latinidad – such as darker skin, eyes and hair; or consumption of the traditional foods that have an excess of fat and that cultivate larger and more curvaceous bodies. Adriana, Sylvia, and Tori are the epitome of a supreme Latina and Latin American beauty which holds true through the majority of the U.S. and the Caribbean, by encompassing both the idealized Anglo or Northern European facial features and complexion and slender but curvaceous bodies. Through the narrator’s descriptions the reader learns that Adriana has auburn hair and hazel green eyes, with a
curvaceous but slender physique; and Sylvia has long blond hair and wears an outfit which accentuates her every asset (read attractive body); Tori is slender but has “perky” breasts and curves.

The prevalence of the well-publicized ways in which women’s lives are “out of control,” and in need of correction through dieting, exercising, make-up, plastic and cosmetic surgeries – including the well-documented eating and binge behaviors among women – makes the connection between the young Latina reader and Juli the most compelling. Juli exemplifies the body in need of discipline because, unlike the other female protagonists, her primary relationship is with food instead of with a man. In this way, Juli personifies the image of Latino culture as a culture of excess in need of restraint. In line with this fundamental sentiment, Juli’s narrations always revolve around her struggle with food and generally take place in the kitchen. At one point she glances at her empty plate, feels guilty and decides that “she would have to exercise extra hard tomorrow (…). And dinner afterward …. It would be solamente ensalada for her” (38). Here Juli equates physical fitness and control over diet to attractiveness, as well as peace of mind and self-respect.

Bordo, examining advertisements for food, states that “When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (…), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite” (110). According to such a reading, Juli, in fact, is not left out of the constant hypersexualization of the women, but rather her sexual potential is sublimated into her passion for food: “Being in the kitchen had also taught Juli something else – she loved food. The texture of it between her fingers. On her tongue. The smell of it – comforting or enticing. Sensual. The power of
food when prepared properly” (37). Even Juli desires for her friends to “see the real
her[.] The one who inside had so much passion” (37). By substituting “it” and “food” for
“sex” and “him” this scene is consistent with the portrayal of the exotic, erotic Latina and
Latin American woman-Other, thus aligned with the depiction of the other female
characters.

Within these scenes, food is thus constructed as a sexual object of desire, and
eating is legitimated as much more than a purely nutritive activity. Instead, food is
supposed to supply sensual delight and comfort – not only as metaphorically standing for
something else, but as an erotic experience in itself (Bordo 112). However, within the
Anglo-dominant culture, women are permitted such gratification from food only in
measured doses. Thus, the interplay of power and seduction contained in these scenes
gives rise to what Cepeda, exploring identity, Latinidad and transnationalism, calls a
“complex media dialectic, or the containment of Latino/a ‘excess’ by means of
commodification” (223). Once commodified (read: thinner and portraying dominant
racialized beauty ideals), Juli earns permission to “seduce” her way into the U.S. or
Latina popular imagination.

Nearing the end of the novel, once Juli gives in to cultural perceptions of
hyperfemininity (through her make-over by Adriana) she earns a physical description,
which praises her unique yet sexualized features: “[Juli’s bangs now] framed [her] exotic,
almond-shaped brown eyes and accentuated the higher slant of her cheekbones and the
sharp, perfect slash of her nose. And her lips. Even without lipstick, the way the wisps
of hair curled in at her jaw made her face appear thinner and brought out Juli’s full lips”
(180). At first, Juli’s new access into U.S. mainstream popular imagination as the exotic
Other through her now-physical hypersexualization, appears to be voluntary as her self-esteem improves and she begins to walk “with a new, sexy swagger in her step” (193). Juli’s character gets used to men now checking her out after a haircut and a new outfit, as she now is described wearing “a pair of black low-rise pants and a black lace shirt to match. Nothing fancy, but heads turned” (26). This represents a dramatic change from the oversized tunic she wore at the beginning of the novel. These small changes encourage her to lose weight, which produces even more confidence in her character, to the point that she “intended to allow her passion for cooking to extend to other areas of her life” (195). Looking at body as a text of femininity, Bordo affirms: “The ideal of slenderness (…) and the diet and exercise regimens that have become inseparable from it offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the contradictory demands of the contemporary ideology of femininity” (172). In this manner, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* explicitly reinforces the physical paradigm of Latin American attractiveness that equates to hypersexuality and a “curvaceous but slender” frame. As an immediate reward, Juli also gains the affection of a love interest – and begins to receive compliments. Even her friends notice this difference: “Juli (…) looked stylish and had thinned down a bit, no longer hiding her beauty beneath over-sized clothes” (281).

*Sex and the South Beach Chicas* draws attention to the control of the Latina or Latin American female body through the presence of the concept of honor and dignity tied to female sexuality, or *marianismo*,\(^{12}\) as one of the essential distinctive marks of

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\(^{12}\) *Marianismo*, an aspect of the female gender role within *machismo* of Latin American folk culture, was first coined by Evelyn Stevens in 1973. Oliva M. Espín analyses how it is the veneration for feminine virtues like purity and moral strength. It represents the “virgin” aspect of the virgin-whore dichotomy. The ideas within *marianismo* include those of feminine passivity and sexual purity. From this is derived the idea that an ideal woman should be spiritually immaculate and eternally self-giving. See Oliva M. Espín, “Cultural and Historical Influences on Sexuality in Hispanic/Latin Women: Implications for
Latin American culture where the Virgin Mary – virgin and mother, but never sexual being – is presented as an important role model for all Latina and Latin American women.13 As the friends discuss the recent marriage of one of their high school friends because she became pregnant, the depiction of the cultural practice of guilt and overbearing mothers is reinforced with statements such as: “Girl, you can’t even begin to imagine the guilt levels possible in a Cuban household,” and, imitating her mother Juliana “clapped her hands together as if in prayer and rolled her eyes upward. ‘Dios mío. Que desgracia! Mi’jita, que estabas pensando?’” [sic] (7). Oliva M. Espín, examining contemporary sexuality and the Hispanic/Latin American woman, acknowledges that “although Hispanics in the twentieth century may not hold the same strict values (…) women’s sexual behavior is still the expression of the family’s honor” (155). The contradiction of such statements with the explicit hypersexualization of the female characters throughout the novel illustrates the conflicting pressures exerted upon Latinas: the Anglo dominant U.S. standard that forces them to be sexier than white women, and the good girl code that embodies Latin American legacies. Thus, Sex and the South Beach Chicas simultaneously inserts the tradition of maintaining virginity until marriage proclaimed by the Catholic Church that continues to be a cultural imperative, and challenges it with the representation of the twenty-first century female protagonists as provocative and sexual, yet reserved enough to preserve certain Latin characteristics, thus adding to the fascination of its hypersexualized characters.


13 While the term marianismo today has been questioned, what is useful of Espín’s critical lens is the ways in which sexuality and the female body are viewed within the Latin American culture.
The female characters constantly embody these competing cultural imperatives by their consistent focus on their own sexuality and the physical acts of sexuality throughout the novel. Within the Latin American culture, to enjoy sexual pleasure, even in marriage, may indicate lack of virtue. Juli’s transformation is once again highlighted by the example of her joining in the “sex-talk” that produces a “strong flush of color on her checks because she didn’t discuss sex. Ever” (9). This emphasis on self-renunciation, combined with the importance given to sexual purity for women, is part of the cultural messaging received by Latina and Latin American women in order to be seen by men as “good women” (Espín 156). Thus, the female character’s opposition to the “almost genetic (...) repression” (10) of their sexuality is used to emphasize their hypersexuality. It is important to accentuate, once again, the economic motivation of “Chica Lit” to further tropicalize the already “Other” with signifiers that simultaneously undermine the power of Latinos/as as agents of their own cultural production and hinder their effect on social and cultural transformations at the national level.

While the overall celebratory tone of sexual liberation throughout *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* implies that the female characters are free from objectification, the fact that the novel’s signifiers, both illustrated and verbal, consistently objectify Latinas as hypersexual and show a constraint on their behavior. Aparicio, questioning mainstream discourse about Latinos/as, asserts that this so-called “celebration” of Latino/a culture may be read as a subterfuge for the centuries-old strategy of objectification and co-optation where the “discourse by which these Latinos/as are glorified in not always their own, but rather that of the U.S. mainstream, a language and perspective still constructed from the very same linguistic and ideological elements that
have ‘invented’ Latin America since Columbus ‘discovered’ us” (198). In this way, with her transformation, Juli achieves a more standardized beauty ideal and perpetuates the consistent growing marketing success of the “Anglicization” of Latinos in the media. The fact that no one fights this image in the novel is significant and shows the author’s position within the imposed representation of Latina identity, as shown through the hypersexualization of their bodies and commodification. The overall message in this novel is an endorsement of the Anglo-standard success and power, measured by dominant ideals of attractiveness.

*Sin tetas no hay paraíso*

As we have seen, there are many representations that connote a narrow range of options about Latinas or Latin American women’s appearance and how their physicality plays a role in their success and/or failure. A provocative interrogation of this equation of beauty and power is found in the Colombia novel *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2005) by Gustavo Bolívar Moreno. *Sin tetas* can be categorized more as a literary fiction; in other words, in contrast to mainstream commercial fictions – like the romance novel or “Chick or Chica Lit” – it focuses more on an original narrative and plot instead of following a formula fiction’s storyline and character development. It is considered a more “serious” fiction because of the themes and character development, and because the relationships among the characters are represented not through what is explicitly written, but rather through the implications of what is written. As in *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*, *Sin tetas* is also narrated in third person; however, the omniscient narrator turns out to be a male character in the novel and serves to communicate a specific message concerning his position within the novel and society at large. Since *Sin tetas* incorporates an implicit
social criticism, the assumed readership is the Colombian intellectual society. However, the popularity of the themes of sex, drugs, crime, and the Colombian cartels presented in the novel made possible the subsequent telenovela and film versions; thus, the intended readership of *Sin tetas* becomes broadened to Latino and Latin American spectators of all socio-economic classes and Latin American countries, in addition to the Latino and Latin American audiences living within the United States. This analysis focuses specifically on the hypersexualization of the female protagonists throughout the novel and the anxiety felt by the main female protagonist when she fails to meet what is understood as a requirement for her gender. Such an analysis draws attention to the ways in which the novel questions paradigms of ideal physical attractiveness by emphasizing the perils that exist within the Beauty Cult for women. It also highlights how it can afflict those who do not possess the physical characteristics that are regarded as the ideal beauty.

In *Sin tetas*, the social corollary to the tyranny of drug-trafficking in Colombia results in women trafficking in the currency of female beauty. The plot of *Sin tetas* revolves around the main protagonist, Catalina, a fourteen-year-old girl who desires to prostitute herself to the Colombian mafia in order to obtain breast augmentation surgery and successively, prosperity. Bolívar Moreno depicts this desire as a choice, on the part of a young girl who is clearly influenced by the limited options around her. Her four friends – Yésica, Vanessa, Ximena, and Paola – ranging in age from 15 to 16 – are already niñas prepago (refined prostitutes) for the Colombian mafia. All the girls are from the same underprivileged neighborhood in Pereira, a city with approximately 265,000 inhabitants located west of the capital. Thus, what they represent and own as their “choices” are, in fact, the only possible path forward. The story takes place during
the years after the disbanding of the Cali and Medellín cartels. For Catalina and many young disadvantaged females, the only option to escape poverty exists through the commodification of their bodies and sexual potential. Catalina is represented as readily willing to conform to an imagined “ideal” by premeditatively obtaining breast augmentation surgery, whatever the costs and inspite of her young age. Through her attempts to obtain breast augmentation, she is raped by the peons of drug traffickers, she has sex with a cartel boss, and finally she exchanges sex for the operation with a plastic surgeon who uses recycled silicone, which then causes an infection. Her body’s transformation symbolizes her ability to conspicuously consume and climb the socio-economic ladder. Catalina’s desire to acquire the lifestyle in which her friends live outweighs her ability to moralize about the ways in which they obtain money. Not only is Catalina’s body undeveloped at the young age of fourteen, creating surgical risks, but also this shows the vulnerability of young women who consistently are exposed to successful representations of their gender as hypersexualized and hyperfeminized. The anxiety that Catalina feels to mimic the mafia’s exaggerated and hypersexualized feminine ideal in order to join the lucrative world of prostitution is expressed through her character’s thoughts and actions. Her inability to focus on any other goal in her life ultimately leads to her demise. Thus, although Sin tetas consistently presents what seems to be young women who are able to fit a certain paradigm of physical attractiveness and thus to succeed, ultimately this is shown to be their ruin.

The hypersexualization of the female characters is explicitly communicated not only from the title of the novel, but also through the themes – of sex, drugs, and crime – presented throughout the novel, and through the female character descriptions. First, the
title of the novel uses *tetas* instead of *pecho* which is not only more colloquial but also a more common term to stimulate sexual excitement. Furthermore, the notion of *paraíso* is indicative to the rhetoric of tropicality and thus the superficial primitive sexuality of Latin American women. The perception that without “tits” there is no paradise symbolically associates woman with nature, and her sexuality with primitive lush exoticism. Furthermore, full breasts connote a woman’s fertility and sexual maturity. This, combined with the imagery of an exotic paradise, foreshadows the notion of the hypersexualization of the female protagonists within the novel. Second, the idea of dangerous criminals, drugs, and sex denotes a specific category of woman. In other words, it’s evident that we will not be reading about a *marianista* character, who is a devout Christian and marries before having sex. Finally, the most explicit hypersexualization of the female characters is presented through the narration and character descriptions. The fact that all the girls are prostitutes, and that Catalina aspires to be one, links Catalina’s virginity (a prized possession) and the sexual expertise of her friends as a binary component of female sexuality. As virgins, women are more valued and desired. For example, as the reader becomes familiar with Catalina’s character, she is described metaphorically through her virginity: “La virginidad de Catalina era famosa en el barrio e incluso en algunos sectores populares de Pereira. Alberto, su (…) novio, contaba los días que le faltaban a la niña para cumplir la mayoría de edad,” (10). This is one of the first descriptions the reader is given to describe Catalina. Words such as “virginity” and “girl” serve the purpose of demonstrating her innocence and inexperience; at the same time, the reader is cognizant that sexual intercourse is a prime
motive of her boyfriend. This places Catalina’s body and purpose within a sexual realm, easily allowing for the adaptation of a hypersexualized image of her.

The fact that the first chapter presents Alberto’s lust for Catalina’s body and her overwhelming desire to obtain breast augmentation with the aim of securing her financial future signals an interrelationship between Catalina’s sexuality and her economic potential. However, the models of ideal beauty to which she is exposed are unrealistic and unattainable for most women, which produces feelings of inadequacy and anxiety for her, to the point where she feels compelled to “por sobre todas cosas, lucir tan espectacular como las modelos de Medellín, de cuyos afiches las paredes de su cuarto estaban tapizadas” (11). More than once the novel expresses Catalina’s exposure and perception of herself in relation to cultural representations of ideals of physical beauty as defined by magazines, the television, beauty pageants, and the mafia. This quote gives another example of the female representations she internalizes from the television: “en su casa la televisión estaba destinada para las novelas y jamás veían los noticieros” (91).

When Yésica takes her to a modeling agency, Catalina compares herself to some models who do have smaller breasts. To this Margot, the manager, responds with a validation of Colombia’s expected beauty ideals: “– Sí, pero las modelos que tú ves en la tele son europeas y no se le olvide, mijita, que nosotras estamos en Colombia y aquí modelo que se respete las tiene que tener mínimo talla 36” (61). Margot tells Catalina to come back when she turns fifteen, and hopefully with her breasts augmented, thus reifying the hypersexualized standard for Colombian women and further fueling Catalina’s feeling of shortcoming. Catalina’s beauty is constrained not only by the unnatural perfection of models, actresses, and beauty queens, but also by the national beauty ideal which is
impacted by the ostentatious, exaggerated, and bombastic aesthetic of the drug culture in Colombia. Power, then, is exerted upon her by the beauty standard set by the mafia and the media, against which, given her economic situation, she feels powerless to which she feels compelled to conform.

The social impact of the drug aesthetic and culture reaches every level of society and is a Colombian trademark in television, according to Omar Rincón. In his article on the cartel’s aesthetic and cultural influence in Colombia, he affirms that:

la marca Colombia tiene la silicona como estética porque habita lo narco como cultura. (…) Y es que las tetas abundan en televisión, pues sin silicona no se puede presentar la farándula, ni se puede actuar en telenovelas (¡tetavisión!). La verdad es que, en Colombia, sin tetas no hay televisión. La televisión ha socializado el gusto mafioso, la verdad de silicona y la ética del billete. (160)¹⁴

For Catalina and her friends, success revolves around their ability to imitate the women that they consistently see on television, within the society, and in the cartel. Said success, for all the female characters in Sin tetas, is embodied by the Ahumada sisters – mafia models and girlfriends – who

sin duda alguna, eran las mujeres más hermosas de Pereira y, nada de raro tiene que, de la tierra entera y sus alrededores también. Por sus rostros perfectos y cuerpos esculturales nada tenían que envidiarles a las modelos y reinas más famosas y bellas del país y del mundo. (…) No existía cintura más pequeña, ni senos más grandes, ni caderas más carnosas y cadenciosas ni piernas más

¹⁴ The element of plastic surgery will be fully explored in Chapter 4.
contoneadas ni cola más redonda y levantada que la de [Marcela]. Su hermana Catherine, por su parte, en su todo, era más hermosa que Marcela. (24)

The description of the Ahumada sisters highlights the practice of fragmentation of the female body, also present in magazines, advertisements, and pornography, which allows for a valuation of physical attractiveness based upon parts of female anatomy that frequently are hypersexualized. The consistent description of the hypersexualization through the perfected female characters’ bodies in Sin tetas, plus the linking of the ideal Colombian beauty with that of models and beauty queens, serves to illustrate the country’s contemporary trend of valuing all women by their physical beauty in according with a paradigm of physical attractiveness that is virtually a fabrication of a hypofeminized and hypersexualized artificial woman. This designates the policing of Catalina’s body into projected hypersexualized beauty, consistent with cultural norms of the equations of beauty and power for Colombian women which she summarizes as adelgazar de cintura, agrandar sus caderas, reafirmar sus músculos, levantar la cola, alisar su cabello con tratamientos de toda índole, cuidar su bello rostro con mascarillas de cuanto menjurje [sic] le recomendaran, desteñir con agua oxigenada todos los vellos de su humanidad, depilarse cada tercer día las piernas y el pubis y tostar su piel bajo el sol o dentro de una cámara bronceadora hasta hacerse brotar manchas cancerosas que ellos pudieran confundir con pecas sensuales. (9-10)

Within this quote lies the contemporary pressure to fit certain beauty ideals that limit the acceptable appearance of the female body to being slim but curvaceous, having light and straightened hair, preserving the youthful appearance of the skin, while at the same time
accentuating any indications of sensuality. An interesting correlation is made between beauty and disease. Catalina is willing to conform to an idealized beauty to such a degree that she is willing to give herself cancer. In addition, what is being highlighted here is the indication of the malleability of the female body. The expected unnatural state of her body (straightening her hair, dying of her body hair, the shaving of her pubic area, the tanning of her skin), shows the extremes that the Colombian prepago is expected to attain. The pressures to assimilate into the idealized version are so powerful that Catalina sees herself as inadequate: “Catalina que observaba con atención los gestos de Marino, se empezó a llenar de inseguridad y trató de sacar el pecho para ocultar lo que para ella significaba un defecto” (52). These same feelings are repeated several times throughout the novel marking them as a genuine reaction not only for Catalina, but for other girls as well: “todas las niñas del barrio empezaron a sufrir de envidia y a organizar planes inverosímiles para poder alcanzar el sueño de lucir tan hermosas como ella” (33). In this quote Yésica has just undergone a series of cosmetic surgeries paid for by El Titi after having sex with him several times. She is a tangible example within the novel, one that, unlike what is shown on the television or in magazines, is in plain view. Additionally, the monetary compensation that she now receives, despite how she earns it, heightens the other girls’ aspirations to emulate her appearance: “Entre tanto, y bajo su mirada de envidia e impotencia, las casas de Paola, Ximena, Vanessa y Yésica crecían hacia el cielo y se tornaban más bonitas y de colores, al igual que sus cabellos, pues, de la noche a la mañana todas resultaron rubias con los labios rellenos y los ojos azules” (61). The use of such words as “insecurity,” “envy,” and “impotence” demonstrates the impact and

15 The connection among beauty, medicine, and disease is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.
influence that the specific paradigm of physical attractiveness can have on women. Thus, by emphasizing the susceptibility of the women against the beauty ideals of the media and mafia, and the anxiety it causes when they fall outside that ideal, *Sin tetas* shows the destructive nature of the Beauty Cult.

In *Sin tetas*, the beauty standard set by the mafia and media serves as a hegemony that governs the masses, symbolized by the impoverished girls of Pereira. The prostitutes are molded through plastic surgery to mimic the most beautiful and successful actresses and models of Colombia. Thus, the plastic surgery industry has become a “doll factory” utilized not only by models and actresses, but also by the Colombian mafia to fabricate plastic women who are molded into what is considered the perfection of the drug culture’s aesthetic preference: “todas inmersas en un molde estereotipado que las hacía ver, iguales, esto es, anoréxicas, con el cabello lacio y rubio, la nariz respingada, el vientre plano, los ojos con lentes de colores, el pecho inflado, las mejillas macilentas, los zapatos puntiagudos, los pantalones con chispas brillantes, las blusas ajustadas y cortas” (58). The specificity of the required physical characteristics in order to become a *prepago* are expressed within the novel more than once: “No cualquier niña podía aspirar a este calificativo. Debían ser niñas de cierta estatura, cuerpos perfectos, así fuera a punta de bisturí, cabellos largos y bien cuidados, lentes de contacto de colores, ropa costosa pero no fina, que para la época capitalizaron dos o tres marcas de confecciones” (62). This phenomenon occurs so habitually that these girls are identified easily within society by their identical bodies, clothing, accessories and overall look. In Catalina’s determination to achieve her goal, she overlooks the dangers and risks involved in conforming to the mafia’s ideal: “el cirujano le advirtió, con buen juicio y honestidad,
que una niña de tan corta edad no se podía hacer tal cantidad de operaciones” (33). Even when a second surgeon warns her of the danger and risk of undergoing cosmetic procedures at such a young age, her need to fit the ideal outweighs good sense: “Catalina, seguía sin entender media palabra de las que el médico pronunciaba, pero le manifestó, con suma astucia, que él era el cirujano y que ella confiaba en lo que él sabía hacer. Que le metiera las siliconas por donde él quisiera o por donde pudiera, pero que se las metiera, porque si no ella moriría de tristeza” (86). The creation of beauty – particularly in connection with the modeling industry – serves as the basis for the correlation between the perceived beauty ideals that the girls aspire to achieve and what they must undergo to achieve them. Beauty, throughout the novel, is used against the girls in the most effective yet damaging way: through their anxiety. Said anxiety is constructed by their competitiveness with one another and their desperation to overcome their socio-economic status. As shown in the novel, the influence from the delinquency that plagues Colombia’s culture as a result of drug trafficking and poverty forces many women into escorting and prostitution, which then provides them the economic resources to obtain these surgeries. Once the reader recognizes the correlation between Catalina’s vulnerability and the normalization to equations of beauty and power within the novel, the real theme of the destructiveness that this cultural norm holds for women becomes apparent. Thus, Sin tetas no hay paraíso shows the destructive results of the Beauty Myth for some women. The overall message that can be taken here is that cultural pressures can be fatal, and the women who don’t resist those cultural pressures are destroying themselves.
III. Film

*Tortilla Soup*

One example of a film which reinforces the paradigm of physical attractiveness according to ideas of ideal beauty and the hypersexuality of Latina women is the U.S Latino film *Tortilla Soup* (2001). This film is a romantic comedy that provides the spectator with an interesting twist. Complying with the classic romantic comedy plot, *Tortilla Soup* is a love story that ends happily. The two lovers, likeable characters – ostensibly perfect for each other – are kept apart by complicating circumstances until, surmounting all obstacles, they are finally wed. The title gives reference to Latin American culture; thus the probable intended audience is young Latina women. However, with the growing marketing success of Latinos and Latinidad, this film (like the novel examined earlier) allows for a more inclusive audience. As its genre implies, the typical envisioned setting for a screening would be a female gathering involving movies and wine, or a date night if the women can talk their gentlemen into watching a “chick flick.” However, the accessibility and popular practice of film-watching, through which representations and imagery of Latina and Latin American women are consumed, requires that we thoughtfully question the media content and consciously reflect on our expectations of the cultural productions, in order to explore the related processes of producing and policing Latina and Latin American feminine beauty and power. This analysis exposes the implicit assumptions about the female body’s form, appearance, success and/or failure that are being perpetuated through the film.

The plot of *Tortilla Soup* revolves around the Naranjos, a Mexican-American family, consisting of a single father with three daughters: Maribel (19); Carmen (early
The father, Martín Naranjo, is a master chef and the majority of his appearances in the film take place at a restaurant, at the dinner table, or during the preparation of the meal. Recalling our examination of Juli’s relationship to food in Sex and the South Beach Chicas, Bordo’s critical lens concerning food, sexuality, and desire in Unbearable Weight (1993) becomes useful once again. While for women food operates as a metaphor for their sexual appetite, the metaphorical situation is practically inverted in the representation of male eaters (110). Bordo demonstrates how although voracious eating may occasionally code male sexual appetite it frequently is also found as sexual appetite operating as a metaphor for eating pleasure (110-11). She explains that in such commercials, food is contrived as a sexual object of desire, and eating is legitimated as much more than a purely nutritive activity. “Rather, food is supposed to supply sensual delight and succor – not as metaphorically standing for something else, but as an erotic experience in itself. Women are permitted such gratification from food only in measured doses” (112). Thus, what is restricted for women is boundless for men and reinforces their authority consume. Following this concept, as the women symbolize consumable exotic femininity and sexuality by the mainstream media, Martín’s mastery of food can be interpreted as male desire and his supposed inherent right to consume female sexuality. This concept is confirmed in a conversation when Gomez, a friend of the family, states that he and Martín are too old to engage in sex, and Martín retorts: “Speak for yourself.” Moreover, Martín’s position is specific to the assessment of two key female characters. The women, appearing as the main focus, are represented through an explicitly male camera view. Consequently, each female character is first

16 According to Laura Mulvey (British filmmaker and critic) the eroticization of women on the screen is created through the way the cinema is structured around three explicitly male looks or gazes: there is the
represented, in one way or another in terms of her potential sexuality. Maribel is first seen with Andy, the Brazilian heartthrob; Carmen is first presented at work engaged in phone sex with her ex-boyfriend and later in the physical act of sex with him, and Leticia is first presented as clothed in white and carrying a Bible. She meets Yolanda, Hortensia’s daughter, in a salon where Yolanda has just cut and colored her hair which, Leticia comments, makes her “look younger.” The hairdresser then proceeds to attempt to alter Leticia’s appearance in a way which Yolanda states will “bring out your eyes.” Leticia, uncomfortable, gets up and hurries out the door, but not before stopping to envision herself with shorter hair. Leticia’s appearance in all white, carrying a Bible, indicates her repressed sexuality. Moreover, Leticia’s fervent prayers suggest her unbridled passion that remains contained until her transformation later in the film. Hence, Leticia is pressured to conform to a more youthful appearance that suggests she would be more attractive to the opposite sex (“look younger,” “bring out your eyes”).

Focusing on how the film Tortilla Soup maintains a specific paradigm of physical attractiveness which defines a Latina’s beauty by her hyperfeminization and hypersexualization, I explore here the instances in which these standards are upheld and perpetuated through the characters and plot.

In Tortilla Soup, women spectators are subjected to possibly confronting their own potential anxieties about getting older and being seen as less attractive, as they are invited to identify with the female characters whose beauty is coupled with their age and

look of the camera in the situation where events are being filmed – while technically neutral, this look is inherently voyeuristic and usually ‘male’ in the sense of a man doing the filming; there is the look of the men within the narrative, which is structured so as to make women objects of their gaze; and there is the look of the male spectator that imitates the first two looks. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Feminism and Film, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford UP, 1975) 34-47.
is then used in determining their possible triumph and/or downfall. The most apparent example of this occurs with Leticia, whose character goes through the greatest changes in appearance and behavior with respect to obtaining the attention of her male interest. The transformation that Leticia undergoes is accentuated by her character’s juxtaposition to and success over the older divorcee, Hortensia – played by none other than the 1960’s international sex symbol Raquel Welch – who desperately tries to be seen as attractive by Martín. Furthermore, upon meeting each of the daughters, Hortensia evaluates them by their beauty and age through her individual comments to each one. The first daughter Hortensia meets is Leticia, whom Martín introduces as his “oldest:” “Oh, Leticia of course (kisses). The school teacher, right? You’re still not married? Oh, (disappointed face) and a nice girl like you. (In a matter of fact tone and posture) You might want to try a little Preparation H around the eyes. It gets rid of those nasty little lines (wink).” Next Hortensia meets Maribel, whom Martín distinguishes from Leticia by calling her his “youngest:” “Your youngest! Maribel. Kisses (Hortensia motions for her to kiss her on the cheek – Maribel is in a tank top, jeans, and has headphones on listening to loud music). And what are you rebelling against, dear”? Maribel: “People who talk and talk and talk and say nothing.” Hortensia: “Careful, honey, boys don’t like smart-asses. (In a whisper) Just don’t wait too long like your big sister. She’s already over the hill. And you must be Carmencita. (Giving her full approval of Carmen) Of course there’s no problem here. Just remember when you’re as pretty as you are, a man is incapable of telling the truth.” Leticia’s vulnerability to these comments is made apparent by the disconcerted look upon her face as she reacts to Hortensia’s critical comments, and clear preference for the looks of her two sisters. Subsequently, Leticia is seen looking at
herself in the mirror imagining her next encounter with her love interest: the new baseball coach at the school where she is employed. Leticia, looking in the mirror, smiles and says “hello” in a flirtatious manner, until she notices the wrinkles around her eyes.

Evidently, Leticia’s character is influenced not only by Hortensia’s comments but also by her self-evaluation of her appearance. By evaluating each of the girls by their beauty and age, Hortensia’s character and comments demonstrate how closely related the age-factor is to the paradigm of physical attractiveness and how women scrutinize one another as they internalize this concept. Moreover, each comment offered by Hortensia connects the women’s beauty and sexuality to their ability to attract a male. Wolf notes how the competition between women has been made part of the Beauty myth, so that women will be divided from one another: “Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female span. Most urgently, women’s identity must be premised upon our ‘beauty’ so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying that vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed” (14). The visual language of the film stresses the importance of a woman’s appearance and sexuality. Thus the spectator is encouraged to copy the style and appearance of the successful female characters of the plot: their dress, attitudes and behavior. In this manner, the film’s plot and characters’ behavior highlight the importance of fitting into the particular paradigm of physical attractiveness, by presenting female characters that obsess about their appearance and ability to appeal to men; and it stands as a stereotype of the positioning of Latina women on screen as hyperfeminine, and successful only in direct proportion to their sex appeal.
Hortensia’s character fits the mold of the mainstream media’s construction of Latinidad, as Molina-Guzmán explains, that affirms traditional notions of the United States as a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation, by setting up Latino/a identity and culture as inherently exotic, foreign, and consumable. Within the media’s construction of Latinidad, multiracial women often perform a safe yet exotic sexualized femininity because of their racial and ethnic ambiguity (Molina-Guzmán 7). Before seeing Hortensia’s character, the spectator hears her say, in sexually charged tones, *Hoolaaa*. This aurally and instinctively establishes Hortensia as an ethnic entity to be consumed. This notion is further reinforced by her appearance and actions. Hortensia, the voracious divorcee – symbolic of Leti’s possible future – is a clear example of the hypersexualization of Latina beauty that equates a woman’s worth with her ability to attract a man. The impact of her appearance is intense, as she is seen in bright, tight-fitting clothing. Her make-up and hair are perfect. Hortensia assertively pursues Martín. At one point she deliberately is in the park where he exercises, with the pretense of running with him. Hortensia stretches in a sexual manner by flaunting her flexibility, bending over with her derriere positioned directly in front of Martín. Hortensia brings over salsa music to Martín’s house one night, uninvited, to dance with Martín for the evening. As noted earlier, within Latinidad, one of the most lasting tropes surrounding the signification of Latinas in U.S. popular culture is the trope of tropicalism (Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman, 1997). In their article about Latina iconicity in U.S. popular culture, Isabel Molina-Guzmán and Angharad N. Valdivia attest that “Under the trope of tropicalism, attributes such as bright colors, rhythmic music, and brown or olive skin comprise some of the most enduring stereotypes about Latinas/os, a stereotype best
embodied by the excess of Carmen Miranda and the hypersexualization of Ricky Martin” (211). Yet, for Hortensia, the surface tropicalism of her character connotes a sense that she is a failure, because in fact she is divorced and seems pathetic in her attempt to gain Martin’s affection. This is reinforced later by the fact that Martín eventually marries not Hortensia, but her daughter Yolanda. As a result, the idea that age can threaten a woman’s attractiveness, – and therefore her success and power – is implicitly endorsed. The message being sent through the film is that only those particular traits of youth and potential sexuality are considered attractive and successful.

Throughout the film, Leticia experiences the constant tension of the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. The taboo of feminine sexual pleasures is communicated through the social and cultural control over the sexuality of the female Latina and Latin American body, by Latin American socio-cultural and religious traditions, as exerted through marianismo. The connection between body and sexuality is used by the director of Tortilla Soup in an implicit way in order to perpetuate the external appraisal of the male gaze that can delimit a woman’s perceived range of options for her appearance. Consistent with the fact that traditionally a woman’s sexuality is controlled by society and the church, Leticia’s character represents the locus of control for both institutions. Thus, her hypersexualization embodies a balancing act; she is exceedingly religious and rushes to get married so that she can satisfy her and her husband’s sexual desires. Through Leticia’s character the director is able to dichotomize the ideology behind marianismo, separating the pious woman from the carnal woman who embraces her sexuality. In this way, the film reinvents the female gender role in marinismo to be simultaneously religious and sexual in nature. Leticia’s perceived attractiveness changes
when, halfway through the film, her interest in a man begins to influence her appearance. Thus, her consciously constructed beauty is shown to be a powerful and malleable instrument in attracting the opposite sex. It is important to point out that as a high school teacher, Leticia teaches Chemistry, the study of compositions, properties, and the reactions of matter and also the interaction of one personality with another – or, for our purposes here, the physical attraction between men and women. Leticia’s character is imposed upon from the beginning of the film to change her appearance, from her hairstyle to her physical form – from erasing unsightly wrinkles to working out to “improve” her triceps (read: the composition of her matter). Hence, Tortilla Soup asserts the claim that Latina bodies are malleable and subject to criticism when they fall outside the parameters of dominant beauty ideals set for their gender by media practices which consistently portray Latina and Latin American women as thin yet curvaceous, sexually attractive characters.

Upon discovering Leticia’s secret attraction to the new baseball coach at her school, Orlando, her sister Carmen decides to enhance Leticia’s appearance by fixing her hair and make-up in a more provocative way to “bring Orlando to his knees.” Leticia is symbolically transformed into Hollywood’s stereotypical Latina and/or Latin American woman: the Spitfire\textsuperscript{17} – who is characterized by red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair; propelled by her emotionalism and her inability to control her basic instincts. Leticia’s transformation consists of wearing a thong, which Carmen says will “massage you all day inspiring all kinds of

thoughts,” a red top with more defined make-up, red lips to match, and accentuated curly long hair. The thong causes Leticia to swagger when she walks, swaying her hips from side to side, thus producing an exotic and sexualized image, fully transformed from the all-white Bible-carrying vision of her. The focus on Leticia’s makeover creates in her character a hypersexualization that counters the puritan ideal of Christianity that epitomized her initially, and thus moves her character to the realm of dominant representations of Latina bodies as performing a safe yet exotic sexualized femininity.

Juliet McMains, in her article “Brownface: Representations of Latin-Ness in Dancesport” provides a close reading of how dancesport\textsuperscript{18} choreography “performs” racial positions, and she explains how body movement in Latin dancesport reveals how this Other, non-white racial identity “contrasts with the white Western racial position (…) [as] more sexual, as signaled by costuming, predominance of hip movements, and visual narrative constructed in moves that are often mimicking seduction” (56-57).\textsuperscript{19} McMains goes on to state that while standard dances represent a romantic fairy tale of civilized European culture, the Latin American dances represent a “primitive” mode of human expression that is by contrast overtly sexual, emotional, and physical (57). In a parallel way, Leticia’s makeover by Carmen exemplifies the performance of Latin American dancesport visually through her “costume” and physically through her seductive “walk.” In this fashion, Leticia’s character now represents dominant hypersexualized media representations of Latina women. From the male vantage point, at the end of the film,

\textsuperscript{18} Dancesport refers to a highly stylized version of ballroom dancing performed in competition circuits across the United States, Europe, and Asia.

\textsuperscript{19} While the term Western is today seen as overgeneralized, what is useful of McMains’ critical lens is her analysis of Latin American dances in relation to their perceived primitivism and overt sexual movements.
once Leticia has been transformed she is more attractive and pleasing to the male eye –
this made obvious by the whistles Leticia receives and the union with her love interest,
confirming that when these specific hypersexualized beauty expectations are met, Latina
women become successful and acquire the power to attract the opposite sex. Both of
these details are important because Leticia is the film’s heroine, the primary character
with whom the spectator is supposed to identify. For Leticia, success means conforming
to the dominant sexualized beauty standards. In this way Leticia is acting out her
femininity through make-up, clothes and perceived sexuality. As a consequence, the film
perpetuates certain cultural pressures that require women to perform gender according to
the dominant paradigms of physical attractiveness personified by the other female
characters.

The concept of docile bodies helps us to analyze societal norms imposed on
women. Susan Bordo’s critical lens is useful in examining this concepts, as she asserts in
*Unbearable Weight*: “Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive
ideal of femininity – a pursuit without a terminus(…) – female bodies become docile
bodies⁴⁰ – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation,
subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (166). This observation is borne out in
*Tortilla Soup* where the main protagonist, is transformed into a docile body that is
pressed to internalize unrealistic – at least for most women – beauty ideals that
 correspond to her sexuality. This element within the film can induce anxiety for those
Latina spectators who fall outside of the perceived ideal for their gender. As a

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⁴⁰ Here Bordo builds on Michel Foucault’s work on societal discipline on docile bodies in *Discipline and
consequence, a conditioning takes place throughout Tortilla Soup for the female Latina spectator to ultimately judge herself against the images and lives of other Latina women on-screen, where she is presented with multiple models that encourage her to imitate this same image. Accordingly, her own body becomes a central site for critique and consumerism. The existing social conditions and exploitation of a homogenized Latina identity make the individual feel powerless. Bordo reminds us that to understand Foucault’s conception of power “we must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another; we must instead think of the network of dominance and subordination in a particular domain” (167). Here, mainstream U.S. media’s – and specifically the film Tortilla Soup’s – practice of particular performances of Latina identity which constructs Latino identity and culture as inherently exotic, foreign, and consumable, becomes that particular domain that holds power over the production of Latina identity. In this way, the Latina female spectator of popular U.S. Latino films, geared toward female audiences, is led to vacillate between what she is and what she is shown she ought to be. The overall messages of such cultural productions is an integrated sense of Latina bodies as docile bodies. This is not just because they are malleable through make-overs and other more invasive transformations; but also because Latinas are being taught to follow certain racializing and gendering performances by mainstream popular culture. In such popular culture, the media’s privileging of particular performances of Latina identity consistently perpetuate hyperfeminized and hypersexualized representations.

In conclusion, Leticia’s success and power are explicitly measured by her attractiveness that is achieved only through her physical transformation. Her beauty
becomes an instrument of power, which is then used against her because her hypothetical happiness depends upon its corroboration of hypersexualized beauty ideals. The pressure to fit into particular paradigms of ideal beauty for such women – enforced by the hypersexualization exerted upon them by dominant representations of their gender and the positive changes that come from such a transformation – translates into their perceived “worth” and success within society. Hence, the overall message being transmitted by Tortilla Soup propagates external valuations of Latina beauty ideals that, even if represented as voluntary, really shouldn’t be read that way, because Latina female spectators are not offered a range of options – nor is Leticia’s character.

IV. Music

Toxic Crow’s La morena

One of the most explicit examples of assigning value to women’s hypersexualized bodies can be found in the music videos of denbow21 or Dominican urban music. Video after video provides the spectator with an epitome of the hypersexualization of Latin American women, specifically here, the Dominican woman. A thorough exploration of denbow music and artists establishes Toxic Crow as a typical musician of this genre. Not only does Toxic Crow, a native of Santo Domingo, provide an inherent source of local Dominican produced music, but also his lyrics and videos subsume the collective themes and depiction of women emblematic throughout denbow music. In one particular music video, Toxic Crow’s La morena, the central figure is the sexualized Afro-Latina female. Denbow music is intended for a younger audience, primarily Latin American, but also

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21 (Also spelled “Dembow” in English language references) Denbow Dominicano, or simply Denbow is the Dominican variation and form of Reggaeton.
Latino, as this genre has grown in its popularity not only among the Caribbean countries but also across Latin America starting around 1990, and in the United States after its mainstream exposure in 2004. The lyrics tend to be extreme in their references to the exploitation of women, explicitness and violence. Sexuality is a prevalent theme, as the common dance for this genre of music is the *perreo*, a dance with explicit sexual overtones. The sexually provocative dance moves automatically hypersexualizes the female partner, as it appears to be clothed sexual intercourse from behind. Jane C. Desmond in “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies” asserts how “By looking at dance we can see enacted on a broad scale, and in codified fashion, socially constituted and historically specific attitudes towards the body in general, towards specific social groups’ usage of the body in particular, and about the relationship among variously marked bodies, as well as social attitudes toward the use of space and time” (32). She explains how the meaning of dance is situated both in the context of socially prescribed and socially meaningful ways of moving and in the context of the history of dance forms in specific societies.

Desmond avows how “The pleasure aspect of social dancing often obscures our awareness of it as a symbolic system, so that dances are often seen as ‘authentic’ unmediated expressions of psychic or emotional inferiority.

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22 The dance focuses on grinding and pelvic thrusts, with the man facing the back of the woman. The word *perreo*, meaning dancing “doggy-style,” is also known as “booty dancing” or “grinding” in the United States. This form of dancing is very common in the Caribbean and is one of the main forms of dancing at night clubs and parties and would most undoubtedly be performed to *denbow*.

23 For example, in nineteenth-century dance manuals directed towards the middle and upper classes, bodies that pressed close, spines that relaxed, and clutching arms were all denigrated as signs of lower-socio-economic class dance style. Thus, as “dance,” conventions of bodily activity signify a highly codified and highly mediated illustration of social distinctions. See Jane. C. Desmond “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Culture Studied,” *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 31.
They are often taken as evidence of a ‘character,’ and sometimes of a ‘national character,’ and often of ‘racial character’” (43). In this way, the rhythm, body movement, and attention of the female performer in La morena provide a space where a gendering and racialization takes place which underpin dominant social and cultural depictions of Afro-Latina women.

The fact that the song is entitled la morena, and not la blanca or la india clara, for example, is very important when considering how race plays into aesthetic and sexual perceptions within the Dominican Republic. David Howard, in his 2001 book about race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic, examines how African ancestry in Dominican society is often ignored or denied, instead privileging a lighter aesthetic. Howard observes that “The regular correlation of ‘bad hair’ and ‘ordinary’ features, and their juxtaposition vis-à-vis the desired traits of ‘straight’ hair and ‘fine’ features, manifests itself through a bias for European, and now North American, identity in terms of aesthetics and culture”(9). Accordingly, Dominicans describe race with a surfeit of color-coded terms, ranging from coffee, chocolate, cinnamon and wheat, to the adoption of indio/a to avoid using mulato/a or negro/a (3). Howard further explains how “Mestizo/a is used to a limited extent, largely due to the popularity of indio/a. Moreno/a, again seldom used as a term of racial self-description, may be translated as ‘brown.’” (15). The women in the video indeed have “brown” skin-color. The use of the term morena to describe them is interesting, and contradicts to some degree what Howard indicates about its use, especially since this song belongs to the popular culture arena. While the women in the video are able to perform – or possess – certain Anglo or Northern European traits, such as long straight hair and delicate features, they don’t
escape the culturally hypersexualized beliefs associated with African heritage. Howard notes that “Sexuality is a key social structure in the production and maintenance of patriarchal relations. Conceptions of race are entwined with sexuality and beauty. Aesthetic values tend to discriminate against negro/a features, which are deemed ordinary or ugly. (...) The lighter the skin color, the straighter the hair or the narrower the facial features, the greater the tendency to define beauty within these terms” (88).

Following this theory, then, Toxic Crow’s use of the term morena is not meant to inspire envy as to the Afro-Latina woman’s beauty, but rather to feature her overt hypersexuality and the male’s possession of her. Howard affirms that darker skin color is associated with the erotic, yet the white bias in beauty challenges the desirability of black sexuality. He states that the “contradiction is clear – popular male and female opinion reveres the beauty of the blanco/a, yet popular sexual myth imbues the negro/a or mulato/a with vigor and skillful prowess” (90). In this fashion, the use of the term morena sanctions the hypersexualization of women of color, linking her identity to her sexuality and body, completely ignoring any evaluation of her (nonexistent?) beauty. Focusing on the lyrics and imagery which demonstrate said hypersexualization, I explore the ways in which the song *La morena* reinforces dominant racialized and gendered, representations of Afro-Latina women equating her identity with promiscuity and pure male sexual satisfaction.

The music video opens by showing a man emerging from a black SUV with tinted windows; apparently he has pulled over to pick up two women walking down a dimly lit street at night. The women are dressed in clothing that scarcely covers more than a bikini highlighting their curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and navel jewelry. Their light brown skin color and long straight hair plays into the valorization of Anglo or
Northern European beauty ideals. They wear miniskirts so undersized that, at one point, you can see one girl’s buttock crevice, belly-rings and other jewelry; their nails are done, and they wear high heels. The women, appearing as the main focus, are viewed through an explicitly male camera angle. The body-cropping of their hips, thighs, breast and buttocks indicates the objectification of their racialized gender. As the man approaches them, he greets them and begins the song, and the music starts:

¡Hola!

Hola morena yo sé que tú priva en buena
Que no come berenjena pa’ no perder la figura
Que parece una sirena pero yo tengo la vaina
del tamaño de una antena no me ronque así que ¡ven!

Ven, ven, ven, ven,…

Once the music starts, the girls automatically start to dance and stay in motion for the rest of the video. The singer points to the women’s buttocks as the girls perform the moves of the perreo, symbolically evaluating her by the shape and sensuality of her buttocks, and ultimately assessing her sexual potential. Sander Gilman, in *Difference and Pathology* (1985), discusses the stereotypes associated with race and sexuality. He explains that for centuries the bodies of women of color, specifically their genitals and buttocks, have been exceedingly sexualized and eroticized by U.S. and European cultures. During a time when the sexuality and the beauty of the black body was positioned as antithetical to those of the white body, the labeling of the black female as more primitive, and therefore more sexually intensive, reflects the general nineteenth-
century understanding of female sexuality as pathological.\textsuperscript{24} Gilman affirms how “the genitalia and buttocks of the black female attracted much greater interest in part because they were seen as evidence of an anomalous sexuality not only in the black women but in all women” (89). He continues to explain how in the nineteenth century, female sexuality was tied to the image of the buttocks, and the quintessential exaggerated buttocks are those of the Hottentot (91). This unbridled sexuality, used to describe the sexuality of the Other, prevails today as seen in Negrón-Muntaner’s contemporary analysis of Jennifer Lopez’s buttocks and today’s \textit{perreo} dance. Negrón-Muntaner avows that “like hegemonic white perceptions of Latinos, big butts are impractical and dangerous” (189). Negrón-Muntaner continues to state how “a big culo does not only upset hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste, it is a sign for the dark, incomprehensible excess of ‘Latino’ and other African diaspora cultures. Excess of food (unrestrained), excess of shitting (dirty), and excess of sex (heathen) are its three vital signs” (189). The colonial mentality that see “natives” as needing control is shifted here, to the dominant culture’s need to control the sexuality of the Other; consequently the Latino and Latin American culture is seen by the U.S. media as a culture of excess in need of restraint. However, Negrón-Mutaner indicates how “in gendered terms, the big rear end acts both as an identification site for Latinas to reclaim their beauty and a ‘compensatory fantasy’ for a whole community. Insisting to write or talk about big butts is ultimately a response to the pain of being ignored, thought of as ugly, treated as low, yet surviving – even

\textsuperscript{24} Evidence of this is presented when, in 1815, when Sarah Bartman, a twenty-five year old Hottentot female, had been put on display for over 5 years to present to the European audience a different anomaly. Her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks; a physical characteristic of Hottentots had captured the eye of early travelers. According to Gilman, Sarah Bartman’s sexual parts served as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century and dominate medical descriptions of the black during the nineteenth century.
thriving – through a belly-down epistemology” (192). In this way, the song La morena stands exactly midway between the glorification of the sexualized female and her condemnation. The lyrics and imagery of the music video place the Afro-Latina woman in the limelight while simultaneously sexually objectifying her by underscoring her ethnic physicality and her sexual allure. Thus, the associating of her racialized and gendered identity with promiscuity and male satisfaction is perpetuated.

When focused on the two girls, the camera mainly body-crops and captures the movements of the perreo performed by the girls. As we saw with Juli’s character in Sex and the South Beach Chicas, the women in the video personify the idea of Latin American culture as a culture of excess in need of restraint, as physical fitness and control over diet are equated to attractiveness by the mention of the consumption of traditional foods that have an excess of fat. In the music video, this concept is expressed verbally by the lyrics “yo sé que tu priva en buena, que no come berenjena pa’ no perder la figura” and visually by the selection of slender yet curvaceous female bodies dancing in the video. By equating the women to sirens, they are represented in terms of their dangerously seductive and tempting attributes that can be destructive for men, but here the rapper reaffirms his masculine authority over the females despite their enchantment by associating the size of his genitals to the size of an antenna. The sexual availability of the women along with the power and authority of the male figure, in fact, is the consistent theme produced through the imagery and lyrics of the entire song and again serves to link the women’s identity with lechery and accessibility.

Que yo tengo los trucos, tú sabe lo que bu’co
Bájate los pantie pa’ llevarte pal conuco
Y abrete mamita que te voy a dar tu ruco
Y ya empezó la fiesta quítate los braciele y aplaude
As the girls dance in provocative moves, bending over, thrusting hips, performing *perreo*, the rapper stands and points to the women’s bodies, specifically their buttocks and vagina. The depiction of women as sexual objects is visible by the fact that the rapper, while bent over singing by the woman’s gyrating buttocks or standing behind or in front of her, never looks her in the face; thus her identity is entirely comprised of her sexual potential, her body. As the camera switches to images of her from shoulders to mid-thigh, the rapper instructs her to “open” up to him, remove her brassiere and applaud (him) with her breast. Associating “party” with a woman’s sex, the rapper points to the woman’s genitalia, which she exhibits for him with her seductive dancing by positioning her pelvis in a manner that presents her (clothed) vagina accessible at the exact moment that the rapper points to it. In this way, she is automatically linked with her sexual availability, and functions for the male as entertainment. Hence, Howard’s indication of the popular sexual myth that inculcates the *negro/a* or *mulato/a* (*morena*) with vigor and skillful prowess, is evident by this song and music video.

After pointing to the woman’s sex, the rapper points to himself, as if to show possession of the female and convey his possession of her in addition to his virility. Her physical, racialized hypersexuality is symbolically consumable by the rapper and the mainstream media, as connoted by the fact that the entire song revolves around the triumph of the male rapper as the women obediently get into the truck.
Te meto en una cabaña, no ponemo a comer caña
Dame un chin de tu lasaña, que ahorita eso se daña
Y no me digas que no, porque tú no eres tacaña

His fascination with her apparent unrestricted sexual excessiveness, associated with her protruding and gyrating buttocks, links the woman to representations of racialized and hypersexualized ethnic bodies. She is characterized by her neighborhood as “enjoying” bad habits, automatically implying her socially inscribed (racial) character that undoubtedly considers her provocative dress and activity. As explored earlier, the connection of food to sensual delight is present here as the rapper equates her to lasagna. Thus, she is evaluated by her consumable state, in addition to the “age factor” appearing yet again, with the reference that she must be consumed before she goes bad – in other words, before she ages.

Voy quitándome la ropa en lo que tú te bañas
Y me subo en las paredes como si fuera una araña
No se besa, yo sé que tú piensa que soy un sin vergüenza
Lo que quiero es besarte y jalarte por la trenza
Después que yo te bese quitarte la defensa
no me tenga vergüenza y ábrete morena, que aquí esta tu recompensa.

Implicit here, again, is the idea that she enjoys the physical act of sex and that she is toying with him; however, the rapper suggests that she give herself to him and he will satisfy (reward) her. In this light, she is equated to the sexual act, perpetuating the nineteenth century perception of the racialized female with that of the prostitute, and as a result symbolically equating her to a sexual object. The chorus summarizes the explicit objective of the male rapper, who ultimately uses the female to satisfy his sexual desire of her body. Again, he points to her genitalia as he states that her reward resides here; this is immediately followed by the chorus:
Ábreme las pierna pa' rompértelo(x4)

No me dé cotorra, que yo sé que a ti te gusta
que te agarren por lo' moño' y que te den!

No me dé cotorra, que yo se que a ti te gusta
que te agarren por lo’ moño' así que ven!

The connection that the rapper makes to the woman being compensated for services, in addition to her apparent enjoyment, is visually seen in the music video by the women holding money. Taking into account that the prostitute is the essential sexualized female (Gilman 94), the Dominican women in this video are perceived as the embodiment of sexuality. In this way, the rapper genderizes and racializes the women simultaneously, in addition to assessing their physical aptitude for sex. At this point in the music video, the rapper and the two women have relocated to a speed boat. Accordingly, the women now wear bikinis. As the rapper sings, the women sit on either side of him, still in motion, swaying their bodies to move to the beat. The consistent body-cropping of the camera now focuses on the women’s breasts, as one of their bikini tops is so small that her nipples are visible. At this point, the scene alternates between the cabin of the boat and the deck. Outside, the rapper sits on the edge of the deck while the women stand with their backs to the camera and perform the perreo. When they do turn around, they wear sun-glasses, symbolically concealing their true identities, and thus further reducing their identities to their bodies and their sexuality.

Quiero darte duro
meterte pa’ lo oscuro
porque tu singapuro
No le pare mami chula
Que lo tuyo está seguro
Morena te lo juro
que contigo yo me curo
Entonce ven y comete
este plátano maduro

Dímelo maluca
que es lo que tu busca
que busque un abejón y te ...
Cómemelo con yuca
Agárrate en una cama y darte con eta bazuca

The rapper reaffirms both the women’s expertise and their perceived enjoyment of unbridled sexuality, as he reaffirms the supremacy of his genitalia. In addition, he uses terminology associated with the Caribbean, such as plátano and yuca, to describe the act of oral sex that she performs on him. Hence, he participate in the tropicalization of the Caribbean and Latin American culture and people by associating the exotic and consumable with the Afro-Latina woman. To complete the video, the following chorus is sung while the camera cuts back and forth between the gyrating buttocks of a woman, and a woman sitting upon a motorcycle thrusting her pelvis back and forth as if she is having sexual intercourse with the machine.

Mira que lunar, Cerca del ... (x 5)

This section of the video provides the spectator with the evidence that the rapper has had sex with the women and testifies to the location of a mole by her genitalia. This fact is visualized by the gesture of the hands touching thumb to thumb and index finger to index finger, making the shape of the intimate part of a woman’s body. Socio-economic status is represented in this video by the expensive cars and boat. However, the scene with the money in the cabin connotes the impression of a criminal, and thus, inferior culture. All of these details portray more of an excessive display of money and the consumer power associated with it by those who have come from lower socio-economic classes and have found success by capitalizing on their talent or criminal activity. In sum, the assumption
that can be taken overall with this music video is that morenas are sexually available and are seen as innately hypersexual. The lyrics and imagery of La morena by Toxic Crow perpetuate dominant racialized and gendered representations of Afro-Latina women that liken their identity with promiscuity and pure male pleasure.

In conclusion, as we have seen, cultural productions in both the United States, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic predominately portray Latinas and Latin American women as sexual objects, but to varying degrees. Within dominant U.S. mass media depictions of Latina and Latin American women, there exists a tendency for them to perform safe yet exotic and sexualized roles as a method of affirming notions of the United States as a white, Anglo-Saxon nation. More often than not, Latina and Latin American women living in the United States are not only exposed to imagery and representations of their gender as light-skinned, with light hair and eyes, and curvaceous but thin bodies, but also the celebrities and artists who have become famous in the U.S. are often anglicized to this specific paradigm of physical attractiveness. Those women who fall outside of this Anglo or Northern European beauty ideal, meaning that they are more ethnic (darker skin, eyes and hair, larger body type) are typecast as exotic, foreign and consumable. When considering beauty and power within the Dominican Republic and Colombia, these same tendencies connote a colonial perception of beauty, and often exclude those who fail to represent dominant ideals of physical attractiveness from national identity. Race being a particularly complicated issue for both the Dominican Republic and Colombia, certain traits that are acceptable – such as larger more curvaceous bodies, darker skin and eyes (although lighter color of both is revered as most attractive) – can be extremely encouraged as is evidence by dominant television and mass
media portrayals of women. In some cases, the pressure to conform to hypersexualized versions of their gender lead many women to cosmetic procedures and surgeries where they physically are molded to fit certain national preferences. The power that these beauty ideals hold for women of color in these racially mixed nations can mean the erasure of natural traits, in favor of those that represent an Anglo or Northern European paradigm of physical attractiveness. While many women in both of these countries innately possess these physical characteristics, this narrow paradigm of ideal beauty fails to be inclusive of the many different existent skin and eye colors, hair textures, and bodies across the Latin American region.
CHAPTER 3

Accesorios grandes y poderosos: Consumption of Luxury Goods and Ideals of Glamour and Beauty.

This chapter examines the connection among consumption, beauty, and power in various popular culture products and mass media. Noting the most repeated messages, imagery and representations of Latina and Latin American women, this study explores how the cult of femininity is identified with particular paradigms of physical appearance within magazines, popular music, and novels, thus coupling the female body with signs of consumption and wealth. An important point of reference is to measure how the equation of accomplishment, power, and agency with pleasure of the self allows claims of women’s participation in commodity consumption as symbols of successful womanhood. Consumption, here, should be understood as the purchase of diet and exercise products, cosmetics, clothing, accessories, traveling abroad, or other signs of affluence that correspond to success, power, and agency for women. For many Latina and Caribbean audiences, consumption, repeatedly linked with a specific body type and race, implies that said body type and race can be purchased. While the pairing of consumption with specific body type and race is true for all consumer-women in the hypermodern world, the implications specifically for Latinas are reinforced by being a minority population. In addition, I evaluate narrative representations of how the Latina and Latin American female characters navigate the social pressures to consume and meet a narrowly defined standard of beauty. Lastly, I look at how the lyrics of a popular music correspond to the ideology presented within the magazines and novels.
This chapter first looks at popular women’s magazines, specifically *A la Moda* (a Dominican fashion and beauty magazine), and *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* (the edition of *Cosmopolitan* produced for Latinas and Latin American women in the United States). I explore within these magazines the ways in which beauty and power become coupled with consumption. For Latinas and Latin American women, the general message exemplified through the imagery and advertisements encourages the intentional reshaping, refashioning and aesthetic manipulation of the body as a method of projecting qualities of empowerment onto the self. I then move on to narration and consider how these assumptions are played out in two U.S. Latino novels: *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* (2006) and *The Dirty Girls Social Club* (2004). Within these novels, I consider how the heroines experience the consumer culture and how the anxieties to consume and meet the socio-cultural standards represented in fashion and beauty magazines determine their success or failure. Finally I explore the lyrics of a Colombian song created for the soundtrack to a famous Spanish-language soap opera and film. I contemplate how the desire for money and conspicuous consumption is centralized within the song and how the acquisition of commodities equates to symbols of successful womanhood. Focusing on the success and power of U.S. Latina, Dominican, and Colombian female representations as aligned to a particular pattern of physical attractiveness in popular women’s magazines, novels, and within music, this chapter explores the representational dialectic and imagery produced through the linked practices of racialization and gendering associated with consumption. My thesis is that fictional, pictorial, and musical dramatization of Latina and Caribbean women will either strengthen these
equations of beauty and power, within particular cultural norms, or will interrogate them in creative and provocative ways.

I. Popular Women’s Magazines

The 21st century is an age of media saturation, commodified popular culture, and hyperaccessibility of options to mimic trends. Anyone who thumbs through the pages of popular women’s magazines will inevitably come across an array of articles and advertisements having to do with fashion, celebrities, sex, relationships, make-up, skin care, exercise, diet, home decoration, and cooking. As the main consumers, women are taught in magazines – through images and advertisements – what to buy, how to act and how to look. Such messages and visual stimuli persuade us either to buy something (e.g., anti-age cream) or to buy into the source of that message (e.g., a workout video or dieting plan) or to buy into the subtext of that message (e.g., a preferred standard of living and image). In Ways of Seeing (1972), John Berger asserts that advertising as a system “proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer (…). Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable” (131). For Latinas, this transformation requires a change, such as lightening skin color or undergoing cosmetic surgery, establishing the assumption that the body is malleable and thus susceptible to criticism. It is precisely the paradox between the inferiority implicit in advertisements and the ideal self-conveyed by the images that creates desire and sells the products and lifestyle. The suggestion of self-modification in popular women’s magazines aimed at Latina and Caribbean audiences incessantly links consumption to a specific body type and race, and promotes a particular
lifestyle through consumption as a way of attaining the desired image or lifestyle portrayed within the pages. Thus, the implication for Latina and Latin American women that do not already fit certain beauty standards is that these attributes can be bought. By taking a closer look at the content of articles and the advertisement images in popular women’s magazines produced both in the Dominican Republic and the United States; it becomes apparent that physical appearance and signs of wealth are parallel with evidence of success and power.

I have chosen as my sample group to analyze one fashion and beauty magazine from the United States and one from the Dominican Republic. I chose Cosmopolitan for Latinas because it is the most recent publication that addresses U.S. Latina readership, giving me the most up-to-date representative of this media. A la Moda was chosen because it is strictly produced in the Dominican Republic and is representative of modern beauty and fashion publication in Latin America. As stated in the introduction, these magazines are typical of an array of magazines examined for the present study.

A la Moda

The cover of A la Moda 2011 (Dominican Republic No.45- Año 19) invites its readers to explore, among other themes: “100 ideas para renovar tu estilo, El debut: Nuevas promesas que marcan pauta, Accesorios de lujo para tu verano, Gradúate de fashionista: Mezcla de prints, Dias para ti… vive el relax a la moda, Prabal Gurung: Rey de la nueva estética, Especial de belleza: Páginas para mimarte.” The model on the cover, upcoming Dominican model Wederly de Ossygeno, is thin, has light skin, Northern European facial features (thin nose, light eyes), and long straight brown hair; a shiny bracelet draws attention to her manicured nails (see fig. 3.1). Wederly wears a colorful
blue, pink, and orange stripped tunic dress that she modestly pulls up enough to display thin taught thighs against a light pink background that accentuates her light skin. Her posture is aggressive as she stares straight into the camera, standing firm from a cropped view of her body from mid-thigh up. The print, on the cover of the magazine, in dark blue, purple and pink matches the model’s attire and backdrop. Thus, the magazine’s name and graphic text creates a compositional unity between the image of the model and the thoughts about beauty and fashion promoted.

Figure 3.1. Cover of A la Moda 2011 Issue. Source: A la Moda

Ellen McCracken in Decoding Women’s Magazines (1993) states how across this genre of magazines, “the cover’s goal is literally to sell us the ads inside the magazine which, in turn, will sell us products and habits of consumption” (15). McCracken goes on to emphasize how the photographic text markets an idealized image of women for
potential readers to desire, identify with, and expect to attain through consuming the magazine. In this manner, the imperative and informal tone of the cover text functions as a guideline to achieving the beauty and fashion ideals while the model represents the perfected prototype and future self if the advice is followed. While McCracken’s theories apply to all women, within these magazines’ marketplace, there are specific racial implications for Dominican women within the text of the cover and the visual representation. To understand this, it is important to consider how racial ancestry and spatial proximity to Haiti are vital. David Howard, in his study of race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic, states how racial legacies are crucial among a Dominican population where cultural, linguistic and religious differences are limited. He explains that racial dissimilarities are manipulated through the unequal standing and significance given to European, African and indigenous ancestries. To this end, European and indigenous heritages in the Dominican Republic have been celebrated at the expense of an African past, such that Dominican identity is constructed in relation to Haiti through a shared insularity and shared history (1). Howard goes on to avow how “African ancestry in Dominican society is largely ignored or denied. By downgrading African-Caribbean identity, aspirations for a lighter aesthetic automatically rise on the other side of the scale of perception” (9). In spite of the fact that in general terms many social geographers might describe the Dominican population as mulato/a, most Dominicans do not self-identify as black, but rather use other various terms to represent a range of skin tones ranging from coffee, chocolate, cinnamon and wheat, to the adoption of indio/a, a device that avoids using mulato/a or negro/a (Howard 3). Following such racialization present in the Dominican society, the cover of A la Moda moreover genderizes aesthetic values
by overtly perpetuating European standards of female beauty (read: light skin and eyes, straight hair and thinness) versus celebrating more common physical features of Dominican women, which also speaks to the magazine’s main target audience as the higher socio-economic class who can afford to conform to specific body type and color.

The overarching paradigms of the magazine’s cover are repeated throughout the verbal texts in the ads, through which specific instructions for attaining the model of ideal beauty are given: renovar tu estilo (cover text), exfoliante renovador (Artistry intensive skincare), al sellar la cuticula y restaurar el brillo natural (Keratina Shampoo), A la vanguardia de la Moda (Benest), el rejuvenencimiento de tu cabello (Vitaly shampoo/conditioner/treatment), Renuévate. Reinvéntate. Cambia tu look (Yamelis Arnemann Salon/Spa) (my emphasis). Suggestions of improvement create a web between advertisements and the articles announced on the cover, thus, establishing a cultural dialectic that emphasizes the current inadequacy of the spectator-buyer. Inadequacy, as projected by the advertisements, can be interpreted as not having the right hair texture or length, the correct eye color, aging skin. Each advertisement and article is accompanied by a pleasurable visual representation – or the implication of one – that perpetuates a narrowly defined physical perfection. Concealed within the glamorous ideals are subtexts that play on anxieties and encourage feelings of shortcoming that, as McCracken evaluates in magazines produced in the United States, “attempt to integrate women further into the consumer economy (…) [by] promising pleasure and the acceptance and love of others” (McCracken 37) through the possession of the merchandise or lifestyle. This concept applies to A la Moda here; however, taking it a step further by incorporating racial ideals as well. The presence of Anglo-European
models and celebrities establishes a dominant ideal beauty that contradicts the emblematic Dominican female racial make-up and body type. Furthermore, the transformations emphasize the competing cultural imperatives exerted uponLatinas and Caribbean women: to be more exotic than the white woman, yet resemble her as much as possible. The spectator-buyer, according to Berger, “is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself. (…) the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product” (134). In this manner, the verbal content bolsters equations of beauty and power as connected to consumption and malleability of the female body. For the Dominican female body, it translates here as one that must be restored, renewed, rejuvenated, and in general transformed from its natural form through the use and purchase of diet and exercise products, cosmetics and beauty products (that lighten skin, eyes, and lighten and straighten hair), clothing, and jewelry.

McCracken, pulling from Erving Goffman’s analysis of categories of “gender display” or “ritualized behavior practices,” demonstrates how magazine cover photos communicate through these “hyperitualizations” reinforcing “cultural stereotypes and leading us to similar displays inside the magazine” (22). In this fashion, A la Moda’s cover image of the model sets the stage for the rest of the magazine’s advertisements, images, and articles to maintain a model of success, power and agency based on narrowly defined standards of beauty and signs of wealth. For example, the first advertisement

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after the inside cover is of *Artistry* intensive skincare renewing peel (exfoliante renovador) which promises “La piel más tersa, joven y luminosa desde tu hogar, ¡en cuestión de minutos!” The model that accompanies this product is already young and has luminous smooth skin. The fact that she has Northern European facial features, light skin and eyes, and is the first advertisement and model seen after the cover associates her with the model on the cover, thus maintaining the narrowly defined beauty of youth and Anglicization. Hence, the message sent to the spectator-buyer is one of her future success, power, and agency that can be attained in “minutes” without having to even leave her home. Said success, power and agency come from obtaining younger, smooth (read: without wrinkles), and luminous skin and complexion that the advertisement associates with Anglo or Northern European attributes.

Another example can be taken from the advertisement for *Keratina Brazilian Formula* shampoo and hair treatment products, on pages 6 and 7, which “tiene la capacidad activa de producir acondicionamiento prácticamente permanente.” The model shown in this advertisement is, not surprisingly, a woman dressed in typical Brazilian carnival attire (see fig. 3.2). She wears a jeweled bikini top and matching crown, emphasized by the baby blue feathers that encircle the cropped body shot of her from the mid-waist up. Her olive skin, dark hair and eyes and robust breasts highlight her more
exotic allure, even though this image denies the phenotypical make-up of Brazil: the Afro-Hispano.

Howard avows how “Race and sexuality sell products, but more specifically it is the image of a woman’s body, blanca or india clara, which sells in the Dominican Republic” (89). The anxiety created by the omnipresence of the blanca or india clara female body within the Dominican Republic’s mass media serves to drive the Afro-Dominican woman to the extremity of molding her body through nonmedical beauty practices to the point of changing her race and physicality. Linking the use of Keratina Brazilian Formula to the achievement of a more Northern European “practically permanent” hair texture for the consumer, the advertisement serves to perpetuate the celebration of specific beauty ideals that model a national preference. The choices regarding this particular model’s weight, skin and eye color, and facial features signal a conscious decision to implement dominant media practices about the performance of ethnicity, race, and gender. The reason this is
so important is because of the aesthetic ideals associated with the physical characteristics found in peoples of Afro-Hispano descent – in particular the idea of *pelo bueno y pelo malo*. The model’s hair is pinned up under the jeweled crown she wears. The significance here is the assumption that her hair, since she shows no signs of African descent, is naturally the desired texture and type. Thus, the omission of her hair from the advertisement propagates the belief that those who possess “good hair” are those without African roots. In examining the meaning of “blackness” in the African diaspora, Whitten and Torres affirm that “the imagery of black Haiti held by mainland South American whites (*mestizos*) suggests an undesirable power of blackness within *mestizaje* that is to be feared and controlled. It suggests a racialist revulsion and spiritual awe of latent and nascent power that survived the transformation from distinct gene pools into a mestizo ‘cosmic race’ (*raza cósmica Vasconcelos 1925*)” (12-13). The fact that the advertisement appears in a Dominican magazine – where almost all of the readership would have mixed African ethnicity – speaks to what Whitten and Torres would refer to as ethnic or cultural “lightening.” Whitten and Torres’ critical lens is useful in analyzing how “white” is seen as superior in structures of domination. They state that *

*blanqueamiento* – the process of becoming progressively more acceptable to those classified as “white” – is an ethnic movement “coterminous with the socio-economic advancement governed by the ideology of ‘development’” (8-9). Furthermore, *

*blanqueamiento* holds responsible those people categorized as black and indigenous for the degeneration of the state and accepts the implicit hegemonic rhetoric of the United States with regard to “white supremacy.” Recalling the analysis from chapter 2 of the present study where the gendered media practices that surround Latinas and Latin
American women associate them with hyperfemininity and exotic sexuality, coupled with the transformation signifiers (natural hair to treated hair) present in this advertisement, we can read a symbolic colonization of the ethnic female. Hence the importance placed upon the idea of good hair as different, renovated, a complete change from one’s natural hair is again exemplified. Thus, again and again with different terms the message being sent is of modification of the self to fit specific Anglo-originated beauty ideals.

Robert Goldman, in *Reading Ads Socially* (1992), tells us that “As a system of signification, advertisements compose connections between the meanings of products and images” (5). Goldman explains how advertising works as a device for “reframing meanings” in order to add value to products. They do this by positioning, classifying, and marking meanings into signs that can be inscribed on products – “always geared to transferring the value of one meaning system to another. In this way, advertising comprises a system of commodity-sign production designed to enhance the exchange value of commodities, by differentiating the meanings associated with each commodity” (Goldman 5). A commodity-sign, says Goldman, is the image that attaches to a product – for example, the *Vitaly* shampoo, conditioner and treatment advertisement assures that “el rejuvenecimiento de tu cabello no te lo devuelve el botox,” but rather using this product does (see fig. 3.3). The model shown here, in a cropped side view of her face and head, has light brown, straight and very shiny hair; very light skin, light eyes, a very small and subtle nose and lips. Not only does her light skin correlate with her “light” brown hair,
but the explicit comparison of the product’s results to those of a cosmetic surgery, such as Botox, visually connects the Anglo race with the upper socio-economic class that more easily can afford such procedures, stressing that if you do not already genetically possess revitalized and smooth hair you can purchase it. In this way, the Vitaly advertisement connects beauty and class to physical features that correspond to dominant Anglo standards of beauty.

Because this is a Dominican magazine, it is important to recall our earlier discussion of race. The images discussed thus far emphasize two vital Dominican socio-cultural codes: the importance of having pelo bueno and lighter skin tone, not to mention the significance given to spending power and socio-economic class. It is important to point out that, within A la Moda, every advertisement for skincare products includes a
white-skinned model. The Artistry model is caucasian with blue eyes, another advertisement for HKDerm (Crema Blanqueadora, Crema Limpiadora, Crema Nutritiva) portrays a model that is so light-skinned the tone of her skin has a pinkish tint to it, and even an article aimed at skincare entitled “Cuidar la piel, esa es la cuestión” has a close-up shot of a white model with blue eyes (see fig. 3.4). Erynn Masi de Casanova, analyzing race and beauty in Ecuador, avows that the “racist norms of beauty associated with developed nations (pervading the continent through U.S. – and European – produced media) combine with similar traditions in Latin American countries to create an exclusive, ‘the whiter the better’ ideal of beauty” (291).

Figure 3.4. HK Derm Advertisement. Source: A la Moda

Casanova affirms that “In Ecuador, beauty is often equated with whiteness and its characteristics: light skin; delicate features; straight/wavy, light-colored hair, and light eyes” (291). In a similar manner, A La Moda, as part of its strategic Anglicization
(blanqueamiento), effectively excludes blacks and indigenous people from the paradigm of ideal beauty, rendering racial and ethnic diversity intangible. In addition, A la Moda corroborates Whitten and Torres’ analysis of blanqueamiento as a structure of power within the scope of development and civilization. For instance, socio-economic class is evaluated by advertisements for hair care products, for example, when models that reflect more Northern European features are used for expressing elegance and glamour; yet when the product is readily accessible in local stores or is a hair straightener, Afro-Latina or more ethnic looking models are used to illustrate what is projected as a lower socio-economic class and characteristic, and the product is sold as an “improvement” (see fig. 3.5). Thus, the magazine generates narrowly defined beauty ideals based upon race and socio-economic status, while simultaneously planting symbols of successful womanhood for those who resemble said images and providing products to attain the required body type/look for those who do not.

Figure 3.5. La Aplanadora Advertisement. Source A la Moda
Similar to the marketing strategies in beauty product advertisements, race, body type, and socio-economic class are also used in clothing and accessory advertisements as tools to value, define, and standardize beauty and power within fashion. An example of how “ethnic” beauty is packaged and marketed as a disparate “type” can be found in a local advertisement for the *Dress Lab Fashion Industry* whose logotype is a cropped (from neck to just below buttock) mannequin wearing a corset with large breast and protruding buttocks. The text says “Para tí mujer” (sic) and the advertisement features a full-body shot of a thin Dominican model of light skin tone, straight dark hair and eyes, whose stance mimics the logotype (see fig. 3.6). The model wears a tight-fitting black mini-dress which highlights her red polish, black platform stilettos and is accessorized with large earrings and a large bracelet. In addition to many colorful items of clothing – five dresses and a blouse – accessories such as shoes, purses, and jewelry are also shown. 

As an advertisement for a local Dominican business, within a Dominican fashion magazine, the emphasis of white skin speaks once again to the national aesthetic ideal of Northern European features in terms of skin color. Recalling Whitten and Torres’ discussion of domination, skin-tone is an important factor when determining not only character, but beauty and power as well. Thus, being ‘signified’ or ‘represented’ as ‘black’ in a white-dominated world, as is the Dominican Republic, is to be stigmatized to a position of ethnic disadvantage in a discourse of racial asymmetry (26-27). So, while McCracken’s observations are true for women of any ethnic background, there is a deeper implication for Dominican women because unlike other advertisements where they have to compare themselves to physical features of the models, here they are encouraged to ascertain that white skin is seen as beautiful, rejecting possibly their own
ethnic structure for the national preference. Thus, here the Latin American female body is treated as a spectacle of inclusion and participation by constituting and popularizing Latino culture within the dynamics of beauty construction. In other words, for the female Dominican body the ideal is different but still narrow. She doesn’t escape the trope of tropicalization – which circulates and exploits gender-based stereotypes about Latin American and Latino/a sexuality as tropical, exotic, and hyper-eroticized,\(^{26}\) – nor does she evade the cultural contradictions at play within the pages of *A la Moda*: to resemble a white woman but be more alluring and exotic in nature than her.

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The pressure of the two dominant cultural codes – a Northern-European/U.S. Anglo standard of beauty and femininity and the tropicalized pressure exerted upon Caribbean women and Latinas to be more exotic and hyperfeminine than white women – is evident by replicating aesthetically the Anglo dominant beauty archetype (using a thin, light-skinned Dominican model with straight hair) while simultaneously hypersexualizing her through her provocative dress and stance. The message being transmitted through the advertisement is the idea that purchasing the clothing and accessories from the *Dress Lab Fashion Industry* is how to mimic certain physical attractiveness while perpetuating the link between consumption to a certain body type and race.

Reiterating the differences between Northern European or Anglo women and Caribbean women is the adjacent fashion advertisement that features the maxi-*falda*, a long skirt worn by models, actresses, and American socialites such as Kate Bosworth, Olivia Palermo, Gillian Zinser as well as designer names such as Francis Montesinos, and Massimiliano Giornetti (see fig. 3.7). The strategic placement of the two advertisements side by side facilitates the juxtaposition of the “maxi-*falda*” versus the “mini-*falda*” while symbolically juxtaposing the Dominican woman to Anglo or Northern European women. Sexually the Dominican model is represented as more exotic, foreign and available than the white women; socio-economically she appears less wealthy yet more imposing through her gaze and stance. The model’s pose for the *Dress Lab* challenges dominant modes of apathetic femininity shown in the maxi-*falda* fashion advertisement. For example, the directness of the Dominican model’s glance and her almost defiant stance with hands on her hip contrast with the models and actress on the adjacent page as they are represented as more vulnerable and passive, pictured as walking or standing looking
away from the camera. Angharad Valdivia in “Visions of Desire” analyzes the way sexual allure is represented in class-specific terms in two popular lingerie catalogs. Valdivia states how the distinction between vulnerable/gaze aversion/reclining and standing/directness of gaze/agency “suggests different standards of sexual allure – that is, demureness in a middle-class setting and directness in a working-class setting” (81).

Following Valdivia’s theory, the products being sold here, as well as the models and their stances, speak directly to class in both a socio-economic and cultural sense. The maxi-
falda fashion advertisement highlights not only the spending power of celebrities by the mention of renowned designers, but also the style purchased by a higher socio-economic class.

Figure 3.7. Maxi-falda Advertisement. Source: A la Moda
The images, on the opposing page of the *Dress Lab* advertisement, offer the reader a utopian vision of themselves through images of affluence, sophistication, and beauty, while the local advertisement (*Dress Lab*) sends the message that Dominican women in nature display more colorful and provocative attire connected to the idea of their tropicality. The images illustrate the competing cultural demands between which Dominican women must vacillate. While the ideal for Dominican women is different than that of the Anglo or Northern European woman, it is still narrowly defined. In this way, the portrayal of this model and the products being advertised perpetuates equations of beauty and power for Dominican women, in addition to narrowly defining said beauty to a provocative yet feminized white standard of beauty.

*Cosmopolitan for Latinas*

With a growing number of corporate sponsors interested in Latinos as a target market, it is not surprising to see that the summer of 2012 *Cosmopolitan* magazine launched an edition specifically for Latinas. In *Latinos Inc.* (2001) Arlene Dávila examines the “Hispanic” marketing industry and its role in the making and marketing of contemporary definitions of Latinidad. Dávila affirms that this language – and culture – specific market is now considered the fastest growing segment of the marketing industry in the United States. She avows that “Over eighty Hispanic advertising agencies and branches of transnational advertising conglomerates spread across cities with sizable Hispanic populations now sell consumer products by shaping and projecting images of

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and for Latinos” (2). Capitalizing on such a culture-specific market is Cosmopolitan for Latinas. Although Cosmopolitan for Latinas claims to be a representative of all “Latinas,” what is interesting is how the majority of the text and imagery throughout the magazine perpetuates existing stereotypes and conforms to the ubiquitous representations of Latinas and Latin American women in North American popular media today. I shall analyze the connection among consumption, beauty and power throughout Cosmopolitan for Latinas through various depictions of Latinas and Latin American women, articles and advertisements showing how they either maintain dominant equations of beauty and power or undermine the paradigm.

A fundamental contrast from A la Moda is the employment of an Afro-Latino on the cover. For example, the premiere issue of Cosmopolitan for Latinas (Summer 2012) features actress Zoe Saldana, an Afro-Latina whose parents are from the Dominican Republic (see fig. 3.8). Though she was born in the United States, she returned to the Dominican Republic during her childhood and came back later during her high school years. Saldana is pictured from right below the waist up; she wears a coral halter dress accessorized with gold earrings, bangles, and a ring. She stares into the camera in a flirtatious manner, with her hand on her hip accentuating this part of her body. This stance not only – as Valdivia suggests – is a more powerful stance, but by engaging the camera with a more direct stare and standing on her feet with a defiant gesture (hand on hip), Saldana also replicates what Valdivia calls, in terms of socio-economic class, a “middle-class sexuality” (81). Recalling Valdivia’s analysis is useful here again, when evaluating the importance and purpose of magazines aimed at minority groups. Valdivia, analyzing how sexual allure is represented in class-specific terms, evaluates how
advertising and gender roles suggest socio-economic and cultural class. U.S. Latinos, though targeted consumers, are still often perceived as working-class. This is part of an underrepresentation and misrepresentation resulting in negativized and stereotypical portrayal of Latinos and Latin Americans in films and on television dating back to the 1990s.  

According to Valdivia, the more active look that Saldana expresses – standing and starring directly into the camera from a confident and stable position – contrasts with a more demure gaze and gait of opulent leisure (85). While Anglo *Cosmopolitan* covers

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also portray their cover models in the same stance symbolic of the sexual nature of the magazine, prevalent racialized and genderized portrayals of U.S. Latinas do not cease to exist although they have become significant enough consumers to merit their own version of *Cosmopolitan*. In fact, a closer look at Saldana’s features and we encounter the permeating look present in women’s fashion and beauty magazines of a white ideal even for Latinas and Latin Americans even those supposedly representing racial diversity.

Saldana has Anglo or Northern European features, is light skinned, and slender enough to embody the North American standard of thinness for women rather than the more curvaceous stereotyped Latina body found in mainstream dominant representations of Latinas and Latin American women. Even the models presented in *A la Moda*, a Caribbean magazine, follow this pattern. The more Northern European or Anglo in appearance the model, the thinner and lighter-skinned; yet the more ethnic in appearance the curvier and more sensual. Though race is meant to be used in *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* as a marker of variation among Latinas and Latin Americans, it is consistently limited to narrow definitions of ideal beauty that emphasize dominant equations of beauty and power, in reality, marketing a specific Latina body. Thus, the Latina reader is incited to evaluate herself based upon the dogma of beauty created by such magazines.

Consequently, what is being marketed is a specific version of “Latina/Latinidad” that fits already established models of culture, beauty, power, and socio-economic class defined by dominant representations in mass media. McCracken explains how the image on every cover is a non-verbal text, “a photograph that we see before or while reading the verbal messages” (22) while the “photographic text markets an idealized image of women for potential readers to desire, identify with, and expect to attain through consuming the
magazine” (15). Dávila, describing the growing popularity of generic, national “Hispanic” advertising, explains how the “Hispanic marketing industry becomes a mirror of trends in the advertising industry at large, and of the same processes through which differences are ordered, contained, or partially represented” (125). In this way, *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* sells an image of Latina beauty that is marketable and “generic” by portraying Zoe Saldana, a Latina that represents Afro-Caribbean culture but who mimics Anglo or Northern European standards of beauty in terms of body physicality, hair, and facial features. Dávila avows that “Hispanic advertising still responds to the social hierarchies that subordinate Latinas in this country and is still predicated on the need to project positive images, leading it to rely on the same clichés of the good, traditional, patriotic, not-too-dark/not-too-light Latina which, against the always-present specter of Anglo culture, still dominate their commercial representation” (124). She expands here by stating that regrettably these are the same “clichés that while making Latinas safe and commercially viable for mass consumption, limit their association with some sort of cultural ethos, keeping them unthreateningly in ‘their place.’ The dominant racial and ethnic hierarchies at play in the U.S. society thus remain unchallenged” (124).

These same strategies exist throughout the magazine as well. The articles and models used in the advertisements maintain the same ideology that is presented on the cover. However, in an attempt to “Latinize” the context, connections to Latino culture are persistent throughout the magazine in terms of the models used, the type of

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29 I use “Latinize” here as the opposite of “Anglicization.” In other words, to make or become Latin American or Latino in form or character.
advertisements, language, and the articles. In *Cosmopolitan for Latinas*, the profile of Saldana identifies her “background” (defined in terms of national heritage) and asks her to list her Latina role models, beauty tips, how being Latina affects her personal style, her favorite Latin American bands, dating “deal breakers,” and her favorite word in Spanish. In this way, *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* attempts to connect with Latina groups through “products of strategies of representation aimed at the partial representation of the ‘Hispanic consumer,’ even when this simultaneously involves the erasure and reconstitution of differences (such as those of class, race, nationality, etc.) into his or her very construction” (Dávila 125). Another tactic used here is the application of the word “your” in the cover text: “Bronze Beauty: Finally! More shades that match your tone,” “Heat Wave: Own your curves,” “Don’t Tell Mami! Your Secret Fantasy Hookups” (cover, emphasis added). Such textual evocation serves to connect the reader’s identity (“you”) with the glossy pictures of the Latina identity created throughout the magazine. Katynka Zazueta Martínez affirms how the connection between celebrity and reader “builds a Latina identity that is partially determined by the success of the handful of Latinas who have been recognized as celebrities within the U.S. entertainment industry. This allows readers to symbolically associate the success of these women with their own individual experience as Latinas” (161). For example, a section entitled *En Vivo* features five segments described as “Over-the-top celebs, near-sex dance moves, and Hollywood’s newest hottie – he’s Latino!” (25). The over-the-top celebs features Latina and Latin American celebrities such as Eva Mendes, Demi Lovato, and Sofia Vergara that “don’t leave the house without dressing to impress” (26). These “Latina” celebrities are featured for being “dolled up” in the grocery store, while pumping gas, and even
jumping a fence. In other words, the implication is that a Latina is always perfectly primped and ready to impress, thus creating a strict definition of acceptable beauty regulations. Playing into mainstream media’s practice of portraying Latinas as exotic, foreign, and consumable, this image of Latinas upholds equations of beauty and power by connecting the power of these celebrities with their ability to maintain a perfect attractiveness, in addition to narrowly defining said beauty to a provocative and feminized standard of beauty.

Another section “Cultura Clash: Celebrating our differences – and occasionally settling some scores” (30) celebrates “differences” through the critique of Latin dances, what countries they come from, and how they are performed (see fig. 3.9). While seeming to enlighten its readers about different Latin American cultures and dances, this section essentially associates each dance to sex: “Remember: It takes two to tango. You can have sex by yourself but not tango, which is what makes tango more sexual than actual sex;” “Bachata: This Dominican offering redefines the close embrace as more of a genital embrace;” and “Salsa: This Cuban/Puerto Rican dance’s embrace is generally respectful (before the third Cuba Libre)” (30-31). As Dávila expresses, such “culturalist types of appeals that reduce different subnationalities to culture indexes and traits, such as a type of food, music, or festival, which are seen as the greatest inducements to Latinas, irrespective of their background” (118-19). The representation of “Latin America” in these dances relies on and reproduces stereotypes derived from one of the most enduring tropes surrounding the signification of Latinas in U.S. popular culture: that of tropicalism. Erasing specificity and homogenizing all that is recognized as Latin and
Latino/a, tropicalism encourages stereotypes personified by bright colors, rhythmic music, and brown or olive skin, sexuality and excess.

As is evident in this section of *Cosmopolitan for Latinas*, sexuality – a major component in tropicalism – plays a major role in standardizing Latin dance, and in turn, Latinas and their bodies. Molina Guzmán and Valdivia state how dance, particularly movement below the waist, is often racialized and sexualized within mainstream U.S. culture and linked with the construction of Latinidad (212-13). Consequently, the sexualized description of the Latin American dances provides a symbolic bridge between the racialized and sexualized physical bodies of the dancers. The sexuality of the dances, then, associates them (and their culture and their performers) with nature, primitiveness, and sexuality. By consuming the magazine, the reader in effect consumes the projected
sexualized image of being of Latin American descent. Here, the corollary is that all Latinos and Latin Americans (men and women alike) are sexual in nature. In this way, *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* takes the cultural trait of Latin American dance, reduces the distinctions among it, and sells the ever-present idea of sex, sexual allure, and the sensual female connecting it to every distinct dance and the images throughout the magazine. What Latinas take away from the article is the assumption (and possibly the belief) that in order to be successful as Latinas or Latin American females, they must be sexual in nature.

Another section is entitled Stylista (35-50) and contains different sections on beauty and fashion. While this type of section can be found in any popular women’s magazine, again we see a specific Latinization taking place in *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* creating a specific Latina archetype that can be measured by strands of socio-economic class and race interwoven with ideals of physical appearance. As with the acquisition of status goods, projecting a certain physical appearance signifies socio-economic standing and modernity, connoted with young and popular (and sexy) Latina and Latin American celebrities. For example, a segment for jeans entitled “Fit for a Queen: Curve-tacular!” (44-45) features Latina and Latin American celebrities and highlights their bodies’ curves thus suggesting what type of jeans to purchase (brands, styles, etc.) for which body types (see fig. 3.10). While this is a typical fashion advertisement common in such magazines, the regular categories for body types are generally pear shape, boy/athletic shape, petite, etc. Here each category emphasizes curvaceous bodies: Big Booty, Soft Tummy, Shapely Hips, and Juicy Thighs. In this way, the magazine denies any petite or athletic
Latinas, but instead perpetuates the beauty ideal of curvaceous physicality and prompts its readers to purchase the correct jeans to acquire the appropriate look.

![Figure 3.10. Fit for a Queen Advertisement. Source: Cosmopolitan for Latinas](image)

This ubiquitous innuendo of a Latina as commanding sexual allure is even projected while attending church. Playing on traditional cultural traits – such as was done with dance – *Cosmopolitan for Latinas* takes being Latina to a whole new sexual level as it advises how to achieve “Extra Glam at Church: Polished, pretty, and sexy as … heck” (42). This article provides style and make-up tips in terms of “commandments” that, if followed, will ensure that the consumer will “be on your way to the promised land. Or at least a date” (42). A model is shown in a low-cut bright pink dress holding down her skirt as, mimicking the popular image of Marilyn Monroe a gust of wind blows it towards the heavens (see fig.
A priest is walking by her; apparently overwhelmed by her “beauty” he turns to glance at her from behind: “A loose-fitting skirt leaves room for a divinely inspired gust of wind” (42). The “Style in the aisle” section suggests a knee-length shift dress that can always “flash more leg with a well-timed crossover.” In addition, “Virtuous vamp” teaches the reader how to “Be a doe-eyed seductress.” This entails how to apply eyeliner and which eye shadows will achieve the best results. Of course, the suggestion includes brand names and prices. Other items of clothing endorse unchaste exhibition of the body: “A fitted floral bumps up the cleavage factor,” “Try a low-cut cardigan. You’ll at least seem like you covered up,” and “Sky-high, closed-toed\) pumps will bring his eyes downtown” (42).
In this way, the magazine promotes consumption of specific products from very specific companies while projecting a sexually enticing image for Latina readers to imitate. Capitalizing on the fact that religion remains one of the most enduring traditions among Latinos and Latin Americans, this advertisement expresses one of the boldest attempts at homogenizing every Latina reader’s religious beliefs, cultural sexuality, and sex roles. Accordingly it disputes the taboo of feminine sexual pleasures – established by the social and cultural control of the sexuality of the female Latin American – inherited by the Latina body through Latin American socio-cultural and religious traditions.

As discussed in chapter 2, the concept of honor and dignity is coupled to female sexuality as exercised through marianismo. Exploring contemporary sexuality and the Latin American woman, Espín testifies how “If the role of women is currently beset with contradictions in the mainstream of American society, this is probably still truer for women in Latina or Latin American groups. The honor of Latin families is strongly tied to the sexual purity of women. And the concept of honor and dignity is one of the essential distinctive marks of Hispanic culture” (Espín 154). Thus, this advertisement directly challenges the binaries of good girl/bad girl (saint/whore) complex that many Latinas and Latin American women face. Additionally it intensifies the experience of acculturation by combining those legacies with the competing cultural imperatives they encounter in the United States. While acculturation may be unavoidable, “The adoption of new ways of life or sexual behaviors, although satisfactory in many respects, may be associated with intense guilt and feelings of betrayal” (Espín 161). Latinas and Latin American women are again asked to trend towards the U.S. Anglo standard of beauty while expected to be sexier than white women.
It is possible that this advertisement might be offensive to some of its readers; then again, it assumes that the targeted readership is an acculturated group that experiences a more liberated understanding of her sexuality than in many more conservative societies throughout Latin America. While it is no surprise that every image, article, and advertisement in Cosmopolitan for Latinas – like Cosmopolitan itself – is related to sex and the body, what is interesting is the use of Latinidad, the trope of Tropicalism, and the assessment of the Latina and Latin American female to her sexual appeal, body type, and style which can be acquired through the purchase of certain items.

The overall message being sent by all of these images, texts, and articles associate consumption and signs of wealth with physical appearance (female body), success, power and agency. A key difference between these two magazines is the treatment of race. While racial implications are renounced within the Dominican context of A la Moda, they are used within North American imagery as markers of difference among Latinas and Latin Americans. What is persistent in both is the veneration of Anglo and Northern European physicality. The magazines, whether produced in the Dominican Republic or the United States, perpetuate a narrowly defined beauty that promotes specific characteristics (thin yet curvaceous) with Anglo/Northern European features (light eyes, hair and skin). While the ideal is different in the United States – using darker models to exoticize difference – the paradigm of physical attractiveness is still narrow. Both magazines seem to market to specific socio-economic class and racial attributes, sending the message that link body type with consumption, implying that the body is malleable and that body type and “race” can be purchased.
II. Narration

As we have seen, the most repeated messages, imagery, and representations of Latina and Caribbean women within popular women’s magazines define beauty by body type, race, and lifestyle. By creating a very specific prototype of ideal beauty, popular women’s magazines condone the impulse to conform to this image, implying that women who do not fit this very specific ideal of narrowly defined beauty can “buy” it. The cult of femininity is then presented as physical appearance and the female body is coupled with consumption and signs of wealth as symbols of successful womanhood. Building upon the previous analysis of how consumption is constantly associated with a specific body type and race within popular women’s magazines, this section considers how the female characters in two U.S. Latina novels – *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* and *Dirty Girls Social Club* – navigate the social pressures to consume and meet a narrowly defined standard of beauty.

*Sex and the South Beach Chicas*

*Sex and the South Beach Chicas* (2006) by Caridad Piñeiro, reviewed in chapter 2 of the present study, once again proves to be a significant text from which to assess the ways in which Latina and Latin American female protagonists are drawn as conforming or resisting societal and cultural pressures that shape the United States’ mass media’s established identity for them. While, as thoroughly discussed in chapter two, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*’ consistent hyper-feminization and hypersexualization of the female protagonists conforms to mainstream dominant practices of gendering and racialization of
Latina and Latin American women, it also contains elements which equate beauty and power with consumption. Acquiescent to other novels of this genre, the main theme presented in *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* is that of normative heterosexual love between two characters, with an underlying link to the role the relationships among the protagonists and their families play to further their romantic triumphs. *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* presents four female protagonists – Victoria (Tori), Adriana, Sylvia, and Julia (Juli) – who have been friends since high school. Written for a more inclusive audience, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*’ title is a spin-off of Candace Bushnell’s highly popularized *Sex and The City* TV series with a Latin twist. Despite what appears to be Piñeiro’s attempt to present a contrast to mainstream white Chick Lit, the characters of the novel resemble all too much the characters of other white Chick Lit novels in terms of their conformity to dominant beauty ideals and conspicuous consumption.

The plot revolves around the “love” lives – or lack thereof – of the four female protagonists. The “sex” in the title couples with the tropical climate of the South Beach location and implies the main focus of the novel. The protagonists, all single, independent and successful, are consistently described in terms of their physicality and beauty. In addition, many descriptions include specific clothing labels accessible mainly to a higher socio-economic class. The physical descriptions and spending power of the female characters and their lifestyles perpetuate the assumption that a selective (read: superior) socio-economic group possesses power within the beauty cult. Beauty within *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* mirrors not only the dominant physical specificity of thin yet curvaceous figures, long straight hair, light eyes and hair color, and light skin tone reflected in U.S. mass media, but also the glorification of Anglo or Northern
European beauty ideals prominent in Latin America. Furthermore, Juli – who undergoes a make-over in order to meet this ideal – is persuaded to purchase a new wardrobe and hairstyle as part of her beautification process, implying that she can acquire said state through the purchase of these items. Thus, the lifestyle of each female protagonist, their physicality and spending power accentuates their beauty within the novel.

Piñeiro’s Cuban-American\textsuperscript{30} characters reflect the first generation of emigrants that arrived to the United States before the 1980s, embodying the white Cuban elite.\textsuperscript{31} Susan Eckstein and Lorena Barberia, in a study of Cuban immigration to Florida, state how the first wave of emigrants was business men and professionals “mainly of upper and middle class origins (…) [who] benefited from immediate unconditional refugee status and from public programs easing their adjustment” (801-02). Eckstein and Barberia elaborate on the Cuban immigrant’s transition at that time and how they received food, clothing, healthcare, and assistance in finding jobs, financial aid, employment and professional training, even college tuition loans (804). Within the novel, the families’ relevance to this group is reflected by Adriana’s mother’s mention of the civic resistance in Havana, which was formed in 1957, and her father’s capability to establish an import/export business that enabled them to move to a more upscale home and neighborhood. In addition, each female protagonist is college-educated and belongs to the middle to upper socio-economic class. In this way, Piñeiro distances her characters from the reality that many female Latin immigrants face in this country, which is as

\textsuperscript{30} All characters except Sylvia, who is Anglo/Argentinean, are from Cuban backgrounds.
raced or “Other” minority population who have been and continue to be the sources of cheap labor in the field, factories and domestic service. 32

In fact, the few markers of ethnicity employed in *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* are the minor use of Spanish throughout the novel and the stereotypical trait of strong family ties. Without these, the descriptions of the female protagonist create the image of a marketable and “generic” Latina common in U.S. media depictions of them with Anglo or Northern European physicality. The first chapter explains how the women meet up every Monday for dinner to “catch-up.” Here is where the reader is first introduced to each character: “Adriana wore an absolutely gorgeous dark green suit that perfectly accentuated her curvaceous but slender physique. Her precisely trimmed auburn hair framed the clean oval of her face, emphasizing her hazel green eyes. As always, Adriana’s public face flawlessly represented the class and elegance of the restaurant and hotel. (...) Sylvia made heads turn, in an eye-catching golden gown that delineated her every asset. Long blonde hair swung in a curtain to the middle of her back, its silky texture reflecting a hue of gold and paler blond highlights;” and Tori, feeling the pressure to resemble her enchanting friends, “couldn’t help but glance at her own five-four, size six body, trying not to feel intimidated by her less than ample – but still perky – breasts and curves” (4-5). Within these first three descriptions of the protagonists the tone for the rest of the novel is set.

The connection made between each woman and her body replicates the Latina and Latin American models and fashion projected within popular women’s magazines: the

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ubiquitous image of the successful, independent, sensual, perfect-bodied female.

Accordingly, also included is the intended feeling of inadequacy possibly experienced by women who do not fit precisely this ideal, as seen in Tori’s comparison of her body to that of her friends and the first physical description of the fourth friend Juli. Juli, who unquestionably does not fit the ideal, is described in terms that highlight her lack of grace and style: “Adriana was the brains of the business, while Juli’s amazing culinary creations were the heart of it. A heart that rarely ventured into public, and when it did, like tonight, often seemed drab and tasteless” (4). Earlier in the text Tori’s description mentions her Brooks Brother business suit, and later in the conversation between the women Juli responds to a critique made about watching telenovelas “With a weak shrug that barely moved her oversized tunic top” (9). Thus each character’s first description connects their clothes to their physicality and overall persona. Adriana’s dress represents class and elegance, Sylvia’s glamour and eye-catching, Tori’s conservative yet adequate, while Juli’s is drab, oversized, and tasteless. Consequently the depictions embodied by the characters reinforce equations of beauty and power for Latinas by glorifying not only the genderized and racialized dominant depictions of them, but in effect also linking certain physical characteristics, body, and lifestyle with this image.

McCracken, evaluating key inducements to consumption in the fashion and beauty magazines, reminds us that the pleasure offered to the reader is what draws them in. For example, bright colors, exciting headlines and layouts, elegant fashions and flawless faces (think Adriana’s flawless public face and Sylvia’s golden gown) provide ideal images of the future self (135). The title itself implies pleasure, and the cover’s illustration and design attracts its reader. Within the pages of Sex and the South Beach
Chicas the paradigms of physical attractiveness set up by the fashion magazines are embodied by the characters. McCracken continues to avow that

The apparently straightforward and positive ideals of fashion and beauty magazines (…) are often subtly intertwined with their opposites – the non-fashionable and the non-beautiful. The attractive presentation frequently disguises the negativity close at hand: within this discursive structure, to be beautiful, one must fear being non-beautiful; to be in fashion, one must first fear being out of fashion; to be self-confident, one must first feel insecure. (136)

If this is true for Anglo women, then Sex and the South Beach Chicas takes this a step further for Latinas and Latin American women. By limiting so narrowly the standard of physical attractiveness and physicality of Latina and Latina American women to that of Anglo or Northern American likeness, and offering no acceptable alternative, Sex and the South Beach Chicas excludes any variation to this representation and therefore a large percentage of women who come from mixed racial backgrounds and socio-economic classes, or just don’t fit the physicality of the characters. The author’s strict adherence to this archetype is demonstrated by the character of Juli. Juli’s first physical description is not glamorized, nor is her beauty depicted, but rather her worth is seen in terms of her relationship to food, and her lack of a fashionista consciousness is critiqued. In this way, Juli personifies the non-beautiful, the out of fashion, and exposes the importance placed upon certain bodily physique, race and lifestyle.

The preference for Anglo or Northern European features is apparent in the connection made in Sylvia’s description between her beauty and the texture of her hair. This is reminiscent of the advertisements for hair products and hair straightening products
popular in *A la moda*. The fact that Cuba, like the Dominican Republic, has a large racially or ethnically mixed population demonstrates the continuous favoring of the *blanqueamiento* ideology present in the Caribbean. Unsurprisingly, fashion and beauty – in the form of socio-economic class, the body and physical features, and couture clothes – are tied to each protagonist’s success or failure. Hence, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* brings the tone of fashion and beauty magazines to life by perpetuating the preference for Anglo or Northern European features, curvaceous but thin bodies, and a lifestyle that supports a consumer culture.

Since Juli does not meet these standards, she is compared to her friends and eventually undergoes a make-over with the help of Adriana. One of Juli’s pastimes is watching *telenovelas* where most of the characters are glamorous and beautiful. The association that she makes between this fantasy world and her friends, plus her awareness that she does not belong to this world, sets up and increases the supposed “need” for her transformation: “She was nothing like her glamorous *amigas*, and sometimes wondered what they saw in her. Why they stayed her friend” (37). Here she correlates her worth to the paradigm of ideal beauty and glamour that her friends represent. In addition, Juli considers herself undeserving of their friendship because she does not believe she is as alluring. The connection Juli makes between her friends and the characters of the *telenovela* symbolizes the importance placed on physical attractiveness and glamour. Moreover, the consistent use of elegant dress by the women implies access to exclusive locations:

In the current *telenovela*, the two characters reminded her of Tori and Gil and how they looked on the night they first met. The heated glances. The elegant way Gil
carried himself, and Tori, in an incredible gown unlike any her friend had ever worn before… Taking another bite of the French toast, Juli wished to be that glamorous. That sexy, only… On the outside, she was as drab as a kitchen mouse, but unfortunately not as sleek. (38)

Juli’s lack of color and self-identification with her lack of “sexiness” underlines the author’s substantiation of the specific beauty ideal set up by the characters. At this point, Juli has eaten a plate of French toast topped with bananas Foster and a healthy dollop of whipped cream “Glancing at the suddenly empty plate, she decided she would have to exercise extra hard tomorrow when she did the workout with her friends. And dinner afterward… it would be solamente ensalada for her” (38). Juli personifies the food sections within popular women’s magazines that habitually express the theme of guilty pleasure and present some sort of light preparation instruction with exaggerated emphasis on physical appearance and feelings of insecurity – as a means of integrating the reader into the consumer society to either buy the diet products or calorie-laden foods. While the main purpose in magazines is to secure advertising revenue from the makers of food products, the main purpose in Sex and the South Beach Chicas is to secure a preferred and fantasized ideal. By connecting food to Juli’s insecurities, it specifically connects the body’s physicality with beauty and power. Additionally her desire to exercise puts forth the same ideology found in magazines to apply willpower and that the improvement of the body, for the individual with the “problem.” In other words, maintaining a specific lifestyle centered on physical appearance will potentially gain Juli entitlement to beauty. Juli concludes that only skinny women can be glamorous and dress in a sexy manner, thus emphasizing that only specific body type is acceptable and marketed to within the
world of fashion. If she wants to participate in the consumption of fashion and beauty, she must first conform to the narrowly defined regulations concerning physical attractiveness.

Susan Bordo’s critical evaluation of feminism, Western culture, and the body is useful in interpreting Juli’s significance within the text. Bordo avows that “Increasingly, the size and shape of the body come to operate as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder) – as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual” (193). Thus, Juli represents the possible anxiety created by the overwhelming presence of the perfected beauty that is pervasive within mass media depictions of Latinas and Latin American females. The juxtaposition of Juli to that of her friends – and the dominant portrayals of Latinas in popular culture – climaxes halfway through the novel when Juli directly compares herself to not only her friends but fashion models as well:

As if anyone would look at me with the three of you around, [Juli] muttered under her breath (…).

[Adriana] had suspected how Juli felt, but hoped that she’d been wrong. (…) ‘You’re a beautiful woman. I just always thought you weren’t interested –’

‘In men?’ Juli jumped in, her gorgeous brown eyes flashing wide.

‘In fashion and all the latest things,’ [Adriana] corrected.

‘How can I be interested when half of those models in the magazines you read look like they haven’t eaten in months? When all those women in the gym disappear when they turn sideways?’

So many emotions warred in Juli’s tone that Adriana didn’t know where to start. ‘If you want, we can go shopping together. I saw some things the other day that would look great on you.’

Juli hesitated and began moving the papers around again. Adriana laid a hand on Juli’s. ‘You can make a change that will make you happy –’ (68)

Juli’s immediate association of men’s non-interest in her and magazine models reveals how through mass media “the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted
more and more through standardized visual images” (Bordo 169). Here Adriana verbally indicates that Juli can “purchase” beauty by purchasing new clothing and that these items will not only change her luck with men but in effect make her happy. Robert Goldman, analyzing envy, desire, and power within ads, affirms how “Ads continue to address women about themselves as malleable surfaces that can be adorned with objects that carry desired attributes via commodities’ powers of signification” (121). Goldman explains how a woman acquires power by partaking in the fetishism of commodity appearances. Similarly, Adriana encourages and perpetuates the pattern of equating women’s (and specifically here Juli’s) happiness and success with the opposite sex to consumption. In other words, by making herself an object of desire – through the consumption of “fashion and all the latest things” – Juli, “by actively mastering the currency of looks (…), may hope to acquire power over men” (Goldman 121).

Having “power over men” by possessing enchanting beauty is central to the plot; once Juli has bought a new “look” she is finally granted (over halfway through the novel) a physical description that doesn’t involve negative connotations or food. At this point Adriana has taken Juli to get a haircut before they go shopping. This is the first time the reader learns that she has “exotic, almond-shaped brown eyes” (180). Juli’s new haircut framed her eyes and “accented the higher slant of her cheekbones and the sharp, perfect slant of her nose. And her lips. Even without lipstick, the way the wisps of hair curled in at her jaw made her face appear thinner and brought out Juli’s full lips” (180). It is important to point out here that on one hand Juli’s transformation has granted her exaltation; on the other hand, Piñeiro actively participates in the tropicalization of darker features. Notice here the use of “exotic” to describe Juli’s eyes; additionally she has
higher cheekbones associated with indigenous facial features, and “full” lips that are commonly associated with ethnic attributes. In contrast, to the use of words such as “glamorous, eye-catching, elegant,” that describe the Anglo or Northern European features of Adriana and Sylvia, for example, Juli’s more ethnically associated features are connected to a more exotic sexuality and allure. Another example of how the novel emphasizes specific body type is when Adriana hesitates to take Juli into the Armani Exchange store: “A possible place for some casual things, Adriana thought, but she worried about sizes. If things were cut too small, she might be hard pressed to find anything that would fit Juli’s generous, size twelve body” (181). Adriana has reason to suspect Juli would not be able to find any Armani styles in her size. A quick internet search for images of Armani Exchange reveals ad after ad of taught, muscled, thin bodies. The Armani brand, a prestigious name in the fashion industry, has become synonymous with high fashion. Again, we see how only a specific body type sells and in turn marketed to, thus facilitating anxiety for those who do not conform to this ideal. Moreover, Armani Exchange retails haute couture: high or elegant clothing that is specifically made for specific measurements and stance evident by the bodies that model the clothing. Juli does not fit this ideal and therefore is excluded from shopping there even if she can afford it. Thus, not only is a certain socio-economic class connected with consumer society, but also a specific body type. Juli’s character emphasizes the correlation between beauty and power, and the real agency that comes from their ability to meet the very specific criterion of physical attractiveness laid out by the author, adhering to dominant hyperfeminine and hypersexual representation of female Latina and Latin American women. When Juli doesn’t meet these exclusive requirements, she gains
partial access to them through the purchase of new clothes and a new style prompted by
the already fashionable and beautiful Adriana.

Overall, *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* constructs a very specific model of ideal
beauty and condones the impulse to conform to this image through consumption of
clothing and updating one’s hairstyle in addition to exercising and watching one’s diet.
Following acceptable representations of femininity found in fashion magazines, beauty
within the novel corresponds to white skin, Anglo or Northern European facial features,
and thin yet curvaceous bodies. Thus, Juli’s ascension up the beauty ladder, where her
friends all are, rests on her ability to purchase fashionable clothing and her efforts to lose
weight, signifying the novel’s perpetuation of narrowly defined paradigms of physical
beauty for Latinas. The fact that all female protagonists share the same socio-economic
status completes the belief that women have malleable bodies that can be adorned with
objects that add value to their beauty thru commodities’ powers of indication.

*The Dirty Girls Social Club*

Like *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*, *The Dirty Girls Social Club* by Alisa Valdes-
Rodriguez also follows a typical Chick Lit novel plot and meets the expectations of the
sub-genres known as “Latina lit” or “Chica lit.” In other words, the main focus is on
relationships and the development of romantic love for each of the Latina and Latin
American heroines, and it ultimately offers an emotionally pleasing and positive ending.
I think, for example, that it superficially copies the conventions of Chica lit, but in fact
has more sophisticated character development and is more transgressive, thus appealing
to a more critical readership than true Chica lit does. The title refers to a small society of
close friends who met in a communications program at Boston University and have
maintained their friendship throughout their post-collegiate lives through bi-annual meetings. As each protagonist narrates her own chapters, the plot revolves around the individual lives of each protagonist and how they intersect with one another. Boston, being one of the oldest cities in the United States known for American baseball, the Boston Tea Party, and Paul Revere, not only allows for the juxtaposition of white and brown within the same space, but additionally their association with the largely white college setting endorses a more assimilated “Americanized” (if you will) perspective on the Latino and Latin American experience in the United States, thus allowing for a more inclusive representation. As a matter of fact, as many have noted, the socio-economic status of the group places them in a position familiar to the mainstream white Chick Lit readership making them more accessible, accepted, and relatable to both a Latino and white readership. In contrast to Sex and the South Beach Chicas, which conforms to mainstream media beauty ideals for ethnic women, Dirty Girls Social Club deconstructs stereotypical depictions of Latinidad by breaking with dominant representations of Latina and Latin American body type and beauty ideals within mass media. Throughout the novel, both the heroines’ physical characteristics and socio-economic status are used to contradict dominant portrayals of Latina and Latin American females which equate beauty and power by rejecting a narrowly defined beauty and inserting the ability to consume.

The Dirty Girls Social Club consists of six friends: Lauren, Sara, Amber, Elizabeth, Rebecca, and Usnavys. They vary in race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and physicality – skin and eye color, hair texture and length, and body type – yet all are connected through their shared identities as educated and professional Latinas. Usnavys, a heavy-set dark skinned Puerto Rican-Dominican, is the Vice President for Public Affairs for the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, a non-profit organization. Sara, a white blonde-haired blue-eyed Jewish Cuban born in Miami, is an interior designer turned housewife. Elizabeth, an Afro-Latina born in Colombia, is a co-host for a network morning show. Rebecca, a New Mexican of Spanish American descent, is the owner and founder of Ella, the most popular Latina women’s magazine on the national market. Amber, a Mexican-American Chicana born in California, is a rock en Español singer and guitarist invested in the Mexica Movement. And finally Lauren, a red-brown curly haired and freckled-faced half Anglo half Cuban born in New Orleans, is a journalist who writes a weekly Lifestyles section column for the Gazette. Evident within the novel is the way stereotypes, whether media representation or gender representation, are deconstructed. For example, Rebecca intentionally brings a focus on the glamour magazine industry while Amber, the musician, is not glamorized but rather is a social activist instead of marketing her talent and selling out. Elizabeth, the television host, exposes the artificiality of the media and gender expectations. Ultimately, Usnavys represents the exact opposite of the women depicted in fashion magazines, and Sarah invalidates the trophy housewife. Another important point of reference is the “recreation” of beauty. Within U.S. popular culture, the Latina and Latin American female body is constrained by a history of marginalized, racialized and sexualized media
representations. Within Chica Lit, the hyperfeminine and hypersexual depictions, as we explored at length in chapter two, become coupled with consumerism, producing a very specific ideal beauty that links definite body type and race along with lifestyle as symbols of successful womanhood. By bringing together such a heterogeneous example of Latinas and Latin American women, *The Dirty Girls Social Club* deconstructs media’s privileging of particular performances of “Latina” identity. Thus, within the *Dirty Girls Social Club* it is not beauty that brings power to the heroines, but rather education which leads to a good employment which generates their economic stability within society.

Through the use of a group of Latinas and Latin American women from different backgrounds and of different physicality and defining each one as beautiful, the author defies the ubiquitous assumptions present in every popular women’s magazine that links a specific body type and race to beauty. The reader first learns of the women through Lauren’s descriptions of them. Openly juxtaposing them with one another is illustrative of the resistance within the novel to normalized depictions of Latina and Latin American women within mainstream U.S. dominant popular culture as inherently exotic, foreign, and consumable. In addition, it directly transmits the message that there is no such thing as a single “Latina identity or body” marked by curvy bottoms, full lips, and long straight dark hair. For example, Usnavys who is “not a small girl by any stretch of the imagination” and has a “tightly tugged, truly tortured Afro” contrasts with Rebecca whose “dark hair is impeccable, stylish, and short without being overly so” and for whom “Skinny does not begin to capture the essence of (…). She’s wiry, muscular, delicate, and fierce, all at once” (9, 14, 19, 23). Another contrast can be found between Sara and Amber who “could not look more different if they tried” (25). Sara has “naturally blonde
hair with salon highlights” that mimics the same color and cut as Martha Stewart. She is a white Cuban, a fact that “would not shock anyone from Latin America or Miami, where white Cubans still ban other shades of people from their social organizations” (26).

Amber’s hair is long and she wears it black. “Black black, witchcraft black, all twisted up in these Medusa things that look like a cross between braids and dreadlocks (…) Her lipstick is dark, gothic purple (…), and her eyes are rimmed in black eyeliner” (29).

Elizabeth is described as “so tall and thin and beautiful that she earned a living as a runway model during college” (30). “[S]he’s a black Latina. (…) Her hair hangs down long and straightened” (…) she has “incredible white teeth, and that golden brown skin, and those large liquid eyes” (32). While Lauren describes her own physicality in terms of her love life: “When happy, I keep food down and stay around a size ten. When sad, I vomit like a Roman emperor and shrink to a six” (2). Lauren has curly hair and is half Cuban “half white trash, born and raised in New Orleans” (6). The variation of personalities, physical characteristics, and backgrounds of the protagonists undeniably challenge the trope of Latinidad and the perceived “Latin look” perpetuated through mass media. Thus, the overall message within Dirty Girls Social Club about body type and beauty goes against the homogenization of Latinas in particular media and intentionally works to broaden the spectrum of acceptable body types and lifestyles for Latina and Latin American women.

Lauren’s character, following her role as a reporter, gives the first commentary of each protagonist and initially describes them for the reader recounting their individuality, personality, and appearance. She functions as a candid spokesperson who speaks directly to an implied reader familiar with Latinas only from dominant media images, accusing
them of buying into those representations: “You might have imagined by now – thanks to TV and Hollywood – that a sucia\textsuperscript{34} is something beautiful and curvy and foreign, (…). Get freaking over it, lames. It’s, like, so not” (5). Lauren gains authority over the reader and throughout the novel by informing on what she believes to be unknown facts about Latinos: “A lot of you probably don’t speak Spanish, and so don’t know what the hell a “sucia” is. That’s okay. No, really. Some of us sucias can’t speak Spanish either” (4), and “yes, we Latinas come in “Jew,” too – shame on you for being surprised…. she’s shouting in Puerto Rican Spanish (yes, there’s a difference” (11-12). Lauren suspects she was hired at the newspaper only to be “a red-hot-’n-spicy clichéd chili pepper-ish cross between Charo and Lois Lane (…). I’m a pretty good journalist. I’m just not a good Latina, at least not the way they expect. (…) With a name like Lauren Fernández, they figured Spanish was part of the package. But that’s the American disease as I see it: rampant, illogical stereotyping” (5-6). The specific reference to Hollywood juxtaposes Lauren’s physicality and language with mass media’s established depictions of Latin American beauty and speech. Additionally this sets up the novel’s supposed stance against stereotypes in general. Within the opening chapter, in addition to repudiating stereotypes, there is also an implicit valorization of upper-middle-class, urban professional Latinas:

In reality, we sucias are all professionals. We’re not meek maids. Or cha-cha hookers. We’re not silent little women praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe with lace mantillas on our heads. We’re not even those down-trodden chicks in the novels of

\textsuperscript{34} Although the term sucia translates as “dirty” its meaning here has evolved into a non-derogatory term. In the novel it is used as an identity term to show a universal bond between the friends no matter what their origins.
those old-school Chicana writers, you know the ones; they wait tables and watch old Mexican movies in decrepit downtown theaters where whiskey drunks piss on the seats; they drive beat-up cars and clean toilets with their fingernails coated in Ajax; their Wal-Mart polyester pants smell like tamales. (11)

The comparison in Lauren’s statement between her and her group of friends and the racialized and genderized stereotypes mentioned above acts to disassociate them from those who are portrayed as a lower socio-economic class and therefore less attractive (read: less pampered) form of Latina. The girls’ elitist attitudes are presented through the description of their manicured nails, Movado watches, Tiffany key chains, and fur coats. They drive brand new Jeep Cherokees, BMWs, and Land Rovers, wear conservative Martha Stewart attire, and have six figure salaries and personal shoppers. These material items and lifestyle draw a direct distinction between them and the women who “shop at Wal-Mart, clean toilets and smell of tamales” (11). As a matter of fact, the characters’ elevated professional status in the Anglo-dominant spheres of cultural production – newspaper, magazine publishing, television, music, public relations, and a connoisseur of the domestic sphere turned interior design and television producer – separate them from lower socio-economic class associations and highlights their lucrative acculturation into North American society. From the point of view of the fashion and beauty magazines, the “Dirty Girls” represent the targeted audience evident from their conspicuous consumption and spending power. The difference that we see within the Dirty Girls Social Club is the emphasis on education which translates as a status factor differentiating them from not only the women who shop at Wal-Mart, but also from the women depicted in fashion and beauty magazines in which education is never mentioned
and the only thing that counts is the ability to fit a specific archetype of beauty. In this way, the novel redefines beauty to insinuate that their power comes from their socio-economic status, not from a shared ideal physicality. Thus, their success, power, and agency are emphasized through their spending power (education), linking physical appearance with signs of wealth instead of a narrowly defined paradigm of physical attractiveness.

As part of the separation from the dominant pictoral portrayals of Latina and Latin American women, a deconstruction of perfect bodies and racial constructions within feminine magazines occurs within Dirty Girls Social Club. Usnavys and Rebecca are both key characters for such criticism. Rebecca’s character purposely draws attention to the glamour magazine industry, while Usnavys, as much as she mimics the imagery, contradicts the racial and beauty patterns within them. Prominent within beauty and fashion magazines is an ideal physical attractiveness that fit a U.S. or Northern European body type and physical characteristics. That is having a thin yet curvy physique with delicate features such as dainty nose, light hair, skin, and eyes and straight to wavy hair. In both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, the more ethnic looking or local the model the more curvaceous and thicker the body type and curlier or coarser the hair type in addition to darker skin color (although vary rarely are “very” dark models used and when they are they portray a more primitive representation). Although some media images and female representations are more inclusive, there continues to be a national preference and glorification of Anglo or Northern European facial features and physicality. Lauren highlights this in the first chapter:
This is true of all Latinos I know, no matter what color they themselves happen to be. They want a white girl. You can see it in our soap operas and magazines. All of the women are blond. No lie. I mean, if Hollywood pretends we all look like Penelope Cruz and JLo, the Latin media pretends we all look like a Swedish exchange student or Pamela Anderson. (…) It’s like black Latinas, deep dark Latinas, don’t even exist, you know, even though nearly half of the nation of Colombia is black, and same with Costa Rica, Peru, and Cuba. Now and then a black character will pop up on a Univision or Telemundo series, and she’s invariably wearing a turban and a long white skirt, pushing a broom around and concocting some witchcraft on her kindhearted blue-eyed master. (32)

It is important to point out the complexity of race in both the U.S. and Latin America due to the wide variation in self-identification and racial categories and the absence of a coherent racial classification in many Latin American countries and the homogenization that occurs in the U.S. media. On one hand, many Latin Americans interpret skin color based on socio-economic status. The higher the socio-economic class, the whiter you are considered no matter what your skin color. On the other hand, ethnicity can be performed through the purchase of beauty products and medical and non-medical procedures that straighten hair, lighten skin and eyes, add or detract weight or curves, reduce nose size. Both Rebecca and Usnavys reflect this racial tension.

For example, Rebecca, the CEO of a fashion and beauty magazine aimed at Latinas in their twenties and thirties, physically embodies the fashion and beauty images depicted within the pages of an average feminine magazine. Keeping in mind that the ideal prototype is generally one of Anglo or Northern European characteristics, in
magazines produced both in the Caribbean and the U.S., an emphasis on the models’

bodies is used in order to encourage women to imitate them. She is thin yet muscular,

not too dark, not too light skinned. The diligence Rebecca exemplifies with her diet and

exercise directly mimics the tactics used to help readers move toward the goal of getting

flat stomachs, tight buttocks and thighs. Reflecting prevalent racial and socio-economic

attitudes, she glorifies her European ancestry: Rebecca explains that her family has “been

in New Mexico for generations, that [they are] not immigrants” (58). She goes on to say:

“I came from a long line of successful politicians and businessmen there, that we were

descended from Spanish royalty from the Andalusia region, near France, where everyone

is white” (58). Across cultural productions, social prejudice is often illustrated in

aesthetic terms, and being white continues to be a social and aesthetic ideal for many.

The fear of being any other color than white within this character serves to highlight the

racial, socio-economic, and political tension within Latino and Latin American identity

constructions. Rebecca is directly affected by her race and that of others. For example,

she married Brad, the son of a billionaire, openly admitting she was excited about his

wealth. While she admired him for his cultured and sophisticated manner, he married her

for her foreign, natural, “Earthy” qualities (57). Although she claims Spanish and not

Mexican lineage, Brad’s parents want nothing to do with her because of her origin.

However, the most significant twist is when she becomes involved with Andre, a Black

Brit. Rebecca reflects on the “racial” difference between them: “Not that I am racist, but

I was raised a certain way. I have nothing against black people (…) but I wouldn’t feel

comfortable dating someone outside of my own race. My mother made it clear when she

told me repeatedly, ‘Date a black man, and you will break my heart.’ That’s why this
whole thing with Brad is so shocking. They don’t understand where I come from, who I am, or what I believe in” (59). The fact that she accepts a black man as the love interest in her life is symbolic to the reversal of the ideology of *blanqueamiento*. Although Lauren’s description of Rebecca clearly emphasizes her ethnic qualities (brown skin, high cheekbones, ethnic nose), Rebecca considers herself white and therefore equal to Brad. The entanglement between race and socio-economic class, stemming from a colonialist attitude, asserts those of a higher socio-economic class to be white. And, while the higher socio-economic class may not physically have white skin, they self-identify as white according to their socio-economic status.\(^35\)

In terms of socio-economic status, for Rebecca, her European ancestry is a powerful source of prestige. The incentive to call oneself white highlights the persistence of the importance of whiteness and upward socio-economic class mobility in many Latin American societies. A criticism against the Europeanized glorification is seen when this attitude is disparaged by Lauren:

She insists on being called ‘Spanish,’ too. God forbid you call her a *Mexican*. She swears she can trace the family tree back to royalty in Spain. Now, I’m no anthropologist, but I do know what a Pueblo Indian looks like. And Rebecca Baca, with her high cheekbones and flat little butt, fits the description. If any of us *sucas* were to be chosen to play a ‘Latina’ in an Edward James Olmos production, it would be *this* chick, okay? (…) Don’t try to ask her about the

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straight black hair and the brown skin and the nose that looks like it came out of an RC Gorman painting, though. (21-22)

Rebecca’s denial of any indigenous origins reflects the many ideologies of national identity among racially mixed Latin American societies which pull from the notion of the theory of *mestizaje* – an ideology of *blanqueamiento* – which glorifies whiteness and effectively excludes Blacks and indigenous people from the nation, making “racial and ethnic diversity invisible” by depicting the “prototype of modern citizenship” as white or white-mestizo (Rahier 421). By falling for Andre, Rebecca’s character serves to reverse the process of *blanqueamiento* and contradict the cultural ideals and general belief – within images and representations of ideal physical attractiveness in Latino and Caribbean cultural productions – that valorize light skin and European features and subsequently degrade nonwhite traits. Although at first Rebecca appears to represent a racial elitist position, ultimately she deconstructs the perception within mass media that views, and homogenizes, all beauty to fit a specific Anglo or Northern European standard. Thus, if this couple were to be seen as the future of the Latino and/or Latin American advancement, their union challenges the artificial split between Blackness and beauty, therefore challenging the universal and generic prototype of ideal beauty for Latina and Latin American women.

Concentrating on break from the perfect race and body type within feminine magazines, Usnavys’ character also provides a point of reference through which we are able to question the universal and generic prototype of ideal beauty for Latina and Latin American women presented as physical appearance (including race) within magazines and novels in addition to how the body is coupled with consumption and signs of wealth.
Furthermore, her own assessment of her accomplishment, power and agency is directly coupled with her pleasure in commodity consumption and represents for her a symbol of successful womanhood. Valdes-Rodriguez intermixes ethnicity and a large body type in Usnavys’ character, producing the exact opposite of the models depicted in popular women’s magazines. Therefore, Usnavys’ character problematizes the homogenizing articulations of gender and ethnicity identity circulated through the U.S. popular media because she is neither the prototype of Northern European beauty nor the Latin Spitfire – thin yet curvaceous and sultry – found so often in cinematic or printed portrayals of Latinas and Latin Americans. However, she wholly embraces the practice of consuming high-end goods to obtain, or at least seem to obtain, upper-socio-economic class status and increase her attractiveness. Thus, while her character upsets the ubiquitous physicality of the images present in magazines and mass media at large, she doesn’t escape the persistent pressure to consume.

The first description of Usnavys’ character arriving for the sucia meeting exemplifies how race, socio-economic class and beauty are inextricably linked within dominant feminine learned performance: “[Usnavys] just slid up to the curb out front in her silver BMW sedan (leased), driving super slow with Vivaldi or something like that blasting out of the slightly open windows so all those poor women with all those kids and shopping bags from the 99-cent store hunching away from the wind and snow could stop and stare at her” (12). As she approaches, Lauren notices Usnavys is on a cell phone. However, Lauren “doubt[s] she’s even talking to anyone, just wants it stuck to her ear so everyone around here can go, oh, wow, look at that! What a rich Puerto Rican!” (12). Through Lauren’s observation we find out that Usnavys is wearing a fur coat, one that
“the Neiman Marcus tag is still attached inside so she can take it back tomorrow and get all that money back on her poor abused credit card” (12). Her hair is “ironed flat as a Dutch cracker, twisted up like she just stepped off the set of some telenovela, the heroine, only she’s too dark to ever get cast in that kind of role. Don’t tell her she’s dark, though. Even though her daddy was a Dominican, ebony as an olive in a Greek salad, her mother from day one insisted that Usnavys is light, and forbids her from dating ‘monos.’ (Read: monkeys.)” (12-13). For added effect she takes “her Tiffany key chain out, aiming the lock button at the car, triggering the little alarm whistle. It peeps three times, as if to announce: Bo-RI-cua! A couple of neighborhood tigres walk by in their Timberland boots and puffy parkas and stare at her long enough to turn their heads right around on their thick necks. She drinks in the attention, plays it up like a star” (13). Despite the fact that Usnavys conforms to the consumer culture she imagines as ideal, she does so without physically fitting the pattern of ideal body type or race:

Beneath the coat she’s wearing yet another elegant pantsuit, this time in a pretty pale green wool. I’m amazed she can find these things in her size, which I’m guessing has fluctuated between an eighteen and a twenty-four for the past five years. Don’t let this fool you though. She’s gorgeous. Her face is delicate, with the kind of nose other women pay lots of money to achieve, and big, expressive brown eyes she likes to hide with green contacts lenses. (…) She calls herself “the fat girl” in front of the rest of us, and laughs about it. We don’t soothe her with lies to the contrary. Her upper arm is bigger around than Rebecca’s thigh. (15-16)

Recalling how aesthetics are a key aspect of Dominican and Puerto Rican race, Usnavys’ mom’s insistence that she be called “light” and that she does not date dark men,
emblematic of the everyday practice of blanqueamiento or whitening among cultures with African ancestry. Reflected within the mother’s statement is the legacy of colonial racism that combines with foreign ideals that values whiteness as attractive and devalues blackness as unattractive. Furthermore, according to Bordo, fat or even curves are associated with powerlessness, both actual and perceived, and lack of self-control (1993). Within the mass media, Frances Negrón-Muntaner analyzes the case of Puerto Ricans, specifically the iconicity of Jennifer Lopez. She attests that representations of the Puerto Rican female body in particular, tend to include the notice of a large, rounded derriere – in other words, larger more “curvaceous” bodies (82). It is important to consider however, as Valdes-Rodriguez does in The Dirty Girls Social Club, the different perceptions of acceptable body types in different cultures. None of the girls try to change Usnavys. As a matter of fact, her weight is not an issue at all; instead “she’s also the most outgoing of” all the girls (16). Nor does she have any trouble attracting men; of all the girls “she seems to attract the most men” (16). Through these two statements from Lauren’s description, Valdes-Rodriguez reverses the international physical fantasy and gives Usnavys more power and beauty than the other lighter-skinned, thinner protagonists. In effect, where anxiety is shown through her character, it has nothing to do with meeting the physical demands ubiquitous in mass media, but rather it is shown through the subjective demands of meeting certain socio-cultural and socio-economic standards.

Usnavys – and all the sucias – challenge the stereotype that Latinos and Latin Americans in the United States are poor and uneducated. However, we learn through Lauren’s narration that Usnavys flaunts the image of a higher socio-economic class –
blaring classical music, driving a *leased* BMW, wearing a fur coat, having a Tiffany key chain – intentionally to disassociate herself from the marginalized “poor” women who shop at the dollar store. Nevertheless, racial and cultural markers – the straightening of her hair, the color of her skin, the use of Boricua to describe her – place her back in the marginalized category and reinforce her inability to negotiate (or assimilate to) mainstream cultural standards about class or beauty. As Hurt tells us: “Usnavys has money but lacks a nuanced understanding of mainstream good taste. She wears Manolo Blahniks and carries a Fendi purse, couture items that signify a certain level of wealth, even as she tucks in tags in order to return merchandise she cannot afford. She buys tacky furniture, wears loud clothes, and performs success” (141). Thus, Usnavys’ performance of success goes hand in hand with her performance of socio-cultural aesthetic ideals. While this makes her visible and attractive to the opposite sex (*tigres*) despite her skin-color or size, what makes her stand out is her supposed high level of wealth that she flaunts through the (temporary) purchase of commodities. Thus, for Usnavys, wealth can buy you beauty not fitting into a specific paradigm of physical attractiveness.

Another break from dominant visual depictions of Latina and Latin American celebrity identity is seen within *Dirty Girls Social Club* through the characters of Amber and Elizabeth. Notorious within onscreen models of Latina and Latin American women are the Anglicization of their physical characteristics and the hypersexualization of their character. While in Latin America the model of physical attractiveness is broader but still narrow – including brunettes and curvier bodies – within the U.S., Latina and Latin American female public figures typically either transform themselves to fit Anglo
national preferences of beauty or are identified as a fixation of sexuality – or both. As stated in previous analysis, when compared to white (Northern American) female characters, Latina and Latin American women are subject to the U.S. tropes of Tropicalism and Latinidad which homogenizes them all to one exotic, consumable, sexual, physically similar group. Amber and Elizabeth are both used to undermine customary TV and gender expectations for Latina and Latin American women. For example, Amber exposes what she believes to be false representations of Latinness and goes against the generic “Latina type.” While Elizabeth also defies the “Latina type,” she specifically dismantles gender expectations. As socially constructed personalities, both Amber a musician and Elizabeth a television anchor, represent bodies that have automatically been racialized and gendered by their audiences and mass media. They both symbolize an ethnic femininity subject to social and cultural practices and perceptions that shape their public identity. While Amber desperately wants others to see her, Elizabeth desperately tries to conceal her real identity. By taking a look at both Amber and Elizabeth’s character, we can analyze how race, beauty, socio-economic class, and stardom are used within Dirty Girls Social Club to disconfirm preconceived notions surrounding Latina and Latin American celebrities.

Amber’s character goes through a personal transformation that represents her awakening to the universal homogenization and Anglicization she sees among other Latin stars within the U.S. and also experiences personally. Lauren draws attention to this through her descriptions of Amber who initially thought “all Latinas are just like her.

(...) She honestly thinks Californian-style Mexican food is universal among Latinas and so the only bananas she’d ever seen before coming to Boston were the ones her mom got at the Albertson’s and chopped over her corn flakes before taking her to marching band practice in the minivan” (10). The socio-economic status to which Amber belongs and her assimilation to North American culture are highlighted within this quote through the grocery store where her mother shops, the kind of food she eats for breakfast, and the transportation her family owns. From this socio-economic advantage – belonging to the middle to upper socio-economic class, now attending college “on a classical music scholarship and took communication classes just in case she couldn’t become the next Mariah Carey” (28) – she comes from a background of significant spending power compared to other minorities within society that might shop at the supermercados, eat breakfast tacos or burritos, and only dream of having the economic provisions to engage in an extracurricular activity or attend college. In addition, at first Amber’s participation in the common practice of grouping all Latinos and Latin Americans to one homogenous group is also emphasized. Amber is symbolic of the Americanized Latina who is unaware of the history of her people. What is significant about Amber is that she voluntarily becomes the disadvantaged – she struggles at first to support herself with her music – and becomes an advocate on behalf of the voiceless through her music. Amber plans to use her stardom to publicize the “American Mexica movement of the new millennium” following her Chicana awakening after a “‘Free Chiapas’ tour” she attended one summer (28, 29). While Amber is economically challenged at first, she still can rely on her parents, who send her money to cover to the rent, and has an education which would gain her substantial employment should she choose. Thus Amber never truly
experiences hardship; instead she has the ability to choose to live at a “lower socio-economic status” in order to follow her dreams. What is significant within Dirty Girls Social Club is the reflection of socio-economic class attitude that renders Amber’s character as less valuable – and less attractive – because early within the novel she has less money than the other characters. This becomes apparent through the physical descriptions of Amber that portray her as the most nonconforming – she is the least assimilated and mainstream in terms of her style – of the group suggestive through her value increase as her tax bracket rises. In other words, as Amber becomes more successful she also becomes more attractive, linking physicality with signs of wealth and not with fitting a specific paradigm of ideal mainstream beauty.

Amber is comparable to Juli from Sex and the South Beach Chicas. She is the one character who stands out among the group as the one who is in need of a transformation. However, Amber is still considered “pretty” but her “improvement” comes through the advancement of her socio-economic status, not a make-over. Again, Lauren’s description of her illustrates her simultaneous difference and acceptance of her character:

When I first met her, (…) she was (…) a coffee-skinned, pretty girl with an unnaturally flat tummy. She plucked her eyebrows completely off, and drew them back in as thin arching lines. (…) Back then, Amber wore her dark, shimmering hair long, with heavy bangs curled under, and she wore the kind of baggy girl clothes and fake gold ‘dolphin’ earrings that probably seemed normal where she grew up but that seemed a little ‘hood-ratty to us. (27)
Amber’s fashion and make-up style is regional and cultural at once. It conflicts with the prevailing images or models within fashion and beauty magazines, or other fictional heroines of this genre. However, the use of “pretty” to describe Amber is repeated in her descriptions, indicative of her acceptance by the group and also by physical attractive standards within the group. By using such a character, Valdez-Rodriquez inverts dominant equations of beauty and power for Latina and Latin American women by glorifying difference among the characters. As Amber’s story progresses, her fashion becomes even more radical but remains acceptable among her friends:

Her hair is still long, but now it’s (...) witchcraft black, all twisted up in these Medusa things that look like a cross between braids and dreadlocks, with strands of colored yarn woven in here and there. (...) Her lipstick is this dark, gothic purple (...), and her eyes are rimmed in black liquid eyeliner. She’s had her nose, eyebrow, tongue, belly button, and nipple pierced, and her clothes are usually black, like her hair. She’s not ugly or anything, mind you. She’s just Amber. She’s pretty, always was. And she’s got these abs to die for. (29)

Amber’s physical description focuses on her dramatic appearance and is also reflective of the rock music fashion. Notice the affirmation that she is not “ugly” but remains “pretty.” The one aspect that is repeated about Amber’s physical appearance is her abdomen area which is coveted by Lauren (who struggles with her weight). When compared to the physical descriptions of the female protagonists in Sex and the South Beach Chicas, for example, there is an absence of the hypersexualization of the character’s physicality that allows for a reconstruction of beauty and shows different paths to power other than dominant beauty ideals.
Amber’s character also directly addresses the Anglicization among Latina and Latin American celebrities. Whereas other Latina and Latin American celebrities go through crossover transformations that include straightening their hair, lightening their skin, eyes, and hair color, in addition to performing in English, Amber does the exact opposite. Her transformation includes returning to her roots in the sense that she now speaks Spanish mainly, is learning Nahuatl, sings in both languages, and supports the American Mexica movement. The distinction from *Sex and the South Beach Chicas* is a more profound inclusion of Latin American culture and experience within the U.S. In addition to underscoring the Latino history and actuality, Amber openly contests the North American trope of Anglicization:

After the first song, I grab the postcards and address the crowd (…) ‘Did you see Shakira lately?’ Everyone boos. ‘That’s right. She’s a *pinche* disgrace. Blond hair.’ (…) I throw the postcards out and they float down into the sea of brown hands. ‘They’re addressed to her manger, *hijos de puta*! We’re telling them we don’t want this kind of representation. We’re telling Shakira she’s a traitor! (…) Your job is to get out there and educate people, Raza. There’s too much self-hatred going on, too much wishing we were like the white man.’ (95)

Just as Lauren’s directness in pointing out cultural stereotypes is essential to the novel’s stance on tropes such as Latinidad and Anglicization, so are Amber’s actions and words in the above quote. Amber draws attention to Shakira, a well-known Latin American female musician who has successfully crossed over into North American popular culture. Part of Shakira’s triumph within U.S. popular culture is owed to her being able to fit a certain paradigm of physical attractiveness. Her transformation includes lightening her
hair and becoming thinner. These alterations are part of the process of Anglicization to which Latinas and Latin Americans are subjected to within popular culture and mass media. Their conformity to these changes in their physical appearance can determine their success rate. In other words, the more ambiguous a character they can perform, the more employable they become. The less they are able to “crossover” (thicker accent, darker features, coarser hair, and more voluptuous body) the more likely they will fit only a rigid image of the Latina and Latin American female as exotic, sexual, and consumable. By using successful characters such as Amber and Elizabeth (as we shall see), Valdes-Rodriguez criticizes the homogenization and perceived necessary transformations of Latina and Latin American women within mass media, allowing for a broader range of acceptable race, body type, and beauty.

Within women’s fashion and beauty magazines, the overwhelming focus on themes of personal change and self-improvement establishes the impression of an “authoritative” discourse of femininity. By regarding the female body as permanently flawed and in need of corrective work, feelings of insecurity and self-dissatisfaction are fueled which aids in encouraging consumerism (McCracken, 1993). Glossy images of perfect-looking, ideal women encourage the reader to compare themselves in relation to the ideal image that is presented as her objective. Meant to provoke feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction within women who don’t fit this constructed ideal, many are encouraged to mimic the standard created by mass media. Highlighting the magazine industry as a source of standardization for women is seen in the following quote from Amber describing her mother’s disapproval of her appearance: “Just like it’s obvious she doesn’t like the way I do my hair or makeup (…). She never comes right out and says it,
but she does other things, like send me pictures of women in magazines with a note saying she thinks my hair would look good styled like the hair in the picture” (129).

Here Amber’s mother symbolically becomes the imperative opinion within the articles and imagery found within the pages of fashion and beauty magazines that tell women how to look, dress, and act. Amber’s style is uncharacteristic compared to the majority of female protagonists within this genre: “I decide on the tight pants I found at the funky boutique in Venice, with portraits of the Virgin of Guadalupe all over them, (…). I wear a tight red-cropped sweater and red boots, my black trench coat. I put red twists into my hair, put on my makeup, a few chokers, and dark silver, gothic rings on every finger” (132). One important aspect to point out here is that, unlike Julie from *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*, Amber is not pressured to change by her friends and her style remains nonconforming throughout the novel. Thus for Amber, her path to power is not attained through a compliance with dominant beauty and fashion standards but rather through her monetary value which increases after she signs with a record label. A significant point of negotiation for Amber is her unwillingness to change her look, dress, music style, or name. In this way, Valdes-Rodriguez recreates the Latina female protagonist to include a more inclusive beauty and fashion and challenges the homogenistic nature of tropes such as Latinidad and tropicalism that mainly focus on physical appearance.

In chapter 4 of *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women’s Body Image* (2005), Sylvia K. Blood analyzes popular women’s magazines. A crucial point that Blood highlights is how the “‘we’ addressed in popular women’s magazines are almost entirely white, Western women. Contemporary images of the ideal and desirable future self are embodied in (usually artificially created) representations of women who are
white, flawless, thin and toned” (65). She discusses the strategy of inducing anxiety and dissatisfaction, mentioning what Roland Barthes (1973) refers to as “the promise of a future self.” As others have noted (Berger 1973; McCracken 1993) this “future self” functions through the perceived difference between who we are presently and who we can be in the future. A central presence in advertising, the images seem to propose the pleasurable fantasy of easily attained (just buy this, wear that, use this product or brand!) self-improvement and beauty. While Blood looks at popular women’s magazines in the U.S. aimed at Anglo women, this same “we” seems to appear in popular women’s magazines – and novels – aimed toward a Latina and Latin American female readership. As I have shown, though claiming to embrace difference, the magazines and novels meant to represent Latina and Latin American women still tend to fit them into a specific patterns of ideal beauty which characterizes them as not too dark, not too light skinned, thin but curvaceous, with long wavy or straight hair, and delicate facial features – she is different enough to be sexier (more exotic) than the white woman, yet resembles her enough to be safe and consumable. 37 This ideal image generated by mass media, when compared to Latina and Latin American women’s actual bodies – which represent an array of physical and racial characteristics – can inspire a sense of inadequacy. Dirty Girls Social Club’s treatment of race and sexuality contradicts this portrait of “we are all the same” Latin-ness by its inclusion of female protagonists who embody the Latina and Latin American racial structure that includes indigenous and African ancestry. Not only

37 Latina and Latin American women are subjected to the tropes of Latinidad, Tropicalism, and the Latin Look which homogenizes them into one physically similar group, erasing origin, speech, and racial differences among others. These tropes also erase the threat they pose to the U.S. patriarchal and racial order because of their racial vagueness. (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997; Valdivia 2007; Molina-Guzmán 2010; Rodríguez 1997).
is this significant because it broadens the acceptable prototype for Latina and Latin American heroines and models, but Valdes-Rodriguez also bestows upon the Afro-Latina characters the most beauty. Additionally, through the use of Elizabeth, Dirty Girls Social Club specifically destabilizes the perceived heterosexual expectations of Latina and Latin American women.

The use of two very dissimilar Afro-Latina characters as the most attractive deconstructs cultural theories of beauty dating back to the European domination of Latin America and the Caribbean. Recalling Whitten and Torres’ discussion of how the racial categories of white (European) as superior to black (African) and native (Indigenous) are “classifications that people took to be ‘real’ 500 years ago and still take to be ‘real’” (25) today proves to be useful once again as we consider mass media’s present racial construction of images and representations of Latina and Latin American women. The critical lens of the cultural explorations of Joel Streicker and David Howard proposes the impact that signifying characters of African descent as the most desirable can have. For example, in his analysis of race, class, and gender in Cartagena, Colombia, Streicker avows how “being black is considered tantamount to being de clase baja (lower class)” (55). In aesthetic terms, he states that what is considered physically attractive is to have features associated with Europeans or “blancos: a straight nose, thin lips, and high cheekbones. For cartageneros, an ugly person has a flat nose, thick lips, and low cheekbones, all features (...) associat[ed] with African or negro ancestry” (61). David Howard’s exploration of race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic also presents a similar inference of racial affect within society. For instance, Howard tells us how race and socio-economic class are the key factors that locate an individual’s status in
Dominican society. He asserts how “Color exists as a social, rather than simply biological, construction that tends to correlate with social mobility and economic status, and is an important element in the aesthetic formation of race” (54). Within Dominican society, aesthetic discriminatory practices are apparent through “advertisements which ask for employees of ‘good presence’ [which indicate] an implied bias towards whiteness or la blancura” (8). Thus, within certain regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, skin tone, a vital factor when determining character, beauty, and power, becomes disadvantageous the darker it is. Dirty Girls Social Club argues against this notion by the inclusion of those who within Latin American society – are frequently excluded and typically subjected to the lowest level of the social hierarchy and by bestowing upon them beauty and power.

In aesthetic terms, Usnavys’ physical description includes many ethnic markers yet this does not exclude her from being described as beautiful. Usnavys is described as having a “tightly tugged, truly tortured Afro” (14); being “too dark” to ever get cast as a heroine in a telenovela;” and “If her African ancestors had been shipped to New Orleans instead of Santo Domingo and San Juan, she’d be black in the U.S.” (13); as wearing “between an eighteen and a twenty-four” size (15); yet being “gorgeous. [Usnavys’] face is delicate, with the kind of expressive brown eyes she likes to hide with green contact lenses;” and “seems to attract the most men” (16) of all the sucias. Elizabeth’s physical description, although in many ways opposite that of Usnavys, follows a similar pattern. Lauren points out that “Of all the sucias Elizabeth is by far the most fine. Her limbs are long and lean, even though she eats everything she wants, and her face peacefully symmetrical” (31) and of being “tall and thin and beautiful” (30). Lauren’s description of
Elizabeth at the first *sucia* reunion in the first chapter highlights her natural beauty compared to the beauty of the other women: “Tonight she’s wearing comfortable-looking blue jeans, duck boots, a thick brown wool sweater, and one of those Patagonia-type parkas, in forest green (...). Her hair hangs down long and straightened, and she has no makeup on and *still* looks better than the rest of us *combined*. It’s those incredible white teeth, and that golden brown skin, and those large liquid eyes” (32). According to Lauren the assumption as to why Elizabeth is still single is drawn from her ethnicity: “Elizabeth also has a hard time because she’s a black Latina. Black as in African. She won’t tell you this, but I know it’s true: Black American guys love the way she looks, and more than one has commented on her resemblance to Destiny’s Child lead singer Beyoncé Knowles, in part because of her dyed blond hair and in part because of her perfect body” (32). Focusing on key descriptors for each female protagonist, it is apparent that these two women are given preference within the paradigm of physical attractiveness with the novel. For Usnavys, the use of words such “gorgeous,” “delicate,” and seems to “attract the most men,” parallels to ethnic markers such as “Afro,” being “too dark,” and being a size “between eighteen and twenty-four” linking beauty to racial symbols and indicating that beauty is not only granted to those who are slim and taught. In Elizabeth’s case, the use of “most fine,” having limbs that are “long and lean,” “peacefully symmetrical” and “perfect body” parallels to “golden brown skin” and “black Latina.” Thus, *Dirty Girls Social Club* by presenting two individuals who come from similar origins but are physically very different and deeming them “most beautiful” breaks with traditional and dominant images and representations of Euro-centric ideal beauty within mass media and redefines ideal beauty to include women of different shapes and skin color.
Recalling how aesthetics are a key aspect of Dominican and Colombian societies, Masi’s study on the concepts of race and beauty among adolescent women in Ecuador proves helpful once again for evaluating racial norms of beauty related with developed nations, that blend with similar traditions in Latin American countries to produce a restricted, “‘the whiter the better’ ideal of beauty” (291). The ideology behind *blanqueamiento* or ethnic or cultural lightening appears in contemporary dominant images and representations of ideal beauty within popular culture and the mass-media. The pervasive suggestion of self-modification, within beauty and fashion magazines, advertisements, and some novels, unremittingly links a specific body type and race to consumption through beauty products and procedures that promises transformation – for those who need it – as a way of attaining the desired look and body. For those Latina and Latin American women of color, this requires such treatments such as skin-lighteners and hair relaxers and straighteners. For those with the wrong body type, certain clothing or cosmetic surgeries and procedures are available. Thus, implying that these specific attributes considered to be ideal markers of physical attractiveness can be bought and that the female body is malleable and thus susceptible to criticism. Within novels, such as *Sex and the South Beach Chicas*, this is shown through the suggestion of a “make-over” or transformation of the characters who fail to fit the specific beauty criterion. This is shown within *Dirty Girls Social Club* through Usnavys’ conscious decision to straighten her hair and use colored contact lenses, and Elizabeth’s decision to straighten and dye her hair. Their decisions illustrate their willing participation in, in some respects, transforming their bodies not only to a cultural preference but also mass media’s feminine ideal. Usnavys, through purchase of hair products and contacts, and Elizabeth’s
ability to mimic certain beauty ideals (thinner, straight hair) makes them “more profitable, successful, and consumable” to mainstream white readership; thus illustrating “the complex nature of docility and discipline” (Molina-Guzmán 12) that Latina and Latin American bodies are subjected to in order to fit into specific racial beauty ideals. While the use of a darker-skinned and corpulent characters attempts to disrupt media practices about the performance of ethnicity, race and gender, the connotations about race and beauty in this passage reveal the inability to escape the ideology that some bodies are more vulnerable to discipline and that particular aesthetic traits are more valuable. Therefore, while Dirty Girls Social Club successfully broads the spectrum of acceptable ideal beauty, the novel is not able to escape cultural pressures to conform to certain beauty practices for ethnic women.

In terms of socio-economic status as Streicker and Howard point out, the societal implications of having darker-skin color and African features throughout some regions of Latin America and the Caribbean is to be stigmatized as less educated and cultured (lower socio-economic class status) and physically displeasing. However, the one commonality among all the sucias is their education, which allows all of them to simultaneously climb the social ladder regardless of their racial and physical differences. Both Usnavys and Elizabeth grew up poor; nevertheless, both hold degrees in Communications. Additionally, Usnavys went on to complete a Masters at Harvard on a scholarship. The fact that the plot takes place in the United States allows Valdes-Rodriguez to capitalize on the “American Dream” which made it possible for her protagonists to advance into a higher socio-economic class – regardless of race or their outset socio-economic class. Through their education they became empowered with the
ability to “glam-up” (clothes, make-up and beauty products, grooming procedures), thus creating a different path to success besides fitting dominant models of ideal physical beauty and ensuring their relatability among non-Latino and Latino audiences alike, thus increasing their value.

In addition to producing alternative paths to success besides ideal beauty, Dirty Girls Social Club also deconstructs the heteronormative expectation of Latina and Latin American female sexuality. Elizabeth Cruz, former model, is a co-host for a network morning show in Boston. She is a finalist for a prestigious national news co-anchor position, and is national spokesperson for the Christ for Kids organization (12). Elizabeth Cruz is from Colombia and represents, like Zoe Saldana, Afro-Latina celebrities who successfully cross-over into U.S. popular culture. Elizabeth’s homosexuality is present from her first narration where she declares her love for Lauren. Her story within in the novel revolves around not only her own acceptance of who she is, but also that of her friends, and that of a watching world. Mid-novel, Elizabeth is spotted one night leaving a gay bar with her lover by the gossip columnist for the local newspaper. The report of her sexuality is broadcasted over news stations, newspaper, gossip programs, and the radio. Though Elizabeth is at first humiliated and fears the reaction of her friends, she eventually comes to embrace the fact that she no longer has to hide her true self. Within the novel, it is the media and certain social and religious groups who reject her, yet her friends all accept her and continue to support her. In this fashion, Valdes-Rodriguez sets up Elizabeth as the only one who stands out from the group of friends because of her sexuality. However, this does not exclude her in any way from being successful or accepted by her friends, and like Usnavys, no one tries to
change her. Thus, the novel again broadens the acceptable range of success and power to include homosexuality, resisting the dominant heteronormative portrayal of Latin and Latin American female sexuality within mass media.

Isabel Molina-Guzmán, in *Dangerous Curves* (2010), talks about the contemporary media gendering of Latinidad that maintains the relationship between women as nature and the Platonic binary ideal of masculine/mind over feminine/body. Molina-Guzmán states that “Because the essential male body and the essential white body traditionally have held the most symbolic worth, representations of Latina beauty and desirability in the media translate into the privileging of Latina whiteness over Latina blackness and Latina femininity and heterosexuality over Latina masculinity and queerness” (13). Within this schema, Rebecca, Amber, and Sara would essentially be more desirable and consumable than Afro-Latina Usnavys and (queer) Elizabeth. Yet by creating a character capable of performing a socially acceptable femininity, sexuality, and racial identity Valdes-Rodriguez is able to distort this condition for feminineness: “‘I just can’t believe it’s true, not you. I mean, I always thought lesbians were ugly. You’re so feminine. So pretty’” (187) states Sara after finding about Elizabeth’s homosexuality. In addition, Elizabeth’s boss highlights her value to the company in relation to her ability to fit a social ideal for ethnic women: “‘We got to number one because of you, Liz,’ he says. ‘Because you were the perfect woman for this town. A beautiful black woman who talks like a white woman but is actually Hispanic. (…). We got all the advocates off our asses when we hired you. We’ll fight this thing. Right?’”(179). Present in this quote is also the exigency for Elizabeth to stay within the safe boundaries of heterosexuality. Because she is able to perform a socially acceptable femininity, it becomes incogitable for her to be
anything else but heterosexual, therefore her producers (and viewers) insist on a heteronormative sexuality for her celebrity persona. Conscious of the reality that U.S. media “privileges a Latina sexuality that is heteronormative, a Latina ethnicity that is universal; and a performance of racial identity that is not quite white but never black” (Molina-Guzmán 13), Valdes-Rodriguez positions the link between heteronormative sexuality and aesthetic ideals as another stereotype open to interrogation within the novel.

Symbolic of the image of the television representation, Elizabeth’s character underlines the position within Dirty Girls Social Club that media representations of Latina and Latin American women are not real. Molina-Guzmán affirms how the gendering of Latinidad reproduces the dominant U.S. hierarchy of social identity which aids in maintaining the position of white male heterosexual elites, who are the primary, but not exclusive, producers of mainstream news and entertainment (14). She states that “the gendering of Latinidad depends on the production of docile Latina bodies palatable to global capitalist demands for exotic sexuality, racial flexibility, and socially acceptable femininity while increasing the economic, social, and political subjugation of those same ethnic bodies” (13). The demand for Elizabeth to remain a docile, “safe” body is shown in this quote when protesters begin to gather outside of the news station where Elizabeth works after the report of her sexuality in the media:

‘Why do they care? It’s so medieval.’ John doesn’t answer at first. He stares at the people. I stare at the people. Together we stare for a full minute. Then, he says, ‘They care because they all wanted you, all the men in town. All the women wanted to be like you.’ ‘That can’t be true,’ I say. ‘Sure it is. TV news isn’t about news, Liz.'
It’s about *entertainment*. It’s about sex appeal. If you’re gay, or lesbian, whatever, they can’t fantasize the way they use to. (179)

Within mass media, Elizabeth’s aesthetic value increases when she is able to perform a “white” identity fitting the dominant ideal beauty model for ethnic women. In other words, resemble the white woman through delicate facial features, slim body, and long straightened hair. Once her homosexuality is discovered, her monetary value within the entertainment business decreases, thus reducing her value and success within the entertainment realm. However, within the novel, Elizabeth is able to overcome the one conflict in her personal narration. Through the reflection of her experience, she learns about herself (how to truly be happy) and the world (stereotypes and bigotry exists). These reflections reveal a change in her understanding of herself in a positive way, thus she remains successful within the novel. Although Elizabeth eventually leaves her career in television, she is able to fall back on her education and decides to become a writer and speak out against negative stereotyping of homosexuality: “I want to write of being a lesbian in Spanish, a language that has never embraced women like me. I want to take my scythe and carve through the jungle of ignorance” (295). While the change within Elizabeth is personal, the experience will resonate with a wider readership, Latino and non-Latino alike. Thus, Elizabeth assumes an authoritative voice, as does Lauren, over stereotypes and becomes empowered through educating others about homosexuality and as a result of her writing gains agency and power through another means besides her beauty. Thus, her revelation as a homosexual is not seen as a failure, but rather a success for her character. Elizabeth’s position within her group of friends doesn’t change either nor is she made to transform in any way. In this way, *Dirty Girls Social Club* reinvents
beauty and power to include homosexuality and simultaneously shows a different path to power through education and having a voice.

The last stereotype of a gender representation that is deconstructed is that of the perfect housewife shown through Sara’s character. Sara has naturally blonde hair and white skin, resembles Martha Stewart in style and social background (26), and is the perfect weight for her height (80). Sara represents not only the archetype of ideal physical attractiveness that follows an Anglo or Northern European ideal, but she also belongs to a high socio-economic class which provides her automatic coveted status within the novel. However, Sara suffers physical abuse by her husband; therefore her beauty (ideal skin and hair color, body size) does not bring her power or success as seen in the majority of Latina and Latin American female representations within mass media. Instead, through Sara, Dirty Girls Social Club deconstructs the notion of beauty represented through the body and physical characteristics as a means to power. Indeed, it is not until Sara takes advantage of her education and begins to profit from it, does she become successful within the novel. Again the Dirty Girls Social Club shows a different path to power – through education and independence – than just physicality for Latina and Latin American women.

From the first portrayal of Sara by Lauren, her body is the main focus of her characterization: “Her driving, all that skidding and screeching, is also in keeping with the way Sara moves her body through space. Sara, for all her charm and beauty, is clumsy. I have never known one woman to land so many times in the emergency room” (24). Placing the focus on Sara’s body allows the novel to critique the common association of a woman’s identity with her body. For most media propagated images and
representations, the successful body – and thus identity – is the one that fits the dominant paradigm of ideal beauty and perfection. However, it is not Sara’s physical description (body shape and size, hair and skin color) that is the main focus, but rather what her body physically experiences. By intermixing a portrayal of flawlessness with concealed injuries, the novel starts to show the reality within an unrealistic ideal that many women try to fit:

She’s perfectly put together tonight, of course, coordinated down to the blush on her rosy cheeks, but probably thinks she looks very casual. Dabs of concealer mask a couple of gashes under one eye, handiwork, she says when Rebecca asks, of her kids’ latest adventure with their new junior golf club set. She looks like the perfect, calculatedly casual, colossally klutzy Liz-Claiborne – issue suburban mom. (25)

Sara’s perfection is tainted by the gashes she must conceal. The concealer acts as a mask symbolic of techniques such as those used in photo-shoots, magazine layouts, make-overs, in addition to cosmetic and medical procedures all meant to transform the body to excellence, sending the message that the female body is malleable and thus subject to criticism. While the majority of messages directed towards Latina and Latin American women within mass media and popular culture endorse a homogenous femininity, style, and physicality – even if extreme measures are needed to achieve this perfection – Dirty Girls Social Club deconstructs that notion of a paragon through Sara’s character by showing that her power comes not from her ability to fit an ideal beauty or socio-economic status – which is tied to her husband, – but rather when she utilizes her education and becomes self-reliant providing an alternative route to power.
The linking of Sara’s description to figures such as Martha Stewart and Liz Claiborne, both self-made successful women, not only foreshadows her successful future but also associates her with media propagated imagery. A combination of Sara’s character, Martha Stewart elevated the housewife and domesticity, and Liz Claiborne became the first woman to become chair and CEO of a Fortune 500 company. These women are admired and have attributed to an ideal image of femininity, beauty, style, and successful womanhood to which many women aspire. If Sara’s life were portrayed on the glossy pages of a popular women’s magazine, she would represent that one glamorous woman depicted in the imagery and advertisements who seems to live a picture-perfect life meant to produce envy among the female readership. John Berger, interpreting glamour within advertisements, avows how “The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour” (131). He goes on to state how publicity is “about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour” (132). Sara’s life, like publicity, is a manufactured imitation of glamour and happiness. The suicias as spectators observe Sara’s life and interpret her position as ideal and aspire to be like her. As Lauren clarifies: “In spite of her lack of grace, it’s hard not to be envious of Sara. (…) [B]asically she has it all. Great guy, great house, great family, great twins, great car, great hair. No need to work for money” (26). “We suicias are happy for Sara, por su puesto, but we hate her at the same time because our lives are not nearly that neat and perfect” (27). While her group of friends look upon her life with envy, beneath the
surface, through Sara’s own narration her ideal life is revealed as false, hollow, and all too human, exposing the impracticable nature of perfection.

Sara’s narration revolves around the revelation of the physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband. The reader finds out that only Elizabeth, her best friend, knows of the abuse, and that Sara is pregnant with her third child but wants to surprise her husband with the news during their wedding anniversary a few weeks away. Recalling how within the novel, education and autonomy are seen as tools for empowerment by women, accordingly Sara’s manipulation by her husband highlights the importance of these tools as an alternative to fitting a standard of ideal physical attractiveness. Sara’s words reveal her present dependence upon, Roberto, her husband: “After eight years of being a housewife, the thought of being alone terrifies me. What would I do for money if I were alone with two – ay, chica, I mean three – kids to raise? I have no real job experience, and I’m accustomed to a certain kind of lifestyle that requires adequate funds, money of a quantity I could never earn on my own” (76-77). However, Sara does become successful on her own after her separation with Roberto. By the end of the novel she starts an interior design business – which all the sucias invest in – and develops and launches a Spanish-language TV show about interior design. In this manner, Dirty Girls Social Club interrogates perfect body and beauty stereotypes, contending that beauty does not bring power to Sara but economic stability does which she acquires through her education.

Through Roberto’s character, Dirty Girls Social Club also highlights a common social characteristic in most Latin American cultures: machismo. According to Olivia M. Espín, machismo, or the myth of male superiority, is still in existence in the Latin
American culture by those individuals who subscribe more strongly to traditional Latin values (156). Espín considers the unique combination of power and powerlessness that many Latin American, and by association Latina, women experience. She states that women are perceived as powerful, for example, as middle-aged and elderly and as spiritual and physical healers, while they also receive constant cultural messages that they should be submissive and subservient to males with the purpose of being seen as “good women” (155-56). According to Espín, the development of sexuality in Latin American women comes from the combination of this emphasis on self-renunciation and the importance given to sexual purity (156). Reflecting these cultural characteristics, Roberto, Sara’s husband as she describes him:

is like most men raised in Latin America – or Miami – which is to say he thinks women come in two flavors: pure and dirty. Pure women are sexless and you marry them and pump them full of babies and they are not supposed to like sex. Dirty girls love sex and you seek them out for pleasure. So a wife who is too sexual, too pretty in public, too demanding in bed – these are thought of as bad things to men like Roberto. (72)

The association made between Sara’s identity and her body instinctively includes her sexuality. Sara makes these comments after narrating a scene in which Roberto warns her about liking sex too much. In fact, the center of Roberto’s rage stems from his desire to control Sara’s body and sexuality. He consistently accuses Sara of having affairs with everyone including Elizabeth once he discovers she is homosexual. Through Sara the novel is able to interrogate such gendered expectations of the Latina and Latin American wife-role as not only submissive and subservient, but also the control exerted upon their
bodies and sexuality. By demonstrating, through Sara, that a separation from a husband can be positive and progressive for Latina and Latin American women, *Dirty Girls Social Club* establishes a self-sufficient and successful role model for them that breaks with dominant gendered representations affluent in popular culture and mass media.

Before her separation from Roberto, Sara seems to, for the most part, accept her family dynamics: “We’re a passionate family, and a little yelling, name-calling, and hitting never killed anyone. It goes with family. I just wish we lived somewhere else. Roberto’s rage is getting scary. We’re alone here. He’s got a good job” (74). “I fix my hair, wipe the mascara from underneath my eyes, and stand at the top of the stairs, smiling like the perfect wife” (194). No matter how perfect she feigns to be, it does not shield her from Roberto’s temper nor gives her power. In fact, Roberto does kill someone. He concludes giving Vilma, Sara’s long-time housemaid, a heart attack that kills her by beating her for coming to Sara’s aid during their last physical fight which also takes the life of her unborn child. This marks the climax in Sara’s narration and the beginning of her transformation. However, unlike the majority of “Chica Lit” novels or messages transmitted through advertisements and imagery in popular women’s magazines, this transformation is not physical. Like Elizabeth, Sara’s change is personal and also will resonate with an inclusive readership. Once she accepts the artificiality of her life and begins to rely on herself, her value, like Amber’s, increases in the novel. In this way, *Dirty Girls Social Club* emphasis on each female protagonists’ spending power, links their success, power, and agency with signs of wealth instead of a narrowly defined paradigm of physical attractiveness. Additionally, for Sara, it broadens the spectrum of acceptable lifestyles and gendered roles for Latina and Latin American women. Overall,
Dirty Girls Social Club, rejects the tendency to reduce Latino and Latin American heterogeneity to an olive race and a specific standard of ideal beauty that encases a definite body type, erasing the diversity within them, and instead it generates a group of Latina and Latin American females that are not only culturally dissimilar but that also scrutinizes dominant media and gendered portrayals.

In conclusion, both novels provide examples of how Latina and Latin American bodies and culture can be commodified and “consumed” by dominant North American society. Once the heroines had been sufficiently “Americanized” (read: assimilated into North American culture), they were packaged and displayed for a more inclusive audience. In terms of consumption, beauty and power, the novels similarly produced characters that perpetuated dominant ideals associated with specific lifestyles that promote an elite socio-economic status. While Sex and the South Beach Chicas maintains definite image of perfected bodies, Anglo or Northern European beauty traits and physicality, The Dirty Girls Social Club aimed to object to this bodily assumption. But, however significant the challenge to dominant depictions of Latinidad, it fails at resisting certain socio-cultural aesthetics regarding racial characteristics.

III. Music

Las reinas del barrio

Turning my focus now to music, I explore the lyrics and imagery of the song “Las reinas del barrio,” off the soundtrack to the popular Spanish-language soap opera and film Sin tetas no hay paraíso. Sin tetas no hay paraíso was first released in Colombia as a Spanish-language novel written by Gustavo Bolívar Moreno in 2005. Its more popular
television series version was first released in 2006 and spread quickly throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States, finally becoming a Spanish-language film in 2010. The popularity of the themes of sex, drug-trafficking, and the display of young attractive female bodies on-screen facilitated the widespread reception of this Spanish-language soap opera and film. The various versions of Sin tetas center on the coming-of-age story of Catalina Santana, born in an underprivileged neighborhood of Pereira, Colombia. Her mother, Doña Hilda, is a seamstress and her brother, Bayron, is a hired assassin for the Colombian mafia. Witnessing the neighborhood girls return from their excursions with drug-traffickers, Catalina begins to covet their abundance of goods and ability to consume. Destitute and desperate, Catalina believes that only through making herself more attractive to the drug lords by means of breast augmentation, will she escape her life of impoverishment. Willing to exchange sex for money, with the help of Yésica the neighborhood panderer, she seeks out the attention of a drug-trafficker. First Catalina is raped by bodyguards, then has sex with a plastic surgeon in exchange for the operation. Resorting to prostitution to survive in Bogotá, she finally secures marriage with an old and unappealing retired drug-trafficker that supports her spending habits and extravagant new lifestyle. Whereas I explore this novel more at length in chapter 2, I will briefly look here at the general message manifested through the imagery and lyrics that encourage the intentional reshaping, refashioning and aesthetic manipulation of the body as a method of projecting qualities of empowerment onto the self very similar to what is experienced in beauty and fashion magazines. Focusing on the connection among consumption, beauty, and power, I demonstrate how this particular theme-song reinforces equations of specific paradigms of physical attractiveness for Colombian women.
The popular song “Las reinas del barrio” from the Spanish-language soap opera is sung by a female artist. She begins by stating what she desires to have: jewelry, clothes, cars, and trips. The materialism of her very first statements puts into perspective the tone and theme of the song, and in essence the storyline:

Joyas, ropa, yo quiero tener
Dámelo, papi, te voy a querer
Viajes caros tú me vas a dar
Dámelo, papi, yo te voy a amar
Yo soy

The female character addresses a male counterpart promising an exchange for what she desires. The mention of “love” in this song does not express the typical attraction between two lovers, but rather a settlement of terms to a business deal. The female offers her affection and body to the male in exchange for commodities. The female simultaneously is consumed through her body and desires to consume as a result of her materialistic nature. Her body becomes profitable and by marketing and selling herself she gains signs of wealth which symbolize her success, power, and agency. Visually the lyrics come to life through the images on the YouTube music video. The music video is a slideshow of different alluring poses by the actresses of the Spanish-language soap opera version released in the United States by Telemundo. The girls are shown in provocative poses and are dressed, at first, in school-girl uniforms, then more provocative outfits, and finally revealing bathing suits. The outfit change symbolizes the girls’ progression from school girl to escort and prepago. Both the clothing and sensual poses suggest youthful perfection and innocence that is offered for pleasure. The images

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38 Colombian term used to describe a female who is paid by the Colombian mafia for sexual services. These women are identified by their extravagant dress, style, and the perfection of their bodies through cosmetic medical procedures.
reflect Catalina’s understanding of how the world works: women are admired and
rewarded for being physically attractive. Catalina discerns, very quickly, the source of
her friends’ triumph over their shared poverty: their willingness to utilize their ability to
attract men who will spend money on them and give them money:

Vamos con las chicas, hay que aprovechar
Todo lo que quieras te van a comprar
    Toda tu belleza te van a admirar
joyas, ropa fina te van a comprar
    Dales tu cariño, deja todo atrás
Es la nueva vida que puedes comprar
    Dales tu cariño, deja todo atrás
Es la nueva vida que puedes comprar

Taking advantage of their youthful beauty, the girls learn to profit from their bodies and
to find pleasure in participating in commodity consumption. The most repeated word in
this verse is “comprar,” indicating the main desire of the neighborhood girls. Every
statement equates some aspect of the body with the power to consume. The word
“aprovechar” denotes not only the importance of taking advantage of the youth and
perfection of their bodies, but also to take advantage of the wallets of the mafia men. The
message in “Toda tu belleza te van a admirar” links the physical attractiveness of their
bodies with the girls’ power to entice the male counterpart.

The imperative tone of “Dales tu cariño, deja todo atrás” proposes for the girls to
use their bodies to physically “love” the male counterpart, leave behind their old lives
(socio-economic status) and buy a new one: “Es la nueva vida que puedes comprar.”
Resembling the messages found in beauty and fashion magazines, the female body is
assessed and thus regarded as successful by its physicality and ability to fit a certain
paradigm of ideal beauty and attractiveness. Furthermore, there is no mention of any
merit given to education as a means to advance socially, or any other qualities that typically are valued in relationships such as being trustworthy, loyal, intelligent, and loving. Therefore, within the song, the participation in commodity consumption as a symbol of success is linked with the equation of accomplishment, power, and agency for these girls. The context that the participation in commodity consumption can only be met through the body emphasizes the female body as identity and female identity as body. Accordingly, the storyline of Catalina’s pursuit of what her body “lacks,” the display of youthful thin bodies with large breasts in the music video, and the lyrics all underscore certain equations of beauty and power for Colombian women.

The girls’ willing participation to mimic certain national aesthetic ideals (thin bodies, large breast, and long straight hair) highlights the body’s function as a tool for climbing the social ladder in a society with a deficient educational system and a lack of job opportunities for women. Contributing to the complex nature of docility and discipline, the neighborhood girls’ desire to transform their bodies to be more profitable, successful, and consumable reflects the dissemination of media discourses that present Latinas, Dominican, and Colombian women as homogenized docile bodies. By referring to the concept of the “docile body” I am borrowing from Foucault’s discussion of social bodies. I propose that, in this instance, the Colombian mafia acts as a force of governance over the prepagos serving the interest of social mobility, or maintaining social stability. In other words, the Colombian mafia contributes to the governance of Colombian women by creating – through plastic surgery and extravagant style – a disciplined and homogenized ideal beauty. Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish (1977) tells us that “These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the
operations of the body, upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called ‘disciplines,’ (137). Thus the mafia – and local media – through the commodification of hypersexualized constructions of femininity, become methods for disciplining the Colombian female body. Susan Bordo, discussing Foucault’s theory of modern power, reminds us that we should see power as

a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces. (...) [Recognizing] that these forces are not random or haphazard, but configure to assume particular historical forms, within which certain groups and ideologies do have dominance. (...) Where power works ‘from below,’ prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gendered among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion, but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms.

26-27

In this way, Catalina and the neighborhood girls, by conforming to the demands of the mafia’s – and media’s – specific beauty ideals gain power, selfhood and subjectivity which they lacked before. However, this power is acquired through the assumption that the body is malleable and thus susceptible to criticism and failure as we see in the last verse after the chorus:

Chorus:
Somos las reinas del barrio
Somos las chicas que damos amor
Joyas, dinero y regalos
Dámelo todo y tuya yo soy
Yo soy
Toda tu belleza te van a admirar
Y si no la tienes te van a operar
Dales tu cariño, deja todo atrás
Es la nueva vida que puedes comprar

Foucault tells us that “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). Following this theory, the girl’s bodies are simultaneously used – by the mafia and the girls themselves – for pleasure and for advancement. Their bodies are consumed: “Toda tu belleza te van a admirar,” transformed and improved: “Y si no la tienes te van a operar;” and finally used as a means to climb the socio-economic ladder: “Dales tu cariño, deja todo atrás. Es la nueva vida que puedes comprar.” Like the imagery present in beauty and fashion magazines, the girls in the music video, the various versions of the Spanish-language soap opera, and film all fit a Northern European or Anglo beauty ideal of white skin, straight long hair, thin bodies and petite nose and lips. The blending of sexual and economic desires is shown through the cosmetic surgeries that the girls undergo. Therefore attractiveness becomes a prerequisite for being a prepago and accordingly a Colombian actress, model, TV anchor. Thus, the message within this particular song and pictorial imagery underpin specific beliefs about beauty and race, reinforcing equations of beauty and power for Colombian women.

In conclusion, symbols of successful womanhood as seen in popular women’s magazines, novels, and particular music are repeatedly linked with women’s participation in commodity consumption. So, can wealth buy you beauty and/or can beauty make you wealthy? The increase in plastic surgery – world wide – demonstrates the inscription of a culturally specific ideal on the body tying body fetishism to commodity fetishism. Particular examples of physical appearance within dominant portrayals of Latinas, Dominican, and Colombian women link the body with specific physicality, race, and sign of wealth shown through conspicuous consumption. The cult of femininity is projected
as the valuation of Anglo or Northern European beauty ideals that exclude ethnic characteristics by exoticizing and eroticizing racial difference. This promotes the idea that body type and race can be acquired through the purchase of specific products that transforms cultural markers such as skin, hair, and eye color and body shape and size, and even socio-economic status, thus linking the body with consumption. While Dirty Girls Social Club goes against the homogenization of Latinas and Latin American women in particular media and intentionally works to broaden the spectrum of acceptable body types and lifestyles for women, the overall pictorial and fictional depictions of Latina and Latin American women within the specific cultural productions analyzed within this chapter underline these representations of beauty and power.
CHAPTER 4

Cuerpo perfecto desde todos los ángulos: Cosmetic Surgery and the Age Factor

This chapter studies the value placed upon the age and physicality of Latina and Latin American women, in relation to the assumed malleability of their bodies through invasive and non-invasive cosmetic procedures. The perfectibility of women’s bodies is an idea reinforced through many cultural productions such as popular women’s magazines, films, music videos and novels. As has been shown in previous chapters, the role of physical appearance is presented through numerous outlets, but primarily through media representations, as a core aspect of femininity. The ubiquitous images of young Latina and Latin American women with long thin legs, taut thighs, shapely hips and buttocks, and ample breasts, coupled with long (mostly straight) hair and Northern European facial features, narrowly limit the paradigm of physical attractiveness to a standard that is almost impossible to fulfill for many women. Naomi Wolf’s analytical framework, as outlined in the Beauty Myth (1991), is helpful when analyzing how images of beauty are used against women. Wolf tells us that, in the 1970s, beauty pornography crossed over into the female arena, in the wake of women’s newfound positions of power and freedom. Accordingly “The ‘ideal’ female body was stripped down and on display all over. That gave a woman (…) the graphic details of perfection against which to measure herself, and introduced a new female experience, the anxious and minute scrutiny of the body as intricately connected to female sexual pleasure. Soon, ‘perfection’ was represented as a woman’s ‘sexual armor’” (Wolf 134). Such showcasing of beauty promotes a cultural imperialism and a glamorization of flawless attractiveness. In this way, society is able to control the female body through
commodification of its worth, based on set values of beauty. As Wolf summarizes, beauty converts to a currency by “assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard” (12).

In the depiction of Latina and Latin American women in popular media, in addition to physical perfection, age is an important facet in the assessment of not only her beauty, but also her potential success. The female role is consistently played by young beautiful Latina and Latin American actresses, characters or models and frequently the scenario will center on their capacity to attract the male gaze or object of their affection. Accordingly, the majority of these female representations on screen, in the plot of a novel or in the fashion shoot of a magazine also fit into this idea and feed the fantasy of its significance for most consumers. Thus, an unrealistic image is produced that the female Latina or Latin American spectator/reader may internalize as the ideal and normative reflection of her gender. Evaluating slenderness, self-management, and normalization of the female body, Susan Bordo affirms that

[t]he attainment of an acceptable body is extremely difficult for those who do not come by it ‘naturally’ (...) and as the ideal becomes firmer and tauter it begins to exclude more and more people. (...) Between the media images of self-containment and self-mastery and the reality of constant, everyday stress and anxiety about one’s appearance lies the chasm that produces bodies habituated to self-monitoring and self-normalizing. (202-203)

While Bordo’s analysis is true for all women, her critical lens is useful here as this study concentrates specifically on the anxiety incited by the ubiquitous images and representations that potentially lead many Latina and Caribbean women who are not born
with said ideal features to seek out skin – and body – enhancing products and cosmetic treatments and surgeries. Thus, the body becomes a powerful aesthetic and erotic symbol in the on-going search for identity. Essentially, sexuality, coupled with the body and age, is constructed as a weapon of power for women and is purposed to induce anxiety in those who fall outside the margins set by mass media. For Latina and Caribbean women, this ideal revolves around not only an ideal sexuality and exoticism, but also an ideal race – skin, eyes, and hair color, along with texture, –become important factors that many Latina, Dominican, and Colombian women do not naturally possess, which conceivably may amplify feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. An important point of reference in the present discussion will be the most frequently repeated messages, imagery, and representations of Latina and Latin American women, in addition to how characters in a novel or on screen manage the anxiety set forth by the beauty ideals and whether they conform to them or challenge them. Focusing on how the cult of femininity is celebrated within particular paradigms of certain physical attractiveness that couple the female body with signs of youth and perfection, this analysis explores how the assumption that the body is malleable creates anxiety. Furthermore, how particular fictional characters and imagery will either promote the use of beautifying treatments and cosmetic surgery – with the purpose of perfecting their bodies and age – in order to meet specific equations of beauty and power, or, conversely, to undermine those paradigms.

From the early 20th century through the present, as mass media has grown increasingly pervasive, the quantity of images and articles dedicated to female physicality has drastically increased, both in the US and Latin America. Feminine magazines remain a major source of anxiety-inducing imagery that cuts across race and socio-economic
class, and that capitalizes on what is seen as attractive in ways that are racially and ethnically marked. Across all racial categories in popular women’s magazines, the abundant presence of mini-skirts and shorts, midriff-baring shirts, etc. exemplifies modernity’s focus on youth and the display of the body. Even so, the glossy images of featured celebrities and models in magazines and on screen reflect an Anglo-centric model, even in racially mixed societies.

As the mingling of sexual and economic desires became increasingly linked, the prerequisite of attractiveness has now become synonymous with the elite of supermodels, pop-divas, and movie and television stars. The local culture of the masses and mass-produced cultural commodities (such as hair straighteners and skin lighteners, or clothing styles) reveals conflicting connotations between global popular culture and the ethnically mixed Latin American (brown) female beauty and sensuality. The boundaries become increasingly permeable between plastic surgery and flourishing entertaining industries. Silicone, rhinoplasty, and lipo-sculpturing, among other surgical interventions, represent not only artificiality but also the fantasy of using the body as a vehicle of social ascension. Plastic surgeries and body enhancements that were once considered only affordable for the privileged have become progressively more accessible as body fetishism is linked to commodity fetishism.

Therefore, this chapter briefly looks at popular women’s magazines as a foundation of the limiting influence produced through the advertisements and imagery. I reiterate from chapter 3 the general message exemplified through the imagery and advertisements in beauty and fashion magazines that encourages the intentional reshaping, refashioning and aesthetic manipulation of the body as a method of projecting
qualities on the self. I shall then shift my focus to narrative fiction to explore how the anxiety of these assumptions are played out by the characters of the Colombian novel *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2005) and the Dominican novel *Ellas saben de amor* (2010). To finish I analyze the Colombian telenovela *Las muñecas de la mafia* (2009). Within these cultural productions, I consider how the heroines experience the anxiety to embody the national aesthetic ideal reflected in magazines and mass media, and whether their compliance or resistance to the set standards results in their success or failure. My thesis is that fictional, cinematic, and musical depictions of Latinas, Colombian, and Dominican women will either reinforce these equations of beauty and power, or will openly undermine the paradigm.

I. Fashion and Beauty Magazines

The cultural importance placed upon national beauty pageants and lower costs for cosmetic surgery accounts for Colombia and the Dominican Republic being more influenced by the concept of the plasticity of women’s bodies. Popular women’s magazines aimed at Latina and Caribbean female audiences are unfailingly saturated with a particular body type, race, and lifestyle image. Apart from a few rare exceptions, the most prominent messages are linked to specific beliefs about beauty and race. These beliefs hold that Latinas and Latin American women should fall into precise paradigms of physical attractiveness. The pervasive representation of light skin, light-colored eyes, (mostly) straight hair and thinness paired with a full bosom, shapely derriere and youth, promote the normalization of medical interventions in addition to nonmedical beauty work in order to fit into these defined sexual norms. Such treatments and more extreme measures are seen as magical rejuvenations and transcendence that are certainly lucrative
for the fashion and surgical industries. For instance, many celebrities demonstrate to the public the wealth and power that can be gained through cosmetically sculpted forms, inciting debates about the commercialization of sex and medicine. Alexander Edmonds avows in his book about beauty, sex, and plastic surgery in Brazil that “it is precisely the gap between aesthetic and other scales of social position that makes attractiveness such an essential form of value and all-too-often imaginary vehicle of ascent for those blocked from more formal routes of social mobility” (2010). In many ways, their minority status limits the position of Latina and Latin American women within the dominant North American society. However, the promotion and presentation of a comprehensive and generalizable depiction of Latinas and Latin American women within mass media in the U.S. and abroad establishes an intricate system of typifications that directly links her success and power to her sexual appeal, which is predominantly determined by her physicality and juvenescence. When we analyze the segment of popular women’s magazines aimed at cosmetic surgeries and body-shaping, it becomes apparent that, within advertisements, the paradigm of ideal beauty revolves around a specific set of physical and youthful characteristics that can be purchased and/or created.

Vanidades (2012 No. 8 año 52 Estados Unidos)

Vanidades (Agosto, 2012) offers visual stimulation centered on women in the form of advertisements and articles about fashion, beauty, celebrities and models. This particular magazine is produced and published both in Latin America and the United States. I chose the August 2012 issue published in the United States in order to juxtapose the quantity and magnitude of advertisements that send messages about the Latina and Latin American body within fashion magazines published in the U.S. with one
exclusively published in the Dominican Republic. The August 2012 issue is a typical representation of what the Latina and Latin American female reader experiences as popular women’s magazines aimed toward her in the United States. The focus on fashion, beauty, models, and celebrities explicates a cultural imperialism used to project the idea of flawed beauty – beauty that falls outside the paradigm set by the models and actresses – justifying the belief of needed “improvements” of the female body that can be acquired through the purchase of products or undergoing nonmedical beauty treatments. As noted earlier in this study, Vanidades is aimed at Latinas and Latin American women belonging to the middle to upper socio-economic status, modern and familiar with North American culture. While my focus in this chapter is not consumption or the hypersexualization of the Latina body (see chapters 2 and 3), it’s important to point out that the perfect and sensual bodies of the models and celebrities highlighted in gossip and fashion articles, together with the advertisements for beauty products, evoke the notion of a national preference and encourage the consumption of products and procedures that help women fit this ideal. Half-way through the 150-page magazine we find the first advertisement focused directly on improving the body – for rapid weight loss. Thus, the first seventy-five pages of female representations and imagery set the frame of reference by which the reader can measure herself. Although aimed at Latina and Latin American female audiences, the North American ideal set by U.S. mass media – extremely thin and with lighter skin, (light) straight hair, and northern European facial features – is very evident throughout the magazine. Vanidades emphasizes white femininity and features primarily North American celebrities. In this typical issue of the magazine, all of the

39 See following analysis
Latina and Latin American female actresses, singers, and entertainers featured (J.Lo, Sofia Vergara, Karla Martínez, Eva Mendes, Lucero) have successfully succeeded within U.S popular culture. In other words, these Latin American and Latina artists or celebrities are able to emulate a safe but exotic and sexualized racialized femininity because of their racial and ethnic ambiguity where “Mainstream media constructions of Latinidad in the United States depend on this unstable ethnic and racial space – not white and not black but ambiguously and unsettlingly brown” (Molina-Guzmán 7). The assumption – even demonstration – of the malleability of the female body is used to create anxiety to fit within certain physical paradigms of beauty and the desire to purchase the products that will enable them to do so.

While direct advertisements for cosmetic surgery and clinics are not present in this issue of *Vanidades*, what is clear and present is the underlying message that the body is malleable and must be transformed to fit very specific paradigms of physical attractiveness through less invasive cosmetic treatments and products meant to mold the body to the appropriate form and size. As a result, sculpting the body through these types of nonmedical beauty work normalizes the types of aesthetic manipulation that the celebrities do undergo, building a foundation for more intensive medical interventions as well. Four out of five of the advertisements for body improvement have to do with weight loss. The first advertisement for *Almased* (pages 76-77), assures that “a diferencia de otros suplementos que simplemente suprimen el apetito, esta fórmula patentada aumenta el metabolismo del cuerpo, mantiene la masa muscular y ayuda el cuerpo a quemar grasa con mayor eficacia” (76) (see fig. 4.1). The advertisement sets *Almased* apart from its competitors by promising an efficient formula that “ayuda a
perder.” What is lost, of course, is the inability to meet the bodily requirements that are reproduced time and again throughout the magazine. The model holds a glass of the *Almased* mixture. She is thin with light skin and light brown hair, looking into the camera and smiling as if she is pleased with the results highlighted by the words “…simplemente porque funciona” (77). A “Plan de Emergencia Bikini a un Vistazo” is featured on the same page as the model, suggesting that to wear a bikini means to lose a certain amount of weight. The well-known anxiety that women feel when picking out a bathing suit is linked with their insecurity of not being at the “proper” weight.

![Figure 4.1. Almased Advertisement. Source: Vanidades](image)

The following weight loss advertisement a few pages later announces that a “Plan de adelgazamiento europeo efectivo en miles de personas, llega a usted” (83). The explicit connection to Europe, alongside the fair-skinned and light-haired model, creates an allure to a valorization of the white/modern/First World at the expense of the often
browner Latina and Latin American societies. The absurdity of this advertisement is the supposed discovery of “11 frutas que en una combinación determinada ayudan a movilizar las grasas almacenadas en el organismo y pueden ayudar a perder peso” (83) which are such fruits such as pineapple, papaya, grapes, coconut, and oranges. While the advertisement doesn’t give many details as to what the “plan de adelgazamiento de 11 frutas” entails, the reader is urged to call the number and order a specific product or instruction that will enable her to succeed in the consumption of this magic combination of fruit. The suggestion of 8-12 lbs. of weight loss per week perpetuates the urgency felt by many women to fit the slender ideal, and thus to buy the idea that the female body is malleable; that its shape can be re-created with little effort: “No es ninguna dieta. La mayoría de voluntarios siguieron comiendo normalmente, basta conseguir el plan de adelgazamiento de 11 frutas, que a diferencia de la mayoría de dietas que quizás haya probado anteriormente, con nuestro sistema de alimentación usted puede comer hasta 5 veces al día” (83).

The next two advertisements advance the notion of women’s desperation to lose weight to the next level. The first product is called Slim Flash, a weight loss paraffin that “se ha convertido en uno de los métodos más usados por actrices, modelos y celebridades” (103). Here there is a direct link to Hollywood’s protocol of perfected bodies and an enticing insinuation that using this product will result in physiques possessed by the stars. The advertisement’s model is already thin and wears a blue and white bikini; she is applying the paraffin to her abdomen (see fig. 4.2). The model is also light-skinned and although she has light brown hair, it is straight and is an example of pelo bueno or “good hair.” For a magazine aimed at a Latino/a and Latin American
heterogeneous population, the omission of ethnic diversity among the models and celebrities serves to demonstrate a clear favoring of physical features that center on Anglo and Northern European heritage. *Slim Flash* promises spectacular results from every application not only in reducing localized fat, but also the appearance of cellulite, flaccidity, and dimpled skin.

The use of “Flash” in the name triggers the idea of “instant gratification,” apparently with no more effort than applying the paraffin. The ad states: “la Parafina sigue siendo el método más usado en los mejores Spa de Europa para moldear el cuerpo y obtener una figura esbelta” (103). As physical appearance is one of the core aspects of femininity, the connection to celebrities and the mention of the ability to “mold” a slim figure associates this type of behavior/look with celebrities and socio-economic success. Thus, shaping
the body through these types of intensive nonmedical beauty work normalizes the types of aesthetic manipulation that the celebrities undergo, laying the groundwork for more intensive medical interventions as well.

The last advertisement for weight loss in this issue is for a weight-loss ring and earring based on acupressure: “una técnica usada desde la antigüedad para perder peso” (119). The model in this advertisement also has light skin and hair, and has a slender face. In a close-up of her hand and her face from the neck up, she is modeling both the earring and the ring. This unlikely promise, in combination with the other advertisements, shows not only the lengths to which women are willing to go to resemble the celebrities and models that are featured on adjoining pages, but also the lure of alternatives to more costly cosmetic surgeries. Another example of this is found in the advertisement for *Bosom Max*, a “treatment” that enlarges your bosom for only $99 – instead of the thousands it costs to have breast implants (see fig. 4.3). The advertisement guarantees “Resultados comprobados por estudios clínicos. Sin dolor y en la privacidad de tu hogar” (139). There is a close-up of a woman’s full bosom in a strapless red brassiere. The red color pulls the viewer’s eye to her chest, while the size of her bosom serves as supposed evidence of the results of the treatment.
The photograph’s body cropping serves as evidence of the objectification of women and fragmentation of their bodies, and gives the spectator/reader a pattern to follow as she considers her own body, evoking feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. Once more, the model is light-skinned and thin. The strategic placement of these advertisements, from the mid-point on of the magazine, conditions the Latina or Latin American female reader to compare herself to the glossy pages featuring perfected bodies, and to be persuaded to transform their bodies accordingly to mimic the image they see. While this might happen to any woman reading beauty and fashion women’s magazines, what’s significant here is that for Latina and Latin American women – living in the United States – it comes with racial and physical implications that not only homogenizes them to one category, but, applies skin, hair, and body restrictions upon them. As a result, this can produce anxiety and fuel bodily alienation by those women who do not correspond to the projected physical and racial archetype.
The 2011 issue of *A la Moda* was chosen because it is representative of a typical popular women’s beauty and fashion magazine produced and published solely in the Dominican Republic. The purpose of including magazines published both in the United States and the Dominican Republic allows for a comparison of not only national and mass media produced aesthetic ideals, but also the various degrees of coercion to undergo cosmetic procedures and treatments in regards to racial and social imperatives. When looking at these same segments in a magazine produced in Caribbean Latin America, the racial implications are even more significant. The association of race and physical attractiveness in the Caribbean countries is intensified by a pervasive racial prejudice that devalues the African influence in Latin American societies. For example, specifically in the Dominican Republic, as we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, the negation of any relation to an African racial identification is fueled by the pervasive anti-Haitian and anti-negro/a attitude plus the popular notion of a European and false indigenous ancestry. David Howard, in his critique of race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic, explains that a significant portion of the Dominican populace could be described as *mulato/a*, but a variety of racial identities exists within this broad color ascription. Consequently, African Dominicans do not see blackness as central to their racial experience. Other racial terms are utilized instead to describe racial identity such as *trigueño/a, rosadito/a, desteñido*, with *indio/a* being by far the most common and adaptable. Instead, accommodating descriptions of color and phenotype allow familial and social variations of race to be integrated within a society where the light racial aesthetic is paramount (182-83). While all societies socially construct beauty and create space for the exhibition
or expectation of beauty in society, within the dominant relations of patriarchy, sexual objectification tends to be focused on the female body. As we have seen in previous chapters, this construction of sexuality is a key social construct in the production and maintenance of patriarchal relations. And, as we have also discussed in this study, conceptions of race are often intertwined with sexuality and beauty. According to Howard, within the Dominican Republic “Aesthetic values tend to discriminate against negro/a features, which are deemed ordinary or ugly. Aesthetics are defined variously in terms of perception by the senses, the appreciation of beauty or in accordance with the principles of good taste. The lighter the skin color, the straighter the hair or the narrower the facial features, the greater the tendency to define beauty within these terms” (88). The white bias commonly used in Dominican media promotes medical and nonmedical beauty procedures that “erase” racial features, thus supporting the notion of the malleable body that can thus elide racial features deemed as undesirable.

Erynn Masi de Casanova, in analyzing women’s magazines in Ecuador, states that “Whiteness is associated with ideals of class, cosmopolitanism, consumption, and modernity in the visual language of these publications, as in popular culture and discourse. The prevailing standard of beauty is thin, white, and fashionable; this ideal is strengthened or exaggerated by the confluence of foreign racism and popular notions of beauty as inseparable from whiteness” (95). The magazine A la Moda produced in the Dominican Republic exemplifies to the increased pressure that is projected upon Dominican women to correspond to certain paradigms of racial and physical attractiveness. The five body-enhancing advertisements that we examined in Vanidades that focused mainly on weight are practically tripled in A la Moda; the advertisements start after the first third of the
magazine, and mainly focus on more invasive and expensive aesthetic practices and procedures, thus highlighting the target audience as the middle to upper socio-economic class. There are fourteen advertisements for hair and body changing products, salon/spas and nonmedical procedures. Almost half are for beauty salons and spas that practice more costly nonmedical procedures and some surgeries such as facials, Botox, permanent make-up, mesotherapy, augmentation and lifting of the gluteus, and ultrasonic liposuction. The other advertisements are for face and body creams, hair straighteners, and body shapers. Even more significant than in the advertisements in Vanidades is the plethora of white models in A la Moda, a magazine produced for an Afro-Latina racially mixed society. Not one model of discernable African descent appears in the beauty salon/spa or beauty clinic advertisements. Of the three advertisements that do include models of African descent, two are for hair-straightening products/treatments that erase the hair features associated with “pelo malo,” and the third is for a body-shaper.

Out of the six advertisements for beauty salons and aesthetic clinics, all models are of Anglo or Northern European descent (blonde and light-brown hair and white skin), with only two of the advertisements featuring a brunette. The camera captures the models in a variety of poses: close-up of the face, or from mid-thigh up wearing bikinis, or wrapped in towels exposing the full back. The objectification of the female body, and in a sense the rejection of the aging process (i.e., wrinkles, sagging skin, weight, flaccidity), is evident in every advertisement. Visually, within these idealized ads, the female aging experience is absent. In other words, while the models represent the “end results” of the different aesthetic procedures, they also posit the image of perfection that is designed to trigger anxiety in those women who do not possess the timeless bodies,
skin, and appearance. The principal image—the model—is a non-verbal one, a photograph we see prior to or while reading the verbal messages. The representation of glamorous women used to represent physical perfection counts on the reader’s/spectator’s personal sense of inferiority, especially about their physical appearance. As John Berger has noted in *Ways of Seeing*, the reader/spectator envies not only the glamorous model in an advertisement, but also herself as she will be in the future after undergoing the treatment advertised. For Berger, this relationship of envy “explains the absent, unfocused look of so many glamour images. They look out over the looks of envy which sustain them” (133). Berger’s theory is easily applied to the advertisements studied here, as none of the models look directly at the reader/spectator; instead, they project a sense of superiority and elicit feelings of envy and insecurity, predisposing the reader/spectator to be receptive to the beauty procedures advertised. The replication of these same bodies/models over and over throughout the magazine strengthens cultural stereotypes of the ideal bodies, leading the reader/spectator to desire the displayed youth, perfection, even light skin and straight hair. For the Dominican woman reader/spectator, not only does the repetition of youth and perfection exist, but this youth and perfection comes in the form of racial and physical demands that many do not possess.

A desire for surgical procedures to recreate these ideals is the logical consequence of these images. Youth and perfection in these advertisements are portrayed as thin, sensual, wrinkle-free, and firm. Text such as “Se acerca el verano, luce tu mejor figura,” “anti-envejecimiento para una mejor calidad de vida,” and “Disfruta este verano de una imagen resplandeciente” (39, 101, 103) supports the message that the route to happiness can only be achieved through the body-self in the form of appearance (see figs. 4.4 and
4.5). The imperative tone of the text stands to manipulate the will of the reader to believe that their “best figure,” “better quality of life,” and “most resplendent appearance” depends on the “improvement” of their natural bodies and the elimination of the aging process.

Figure 4.4. *Forma Vital* Advertisement. Source: *A la Moda*

Highlighting the suggestion of flawed beauty that the reader/spectator “suffers” creates a compositional unity between the image of the model and the thoughts about beauty and power promoted through the view of one’s satisfaction with their appearance not as an inherent trait, but rather as a changeable index of psychic health. In a 2010 study of plastic surgery in Brazil, Alexander Edmonds analyzes how surgeons in Brazil have successfully promoted a vision of cosmetic surgery as a psychotherapeutic intervention. He shows how aesthetics were gradually accepted as having a social purpose in Brazil as
doctors argue that because of the evident psychotherapeutic benefits, cosmetic surgery should be offered within a public health system as a necessity.

The Brazilian surgeons’ strongest argument drew on the World Health Organization’s declaration that health is a state of physical, social, and mental well-being, not simply the absence of illness. In other words, one can reach health through happiness. The doctors were able to show that cosmetic surgery has psychological effects for the poor as well as the rich and succeeded in the recognition of it as a necessary procedure, with the majority of hospitals now performing aesthetic practices today (Edmonds 2010). Consideration of how plastic surgery and the beauty rituals have infiltrated the health care system in Brazil gives us a reference when considering the verbal and visual message being transmitted through the nonsurgical but still therapeutic beauty advertisements analyzed above. The similarities are significant: advertisements are for Centers of Well-being and Cosmetic or
Aesthetic “Medicine,” the “procedures” are categorized under “treatments” such as Anti-age Vaccine, Mesotherapy, and Ultrasonic Hidrolipoclasia (otherwise known as liposuction without surgery), and some are even performed by “doctors.” In a sense, then, the body becomes “infected” by imperfections and lack of certain physical attractiveness that, according to the Beauty Cult, needs to be “cured,” and consumerism becomes therapy rather than acquisition. Also treated are cellulite, flaccidity, dry skin, sagging flesh, and soft gluteus. Clients can receive Botox treatments in many of these centers, as well as face implants, permanent make-up, and depilation of anything from your eyebrows to bikini area to full legs. By such measures, not one living, breathing, woman escapes the narrow restrictions for beauty. Thus, as femininity is bound to beauty – defined as youthful and perfect and seen as a powerful agent in social, physical, and emotional fulfillment – then such advertisements produce a compelling argument for the malleability of the body, and are designed to induce anxiety in those women who fall short of the ideal physicality they present.

In summary, both magazines (and many others) define femininity as beauty. Within U.S. mass media, the female Latina and Latin American body is automatically racialized and gendered into a discourse of Latinidad as “Other” through such signifiers as exotic and foreign (curvaceous, dark eyes and hair). Isabel Molina-Guzmán in *Dangerous Curves* (2010) studies representations of the Latina body in the media. She affirms how “Through dialect coaches, exercise, and dieting, among other bodily practices, Latina actors are expected to display a familiar hyperfemininity and exotic sexuality that always exists in relation to normative white heterosexuality” (13). Latinas and Latin American women in the U.S. then, face the contradiction between these
competing cultural imperatives that render them exotic while at the same time gendered media practices that not only homogenize them but also assimilate them racially and physically to imitate North American white standards of beauty (light skin, hair, tight thin body), thus establishing poles of opposition between which they have to vacillate. For women living in the Dominican Republic, a racially mixed society where the majority could be described as *mulato/a*, the racial implications of the advertisements are heightened. Not only do the majority of women not fit these ideals biologically, but there exists a stronger influence to conform to this ideal, and in so doing an implied greater access to socio-economic power. Masi de Casanova, analyzing a postcolonial nation with an ethnically plural population, states that “[t]he legacy of colonial racism combines with foreign ideals (…) leading to the valuation of whiteness as attractive and the devaluation of nonwhiteness as unattractive” (292). She continues to avow how “[s]uch favoritism affects women’s life chances. In Ecuador, educated and qualified women are routinely discriminated against if they lack a ‘pleasant face’ or ‘presence’ (292). Thus, the celebration of certain physical attractiveness within the U.S. and the Dominican Republic most certainly generates anxiety amongst those women who do not fit the paradigms set by mass media and a national preference, creating pressure to accept the assumption that the body is malleable and, as a result, persuading them to seek “corrections” through medical and nonmedical cosmetic procedures and treatments, thus reinforcing certain narrow paradigms of physical attractiveness for Latina and Latin American women.

II. Narrative Fiction

Turing my focus now to narration, I explore how the main characters within particular novels navigate the impact of anxiety produced by the assumptions about
beauty created by the magazines and other cultural productions. As shown in the
previous section, beauty and fashion magazines produce a very selective paradigm of
physical attractiveness that centers on youth and the perfection of women’s bodies. For
Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women, in addition to the Anglo-centric
requirements, an emphasis is given to voluptuous bodies, highlighting full bosoms and
derrieres, thus perpetuating competing cultural beauty imperatives: to be white (pure and
nonsexual) and be seen as sexual objects (erotic and consumable). These prerequisites
come with racial and cultural implications that homogenize all Latina and Latin
American women into a beauty ideal that ignores the many different racial and physical
factors that make up the Latina and Latin American female body. As discussed in
chapters 2 and 3, borrowing from Foucault’s discussion of the social body, Isabel
Molina-Guzmán attests that through mainstream media’s commodification of gendered
constructions of Latinidad – the homogenization of all Latinos – Latina bodies are
disciplined. Molina-Guzmán states: “The global media consumption of Latinas (…)
depends on the representation of Latinas from diverse national backgrounds as similar
and familiar docile bodies” (11). If Latinas and Latin American women are seen as
docile bodies, then who or what holds power over them?

Also recalling from this study’s previous chapters, Susan Bordo, also following
Foucault, advises us to abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group
and leveled against another, and instead to think of the network of practices, institutions,
and technologies that maintain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular
domain (167). These institutions, networks of practices, and technologies, for our
purposes, are the mainstream media, fashion and beauty companies and marketers,
medical and nonmedical normalized practices. They become a method for disciplining
the ethnic, racial, and gendered body, rendering women helpless against the anxiety-
producing imagery and the ideology that women who do not fit into particular paradigms
of physical attractiveness are “lacking,” are in need of “improvement,” and are even
“sick.” As Bordo asserts: “Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing,
elusive ideal of femininity – a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women
constantly attend to minute and often whimsical change in fashion – female bodies
become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external
regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (166). The concept of the
docility of the Latina and Latin American female body extends through not only media
practices and consumption of their image, but also the effect it likely has on women’s
subconscious, leaving the impression of a “true” ideal of their gender, race, and
femininity, thus exerting power over them. Focusing on signs of youth and perfection, I
analyze how female Latin American fictional characters within the Colombian novel Sin
tetas no hay paraíso (2005) and the Dominican novel Ellas saben de amor (2010)
navigate the social pressure to undergo cosmetic surgery; this discussion will assess their
susceptibility to assume that the female body is malleable, and will explore the ways in
which they either conform to these ideals or resist them.

Sin tetas no hay paraíso (2005)

The drug culture in Colombia has gained increased popularity within the past few
decades, necessitating a national and transnational discourse about its socio-cultural
implications. Omar Rincón, in his article “Narco.estética y narco.cultura en
Narco.lombia” (2009) documents how an aesthetic is formed, and manifested in many
different cultural products, as the result of a country marked indelibly by the drug trafficking and mafia presence. Rincón starts out by telling us how drugs are not just a trade or business, but also an aesthetic which permeates and overlaps with Colombia’s culture and history. Rincón states that

“La verdad, somos un territorio marca narco no por la coca sino por cómo nos comportamos y lo habitamos, desde el presidente hasta quien escribe este texto. Lo narco es una estética, pero una forma de pensar, pero una ética del triunfo rápido, pero un gusto excesivo, pero una cultura de ostentación. Una cultura del todo vale para salir de pobre, una afirmación pública de que para qué se es rico si no es para lucirlo y exhibirlo. (148)

Within mass media and popular culture, this mafia/drug aesthetic can be seen through fashion, conspicuous consumption, cars, architecture, music, literature, and most notably television. A new formulaic genre identified as the *sicaresca* – themed around drug trafficking where the main protagonist is the hired assassin – emerged. Although more recognized for its successful adaption to television throughout Colombia, Europe, and the United States, Gustavo Bolivar Moreno’s novel *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2005) not only broke the pattern of the male main protagonist (shifting the focus from the hired assassin to the female lovers or *prepagos* – prostitutes – of the mafia bosses), but also achieved success nationally and abroad. Bolívar Moreno, the Colombian author, screenwriter and journalist, achieved international fame with *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* – based on a true story – which has sold approximately 500,000 copies in 30 countries. Apart from novels, he has written and directed news reports, dramatized documentaries, television series, cinematographic scripts, and documents, including directing and screen writing the movie
Sin tetas no hay paraíso in 2010. The impact that this fiction has had in written form and on-screen renders it a fundamental source for evaluating the female body within popular culture. Concentrating on the psychological effect of the events throughout the novel that motivate the main characters to undergo cosmetic surgeries and body-altering procedures, I demonstrate how the novel satirizes and exaggerates the view that femininity is contained to a certain paradigm of physical attractiveness that couples the female body with signs of youth and perfection, thus questioning the assumption that the body is and should be malleable.

Sin tetas no hay paraíso doubly commercializes the female body by choosing both prostitution and plastic surgery as the focal points. The theme itself thus commercializes women’s sexuality for a profit similar in many ways to that of the beauty and fashion magazines and advertisements. Sin tetas’ plot revolves around Catalina, a 14-year-old girl whose sole desire is to acquire breast implants so she can become a mafia boss’ official girlfriend, in order to improve her socio-economic status. Her four friends – Yésica, Vanessa, Ximena, and Paola, all 15 or 16 years old – are already niñas prepago (refined prostitutes) for the Colombian mafia. All the girls are from the same underprivileged neighborhood in Pereira, a city of approximately 265,000 inhabitants located west of the capital. The story takes place during the years just after the disbanding of the Cali and Medellín cartels. The girls’ bodies, perfected through plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures, are transformed into their only arsenal against poverty. After being rejected time and time again for the small size of her breasts, Catalina, feeling the angst of her imperfection, makes access into the world of prostitution her main priority; she hopes to enjoy all of the luxuries that her friends now enjoy because of
the plasticity of their bodies. The source of Catalina’s anxiety is linked with the realization that the small size of her breasts is the main obstacle between her and this assured prosperity:

No podía resistir la prosperidad de sus vecinas y menos que el auge de las mismas estuviera representado en un par de tetas, pues hasta ese día cayó en la cuenta de que sólo las casas de las cuatro niñas que tenían los senos más grandes de la cuadra, tenían terraza y estaban pintadas. Hasta ese día en que ‘El Titi’ la rechazó por llevarse a Paola cuyos senos se salían de un brasier talla 38, entendió que debía derribar molinos de viento, si era preciso, para conseguir el dinero de la cirugía porque su futuro estaba condicionado por el tamaño de sus tetas. (8-9)

Thus, Catalina’s financial success is inseparable from her body as object. Accordingly, the girls’ vehicle of social ascension in Sin tetas is linked to the malleability of their bodies, made possible through repeated plastic surgeries, and the commodification and cultivation of their physical beauty. In this way, femininity and beauty are confined to a very specific paradigm of physical attractiveness. The fact that the girls’ bodies are openly scrutinized by the drug traffickers physically causes anxiety for Catalina, and reinforces the equation of beauty and power for these girls.

The main link between the mafia and the girls is Yésica, who acts as the procurer and also happens to be Catalina’s best friend. When mafia bosses want entertainment for the evening, they reach out to her. However, in order to succeed as a desirable body, a girl must first gain the attention of a mafia boss who is willing to invest money into the female body, equipping it to be aesthetically pleasing by reconstructing the body to fit the hypersexualized standard. This, of course, only happens after several exchanges of sex.
Yésica finds that her body, rather than education, is the path to success. Her story sets the stage and provides an example for the reader of what each girl will experience in order to be transformed into a prepago. After willingly having sex with a drug trafficker at fifteen years old, as if he imprints on her body certain identifying marks in order to showcase the cultural and economic imperialism of the narco estética, the narco pays to have Yésica’s immature body physically reconstructed:

la mandó con uno de los guardaespaldas a un centro comercial y le hizo comprar toda la ropa habida y por haber, le giró un cheque para la operación de la nariz, otro para el implante de silicona en los senos y le cambió al cirujano un caballo de paso por la liposucción de la adolescente (...) [A] dos meses de haberse realizado al menos media docena de cirugías y tratamientos estéticos, Yésica lucía espectacularmente bella y transformada. (33)

Within this complete aesthetic apparatus is the means for Yésica to profit from her body and to climb the socio-economic scale. Michel Foucault states that “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). Based on this concept, María Victoria Albornoz in her 2010 study of the mutilated and consumed bodies in Sin tetas, avows that the siliconed women “Son ‘cuerpos dóciles’, (...) sobre el cual los capos ejercen su poder: es su voluntad la que realmente los moldea, por encima del deseo de las mujeres o de los intereses de los mismos médicos” (11). Building on this theory, I propose that these girls become docile bodies not only from the power of the mafia men’s will, but also from the anxiety to conform to a certain ideal in order to become wealthy consumers themselves. For example, Yésica’s transformation made such an impact on the other girls that “todas las niñitas del barrio empezaron a sufrir de envidia y a
organizar planes inverosímbles para poder alcanzar el sueño de lucir tan hermosas como ella” (33). The angst felt by the girls is reiterated repeatedly, mostly highlighting the condition in which the protagonist Catalina finds herself: “Pero la necesidad de no sentirse inferior a las demás niñas del barrio o la mera envidia de verlas contando dinero, fue lo que la impulsó a pedirle a Yésica que le consiguiera un paseo con ‘El Titi’”(10). The phenomenon of the malleable body as shown through the mass media, her environment, and her friends, creates in Catalina – and other girls from her neighborhood – a sense of inadequacy and an anxiety to meet unrealistic standards of beauty, youth, and perfection.

Without implants and then further surgical enhancements, Catalina’s only option is that she “‘pusiera bien buena’ de los demás” (9) in order to be admitted into the world accessed by her friends who have already undergone cosmetic treatments and surgeries:

Desde entonces Catalina comprendió que ponerse bien buena, antes la escasez de busto, (...), suponía adelgazar de cintura, agrandar sus caderas, reafirmar sus músculos, levantar la cola, alisar su cabello con tratamientos de toda índole, cuidar su bello rostro con mascarillas de cuanto menjunje le recomendaran, desteñir con agua oxigenada todos los vellos de su humanidad, depilarse cada tercer día las piernas y el pubis y tostar su piel bajo el sol o dentro de una cámara bronceadora hasta hacerse brotar manchas cancerosas que ellos pudieran confundir con pecas sensuales. (9-10)

The message Catalina understands here is a parodic exaggeration of the message women get from fashion and beauty magazines and beauty clinic advertisements. Just as the advertisements and imagery connect a specific lifestyle and conspicuous consumption
with the perfecting of the female body (through the use of creams and beauty products, diets and treatments to lose weight, procedures to erase signs of aging) so does Catalina connect the girls’ perfected bodies to their access to this world. Catalina, even at the inexperienced age of 14, is familiar with the standards and examples put forth by the Beauty Cult, and already feels the pressure to conform to what is considered (by example of mass media and her environment) the national aesthetic ideal for Colombian women. Thus, Catalina connects the national preference with her own body/identity. For her—and many Colombian women—this means acquiring a resemblance to the models in the fashion and beauty magazines, the actresses and pop-divas that embody a very specific ideal beauty determined by their measurements (la escasez de busto), weight (adelgazar de cintura), tautness of their bodies (agrandar sus caderas, reafirmar sus músculos, levantar la cola), and physicality (alilar su cabello con tratamientos, cuidar su bello rostro, desteñir con agua oxigenada todos los vellos de su humanidad, depilarse cada tercer día y tostar su piel). Her motivation: “por sobre todas las cosas, lucir tan espectacular como las modelos de Medellín, de cuyos afiches las padres de su cuarto estaban tapizadas” (11). Thus, Catalina learns that the body is malleable and must meet particular paradigms of physical attractiveness, reinforcing the belief that her success (and survival) revolves around her ability to conform to this ideal.

It is important to note the racial and physical implications of what “ponserse bien buena” indicates. One effective tactic by the author, to show the intensity of this perception in Colombia, is Catalina’s young age of 14 and the idea that even adolescents are not protected from the cultural pressures to meet certain physical standards. In spite of her youth, she understands she must make her waist thinner; many older women
undergo treatments such as the “reafirmamiento” or “aumento de glúteos” advertised in the beauty clinic ads, yet Catalina recognizes that her pubescent and already firm thighs and lifted derriere are not firm and lifted enough; she also knows that she must already start to use “products” that will prevent the aging process and devaluation of her beauty, lest she have to undergo such future procedures as we saw earlier in *A La Moda* ads: “rejunvenecimiento facial, meso lifting facial,” or “Botox línea de expresión” (*A la moda, Centro Benessere Angela estética* 119). Her natural dark body hair should now be bleached blonde, her legs and pubis shaved and her skin tanned to the point that she would welcome cancerous spots that could be confused as sensual beauty marks. This ideology juxtaposes beauty and sickness, just as we saw in the aesthetic medicine and beauty clinic advertisements, along with the diet and weight-loss advertisements. The labeling of such treatments as vaccines (*vacuna anti-edad*), therapies (*mesoterapia facial y corporal*), and essentially the reversal of aging (*anit-arrugas, aumento de glúteos, flacidez: cara y cuerpo, depilación*) communicates and perpetuates that youth and perfection are the requisites of ideal femininity. Furthermore, the straightening and lightening of her hair reflects the privileging of Anglo or Northern European aesthetics. Additionally, the fact that Yésica has undergone rhinoplasty carries racist overtones because of the implication that this surgery can “correct” the Negroid nose. 40 For Catalina then, beauty is intrusive (breast implants) and even poisonous (cancerous spots), while for the marketers of beauty clinics and aesthetic medicine, the idea of not being

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beautiful is exploited in order to make women feel inadequate and even defective (*A la moda, Medicina Estética* 103).

Catalina is given this message about the construction of beauty over and over. For example, by the manager of a modeling agency: “no se le olvide, mijita, que nosotras, estamos en Colombia y aquí modelo que se respete las tiene que tener mínimo talla 36” (61); by a mafia boss’ bodyguard who describes the uniformity among the *niñas prepago*: “esas mujeres, todas inmersas en un molde estereotipado que las hacía ver, iguales, esto es, anoréxicas, con el cabello lacio y rubio, la nariz respingada, el vientre plano, los ojos con lentes de colores, el pecho inflado, las mejillas macilentas” (58); and by her own observation: “Entre tanto, y bajo su mirada de envidia e impotencia, las casas de Paola, Ximena, Vanessa, y Yésica crecían hacia el cielo y se tornaban más bonitas y de colores, al igual que sus cabellos, pues, de la noche a la mañana todas resultaron rubias con los labios rellenos y los ojos azules” (61). In addition to producing a strict paradigm of very specific – and Anglo – physical attractiveness that makes all women “look the same” and that excludes girls like Catalina, this appearance also contributes to Colombia’s ideology of *blanqueamiento* or “whitening.” As Peter Wade notes in his 1995 study on the cultural politics of blackness in Colombia, the actuality that “Colombia has one of the largest black populations in Latin America” but yet “colonial values that privilege lightness of skin color as a sign of social status or as the putative national destiny are still pervasive” is highlighted by the perpetuation of the valorization of Anglo or Northern European characteristics that the women in *Sin tetas* (and in Colombian and other mass media) model (Wade 342; 341). Although Colombia is considered a *mestizo* nation, this is not an aspect that is valorized in most national magazines, on television, nor public
affirmations concerning Colombian nationality (Wade 1991, cited in Lobo 57). Gregory J. Lobo, in his study of race, beauty, and hegemony in Colombia (2005), employs the example of November of 2001, when Vanessa Mendoza Bustos, an Afro-Colombian from the department of Chocó, won the National Beauty Pageant; this was the first time in 67 years that an Afro-Colombian was crowned queen. Lobo refers to the crowning of Bustos as not a symbol of the advancement of multiculturalism of the country, but rather an extension of the extension of the logic of blanqueamiento in spite of her dark skin color: Anglo-European beauty ideals:

[A] pesar de venir del Chocó y de no ser de ningún modo blanca, Vanessa Mendoza no es ‘propiamente’ negra. (…) Es decir, aunque tenga una piel oscura, aunque sea chocoana, esto no le priva de una belleza que cabe dentro de los esquemas occidentales, blanqueados, que siguen rigiendo a la hora de escoger a la más bella de Colombia. (…) Por tanto, su victoria no debe verse como un paso adelante sin más, sino como la reivindicación del modelo de la belleza que equivale, en resumidas cuentas, al modelo blanco u occidentalizado. (58; 60).

In Colombia, as in other countries, the connection among socio-economic class, race, and gender are inseparable. Joel Streicker, analyzing the correlation among socio-economic class, race, and gender in Cartagena, Colombia, explores this mutual construction of race, socio-economic class, and gender identities in “Policing Boundaries: Race, Class, and Gender in Cartagena, Colombia” (1995). He argues that discourse on socio-economic class and gender encodes racially discriminatory concepts, correlating blackness with acts that contradict normative socio-economic class and gender identities. In Cartagena, according to Streicker, being black is nearly always considered
synonymous with being from the lower socio-economic class. According to Streicker, descriptions of beauty define whiteness as pretty, in opposition to blackness as ugly. For example, in Cartagena the use of *simpático* as “genial, likeable, nice” and also “good-looking” signifies that what is considered pleasing to another person is one’s physical appearance. Streicker avows that “in Cartagena to be *simpático* means to have features associated with Europeans or *blancos*: a straight nose, thin lips, and high cheekbones. For *cartageneros*, an ugly person has a flat nose, thick lips, and low cheekbones, all features [associated] with African or *negro* ancestry” (61). Streicker goes on to explain how the racial hierarchy extends to the socio-economic, as another pair of terms describe the same opposition. For instance, the features of someone who is *simpática* are also said to be *finas* (fine), which also refers to “refinement” or “exquisiteness” in *cartagenero* Spanish. In contrast, the features of someone *maluca* (a common word for ugly) are “ordinary,” having the sense of “common,” “coarse,” and “vulgar.” Streicker tells us these “two terms for physical appearance also encode a covert color/class component because the rich/whites are associated with both physical and spiritual refinement, while the poor and *negros* are said to be more ‘common’ in both aspects. Thus the language of physical appearance in Cartagena exalts European/ *blanco* standards of taste while denigrating those of non-European origin” (61). Following this theory, these racial and gender stereotypes can be applied to the crowning of Vanessa Mendoza Bustos, as representative of a national preference of beauty which upholds the superior value of Anglo or Northern European facial features. Considering how within Colombia’s national preference, beauty is regulated to model white or occidental prototype, and the fact that the girls in *Sin tetas* are pressed to mimic this standard underlines the motivation
for them to undergo cosmetic surgeries and body-altering procedures. The novel highlights how this model has trickled down to the lower socio-economic class, and how their socio-economic disadvantage is used against them by the mafia to reduce Colombian women to one predictive archetype. Consequently, this results in ridiculing the view that femininity is restricted to a particular paradigm of physical attractiveness and contesting the assumption that the body is and should be malleable.

Eventually, Catalina exchanges sex for the breast augmentation surgery. Immediately she begins to exploit her enhanced body, and acquires the status of an expensive fetish within the mafia circle. Catalina successfully seduces a retired mafia boss who proposes marriage; he pampers her and supports her financially, thus substantiating the link between her altered body and prosperity. However, her purchased body parts soon turn on her, when she loses her breast because of an infection caused by the reused silicone that the surgeon had implanted in her. By refusing to wait the recommended six months before having surgery again, and by augmenting the size even more, Catalina’s chest becomes a grotesque parody of the ideal she had sought to attain: “pasó de tener dos tetas pequeñas talla 32, luego dos grandes talla 38, después dos inmensas talla 40 a tener, ahora, una sola, enorme, superlativo, gigante, talla 80” (197).

The body, here, symbolically becomes a casing whose only value is what it holds inside, in this instance silicone. Remembering what Yéscia once told her – “que los hombres se avergonzaban de las niñas feas y que por eso no daban un paso a la calle sin una vieja operada de la pantorrilla a los labios pasando por los glúteos y las tetas” (16) – Catalina absorbs the message that without transforming her body – through plastic surgery and cosmetic treatments – she will never possess the power to achieve her goals. When
Catalina’s body eventually loses the commodities it holds inside, her body is devalued within the drug-prostitution market. Albornoz, discussing the body and one’s identity in this novel, affirms that

A pesar de su naturaleza, los implantes adquieren un carácter identitario que define lo que Catalina es en su nueva vida. Sin ellos, los pierde todo: dinero, poder, posición social e, incluso, su propia identidad. (...) Su ascenso y descenso social es inseparable de su cuerpo objeto, (...) la prosperidad económica se vincula a su época de mayor esplendor físico, así como su degradación moral y social queda tatuada igualmente en su cuerpo. (13-14)

In the end, her husband exchanges her for Yésica, her old boyfriend sleeps with and impregnates her mother, and dispossessed of everything, Catalina decides to commit suicide. She convinces her ex-husband’s bodyguard, who is secretly in love with her, that she wants to take revenge upon her best friend by placing a hit on her life, when instead Catalina places herself at the location at the agreed-upon time, and commits a kind of assisted suicide.

In conclusion, the tragic ending, in place of a happily ever after, serves to draw attention to the destructive physiological effect and pressure of the Beauty Cult within Colombian society. The same effect that magazine imagery can have on women is doubly experienced within Sin tetas through the girls’ environment. Not only do they internalize what they see on the television, and in fashion and beauty magazines, but they also are influenced by the drug culture aesthetic preference that dictates a specific model for them to follow in order to be successful within this community. All of the plastic and cosmetic surgeries which the girls undergo reveal the crucial link between the perfection
of their bodies and the preservation of their youth, as they seek to purchase an ideal femininity that they can exchange for power.

*Ellas saben de amor*

The Dominican novel *Ellas saben de amor* (2010) transports its readers to the heart of the upper socio-economic class residing in Santo Domingo. In contrast to *Sin tetas*, within *Ellas saben* not only is race given a greater significance in terms of superiority and aesthetic virtues, but the adolescent underprivileged girls are replaced by mature female members of the elite ranks of the Dominican society. Thus, *Ellas saben de amor* simultaneously upholds racial preference while disrupting the ideal paradigm of beauty linked with age and perfection. Additionally, the age and perfection ideal is substituted for ideal socio-economic class. This distinction not only allows for a deeper analysis of aesthetic racial partiality – given the socio-cultural implication of race within the Dominican Republic, – but it also objects the youthful and perfect body ideal. The formulaic genre can be categorized as Chick Lit, because of the female protagonists and the focus on their friendship and love lives. While on the surface *Ellas saben de amor* seems superficial and conventional, I consider this work of fiction more sophisticated because of its nonconformity to a ubiquitous heroine that meets the expectations of definite paradigms of ideal beauty. Thus, allowing for a more critical readership and the inclusion of other paths to power. The novel revolves around five friends who have

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known each other all their lives: Elena, María Teresa, Vanessa, Sofía, and Laura. The main conflict for each character is her ability or inability to maintain heterosexual relationships. All of the women are educated, well-traveled, and have maintained their high socio-economic status within the Dominican society. Another variation to many other Chick Lit novels is that all of the female protagonist are divorced – except María Teresa – and most have children, some even grandchildren, allowing for an identification with a readership from an older age group. This provides an unusual twist compared to the dominant prototype of young, perfect(ed) female bodies that flourish within mass media and most Chick Lit novels. However, each protagonist is nonetheless described as beautiful or given admiration from men: Vanessa, a television celebrity, is described as having a “natural belleza” (34); María Teresa, a housewife, is described as an “hermosa y buena esposa” (19); Laura, the proprietor of a real estate agent as a “chica encantadora” (17); Elena, a phycologists, as “Doctora bella” by her love interest (45); and Sofía, the head of the Dominican subsidiary pharmaceutical company, as a “bella mujer” and “hermosa” by her lover (136). Although throughout Ellas saben anxiety about the aging body is present, the novel disassociates the physical body from power. Thus, unlike Catalina in Sin tetas, within Ellas saben value is given to each protagonist based on socio-economic status instead of hypersexualized beauty.

Socio-economic class is repeatedly referenced throughout the novel, marking the status of the five women: “Eran cinco amigas, todas muy diferentes entre sí. Se conocieron desde que estudiaban en la escuela primaria, en el reconocido colegio bilingüe para señoritas Santo Domingo, y donde asistía lo mejor de la sociedad capitalina” (31). All but one have traveled outside the country for college, either to
Spain, Miami, Mexico, or Washington, confirming their high socio-economic status granting them access to higher education. They all live in Santo Domingo where there exists a “competencia titánica entre las mujeres y entre los hombres, una verdadera guerra de marcas, sitios y trapos;” however, much to their advantage, the women are all “en buena posición económica y de familias conocidas, cosa muy importante en la sociedad dominicana” (32). While there are no explicit descriptions of the skin color of each woman indicating a racial origin, there are clear references to either their European ancestry or upper socio-economic class. For example, the reader learns that Elena’s heritage is Italian, María Teresa’s is Spanish, while Laura, Sonia, and Vanessa all come from established Dominican families who were either business owners, medical doctors, or ambassadors favored by the Trujillo regime. Laura at one point describes Dominican women as “nosotras las criollitas” (30). The absence of detailed physical description of the women, such as any indication to their skin color, hair texture, or body shape, is supplanted by their admittance into elite country clubs and theaters, their frequency in spas and resorts, and their professions as business owners, psychologist, real estate agent, actress, and wealthy house-wife – all signs in the Dominican Republic of belonging to the upper socio-economic class which automatically “lightens” your skin color. Thus, the connection to power for these women is their ability to fit the racial aesthetic ideal of upper socio-economic class within Dominican society, rather than their ability to fit a specific paradigm of physical attractiveness. David Howard, in his 2001 study of race, color, and socio-economic class in Dominican society, avows that elites tend to be lighter colored than the rest of the population:
Color exists as a social, rather than simply biological, construction that tends to correlate with social mobility and economic status, and is an important element in the aesthetic formation of race. (...) Color, as the dominant index of phenotypical difference, is thus perceived as a sign of wealth, education, accent or demeanor. It becomes a matter of culture, which is formulated with respect to appearance, social associates and ancestry. (54)

While sensuality coupled with the perfected body and youthfulness is regarded as a means to power for women within dominant media imagery and representations, in Ellas saben this supremacy is understood to come from their socio-economic positions within Dominican society, which automatically associates them with Anglo or Northern European features and perpetuates the national aesthetic ideal. Thus, focusing on the references to the female protagonists’ physical bodies, age, and socio-economic status, we can see the ways in which the novel both challenges the youth ideal, and by association the perfect body ideal; yet still upholds a socio-economic and racial preference, as inferred from their membership in the elite ranks of Dominican society.

The effect of continuous exposure to the juvenescent ideal can produce anxiety for those who fall outside the parameters of certain physical attractiveness as displayed through television, magazines, and mass media in general. However, in Ellas saben the pressure to be and appear young, although occasionally present, does not drive the women to undergo cosmetic procedures or surgeries. Instead, there is a certain valorization of the older woman; this is made obvious by the use of not thirty-something, but fifty-to-sixty-something protagonists. The fact that four of the five female protagonists are divorced, and four of the five have children (some have grandchildren),
replaces the most popular prototype of young, unmarried, and childless female central figures within dominant representations in mass media. Not losing sight of the fact that this novel remains in the Chick Lit category, it is important to point out that the central theme is still the women’s love lives, and the main conflict is still their ability to attract and maintain heterosexual relationships. However, the narrator validates older women by their ultimate success, with love and life in general. Within *Ellas saben*, although there is some reference to a preoccupation with aging and cosmetic surgery, none of the women submit to the pressure to conform to a physical ideal. In this way, *Ellas saben* objects the assessment of the female body based on set values of beauty by redefining the ideal femininity as the inclusion in the upper socio-economic class which favors whiteness. In other words, the women’s potential success is not linked exclusively to physical perfection and age but to their social position.

Within the novel age is treated more as a rite of passage, as Laura describes it: “ya estamos muy viejas, me corrijo, muy maduras, para estar con pendejadas. Vas a beber y a disfrutar de lo lindo” (183). While age is mentioned several times throughout the novel (*a mi edad, a su edad, a esta edad, a nuestra edad*, etc.), it does not impede the women from being successful in love or their careers, and as shown in the quote above, age is downplayed to instead underscore the ability to enjoy life. The narrative, true to its genre, revolves around each protagonists’ experience with finding and keeping a man’s attention and interest. The narrator draws the reader in by including very real scenarios to which many older women can relate. For example, Elena, the psychologist, falls for a younger man: “Al regresar a su casa, lloraba como una jovencita enamorada, sin encontrar una justificación a su llanto. Tomó una ducha para ver si así frenaba las
lágrimas y volvía a la realidad. Le molestaba la piel pues se había bronceado más de la cuenta. (...)[Elena], a su edad, se había permitido experimentar cosas inimaginables, y lloró de nuevo pensando con tristeza en lo mucho que ya lo amaba” (70). Elena is the most reserved of the five women, yet after her shower she touches herself thinking about her intimate weekend with Marcos. Consequently, she keeps her relationship from her friends until at the end of the novel they all “confess” their secrets and share all at once with each other the intimate details of their lives. Unlike Catalina whose survival depended on her hypersexualizing her body in order to obtain a much older lover, this quote emphasizes Elena’s beauty at a mature age through her ability to attract a young lover. It also emphasizes her light skin (se había bronceado más de la cuenta) suggestively linking it with her physical attractiveness and challenging the youth and perfect body ideal while endorsing a racial preference. An interesting point in this quote is the juxtaposition of maturity (a su edad) and youth (jovencita) that Elena experiences simultaneously. Elena is able, through the relationship with Marcos, to feel (and act) younger. Yet in the end, she realizes that she is keeping her relationship from her friends because she herself does not quite approve of it. By the end of the novel, it is revealed that Marcos is engaged and has been lying to Elena. By confronting Marcos and ending the relationship, she embodies logic and experience, compared to the younger, more inexperienced, and false Marcos. Elena is affected emotionally, but not enough for her to fall into a deep depression or feel pressured to change herself (physically or mentally) in order to continue a relationship with him. Instead she accepts her misfortune, and makes a conscious effort to move past her anguish, resulting in the representation of a femininity that celebrates self-respect, maturity, and decency more than perfection and youth.
Another scenario to which a mature reader could more easily relate to is that of falling for a married man, as in Laura’s case. Enrique, who is a doctor, seems “too good to be true” (48). He is charming, handsome, intelligent, has a good socio-economic standing and Laura has fallen deeply in love with him. Not wanting to disconcert the beginning stages of what she hopes to be a lasting relationship, Laura has repressed her desire to ask Enrique about his current relationship status fearing the truth about him. When she does, however, Enrique admits that he is separated but still married and claims to be in love with Laura. After a brief separation, during which Enrique finalizes his intentions for divorce from his wife, the two lovers reconcile and Laura declares that she loves him unconditionally. At the end of the novel the women are at a resort celebrating Vanessa’s upcoming marriage. As they begin to share their intimate secrets with one another, Laura expresses her fear of losing Enrique to a younger woman: “Tengo un miedo horrible, la competencia es fuerte, muchas carajitas con unas carnes apretadísimas y uno por más que allante, coño, la edad está ahí. Él dice que me quiere (…), pero a veces me derrumbo, no quisiera ser una ‘querida’ y mucho menos ya a esta edad” (187). Wolf, explaining how the beauty myth prescribes behavior, asserts how competition between women has been incorporated into the myth so as to divide women from one another. She states for example how “Youth and (until recently) virginity have been ‘beautiful’ in women (…). Aging in women is ‘unbeautiful’ since women grow more powerful with time” (14). Along similar lines, Laura’s statements are an example of the pressure women feel from the value placed upon youthful beauty and the competition that arises from that value. Laura, evident of the competition between young and older women, reveals her apprehension about getting older. However, although there is evidence
throughout the novel of anxiety about the aging body, ultimately Laura symbolizes a valorization of maturity. Enrique does not leave her for a younger woman, instead, as Laura puts it emphatically “él quiere formalizar” (132). Unlike Catalina who was the one pursuing male affection, Laura – who does not represent the archetype of hypersexualized, youthful and perfected body common within mass media and Chick Lit – is successful at gaining a male’s true affection. Elena substantiates her success by declaring if “esta relación está unida por el amor, puro amor, no lo dejes escapar. Nosotras estamos entrando en la edad del ‘no retorno’. No es que estemos desahuciadas, no, pero encontrar a una persona para compartir los últimos años de juventud y enfrentar la realidad de envejecer, amiga mía, eso es muy hermoso, y si él está dispuesto, sin engaño, dale rienda suelta a tu amor” (132). By highlighting Laura’s achievement at securing a legitimate relationship, while simultaneously drawing attention to her middle-age stage of life, the novel challenges the youth ideal both physically and mentally. Here, value is placed upon Laura’s ability to attain a final relationship to last the rest of her life instead of her ability to fit a specific paradigm of physical attractiveness.

Another situation in which a mature reader might find herself is that of María Teresa who is married to a chauvinistic and unfaithful husband. Similar to Sara from Dirty Girls Social Club discussed in chapter 3, María Teresa also represents the trophy wife who privately suffers from mental and physical abuse. A crucial difference between Sara and María Teresa, though, is their age: María Teresa has grandchildren, while Sara’s children are young. As an older woman, María Teresa would more likely feel a greater resistance to “starting over.” After finding out about her husband’s affair and child outside their marriage, while María Teresa is humiliated by her husband’s actions, her
character becomes more independent and begins to find new meaning in her life. She finds ways to avoid her husband keeping an account of her activities, she spends quality time with her children and grandchildren, and even accepts a friendship with a man – almost but not quite being unfaithful herself. Whereas Sara’s character was eventually successful, it took time and the help of her friends. María Teresa’s character favors rapidly a single life, and she is socially and economically secure. In fact, María Teresa’s power within the novel stems around her confidence: “Massimo, como se llamaba el hairdresser, le actualizó su corte de pelo, la convenció de que se hiciera unos reflejos, y en verdad se veía estupenda: más joven y moderna. (…) [E]l verse atractiva le dio una seguridad maravillosa” (100). It is important here to point out the absence of any mention of the hair “straightening” that is extremely common in the Dominican Republic. María Teresa’s hair is merely “cut and styled” with some added highlights. Instead of appearing more Anglo or Northern European, what makes her look “wonderful” is her ability to seem younger and more modern. Thus, her anxieties about appearance are age-focused rather than race-based. The examples of both Laura and María Teresa illustrate how women internalize the demands of the Beauty Cult; however, while the link between youth and beauty causes anxiety for women, it does not drive either woman to undergo excessive cosmetic procedures or surgery, thus defying the assumption that the body itself is malleable and needs to be improved. In this way Ellas saben disrupts the perfect body ideal and substitutes it for ideal socio-economic class and race.

The strongest connection between youth and beauty within particular paradigms of physical attractiveness within popular culture is illustrated through Vanessa’s character, a television host. Her main conflict within the novel is the pressure she feels
from the imperative aesthetic criterion of television. As she ages, Vanessa receives less job offers and recognition. The most significant critique of contemporary mainstream media performances of Latin American beauty and desirability within *Ellas saben* comes from her experience: “Mas, el tiempo es el enemigo número uno de los artistas, y la televisión es muy cruel cuando se trata de disimular las arrugas y la flacidez. Además, con el tiempo la televisión dominicana crecía de una manera descomunal, con jóvenes y hermosas figuras, y Vanessa fue quedando desplazada hasta que ya apenas aparecía en programa alguno” (35). The television, like fashion and beauty magazines, is a prime source of imagery that displays perfected bodies and youthful stars. The narrow media images of femininity limit what is projected as the national ideal for Latina and Latin American women, imposing a cultural aspect of gender stratification that for many is unattainable and, additionally, goes against the natural aging process. The narrator, reflecting on how this process works in Dominican television and how Vanessa’s self-esteem and self-identity have become linked with her on-screen character stress how: “[H]ay personas que no entienden eso de la generación del relevo y que la TV no quiere nada con arrugas y brazos flácidos. Es duro, claro que lo es, pero era una verdad como un templo” (24). This last quote comes after a conversation where Vanessa comes to Elena to vent about how “su tiempo había pasado y que ella no se estaba vendiendo como debía” (23). Through Vanessa’s character, the novel highlights the existent pressure on women to maintain a certain physical attractiveness contained in an ideal paradigm produced by the media, and the anxiety that this causes.

Phillip N. Myers, Jr. and Frank A. Biocca, in their 1992 study of the effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women in
the U.S., reason that “If media content both reflects and contributes to the apparent pursuit of the ideal body by a large segment of the female population, it suggests that for some this pursuit may become obsessive” (113). Success or failure attaining the supposed physical ideal becomes a symbol of the ability to be successful or helpless in general. Although Myers and Biocca’s analysis was not in relation to Latino and Latin American popular culture, their critical lens becomes useful once again when assessing how individuals internalize a social model of the ideal body image. The growth of local Dominican television that features “jóvenes y hermosas figuras” excludes women like Vanessa whose efforts to remain in the spotlight are futile: “provocaba expresiones odiosas, discriminatorias y peyorativas utilizadas contra el género femenino entrado en años. A estas cosas resistía Vanessa, se aferraba a su pasado sin querer darle paso a su realidad, que pudo haber sido mejor si ella se hubiera visto tal cual” (35). Accordingly, pressures on Dominican women to fit a national aesthetic ideal may partially explain why many undergo various cosmetic procedures and surgeries. Vanessa’s reaction to her ending television career and her denial of the reality that she has aged is superficial at most. Since, in the end, Vanessa is ultimately successful through her marriage to a wealthy French man, who indulges her narcissistic tendencies and funds and produces a television program starring Vanessa that highlights popular vacation spots in the Dominican Republic. In this way, the narrator subtly suggests that, should Vanessa embrace her age and disregard the gossip of the entertainment world, she would overall be happier. Her marriage, and the fact that she stars in another television program, addresses both the age factor of her character and her ability to attract and sustain a relationship with the opposite sex. While being successful in attracting male affection
and economically stable within the plot result in triumphs for the protagonists, and contest the restricted representations of successful femininity, the novel does not deny the existence of the dominant culture’s glorification of particular paradigms of certain physical attractiveness, with mass media as the primary vehicle for this glorification.

Within *Ellas saben*, these social influences, are present within the actions and thoughts of the female characters. For example, as evident in the narrator’s comments about Vanessa: “jamás podría ser competencia con la nueva generación de mujeres bellas – aunque fuesen hechas a fuerza del bisturí –, generosas en mostrar sus obtenidos atributos” (60). Elena’s character also experiences a degree of influence of the plasticity of the female body as she meets with a female colleague who has just undergone Botox injections: “– Tú deberías ir a esa clínica de estética, Elena; saldrás como de quince. Con el buen cutis que siempre has tenido, un arregladito aquí y otro allá, bueno…; estarías mejor que yo” (155). These quotes demonstrates the social pressures that insist on specific body type and beauty requirements present in the Dominican Republic, and cosmetic surgery’s ability to mold women’s bodies to this ideal. Nevertheless, while Vanessa does practice a “ritual de aseo y cremas” (54) and experiences “envidia del cutis que tenia ‘la muy condenada’” (62) she abstains from having any invasive cosmetic procedures or surgeries precisely because she succeeds, without surgical enhancements, in attracting a wealthy man who funds a television program specifically for her enabling her to stay in the spotlight. In fact, as a television celebrity, Vanessa would most likely feel the most pressure to conform to dominant mass media paradigms of physical attractiveness. Yet Vanessa never contemplates surgery. Thus, the novel validates, through her character, the natural aging woman who is successful in love and
economically. Elena also dismisses the suggestion by her colleague, instead acknowledging that she has always had good skin and crediting her European mother. Recalling the white bias in the Caribbean, the reification of the white aesthetic is apparent with the connection of Elena’s good skin to her European ancestry. Additionally, light skin color and upper socio-economic class status is closely linked within the Dominican Republic where “To be white is to have a profession” is a commonly heard phrase, indicating greater social and economic opportunities for people with a lighter-colored skin. This conception also recognizes that a white phenotype probably indicates that the individual already occupies a privileged position in society (Howard 68). This rings true in Ellas saben, where not only Elena but every female character has a connection to European ancestry and a privileged education thus indicating an upper socio-economic class status and stressing the celebration of whiteness, Hispanic heritage, and Catholicism of dominicanidad. In this way, the female characters are already integrated to the advantaged society and thus feel less anxiety or pressure to conform to a celebrated femininity (that of the white woman) in order to better their economic standing or opportunity of ascension on the social scale. Thus, although the women in Ellas saben experience some degree of anxiety and/or fear associated with their age, they resist this avenue and instead are presented in ways that glorify their mature bodies and their ideal racial and socio-economic preference.

A reinforcement of the glorification of the mature body is seen through María Teresa’s and Sonia’s characters. For example, during a trip to Miami with her mother, María Teresa’s character is described in a way that already fits certain ideals of physical attractiveness, such as the svelte figure and modern fashion: “María Teresa se interesó en
vestidos más modernos, pantalones y blusas más sugestivas. Bastaba ya de estar aparentando ser una monja. Se sabía con buena figura y aun podía mostrar unos pechos firmes, ¿por qué no insinuarlos?” (147). Here, although María Teresa is a grandmother, her ability to dress fashionably and the fact that she has maintained a good figure and firm breasts defies the youth ideal which implies that only young women with taut bodies should be seen as attractive. Another example of this is seen through Sonia’s character. Sonia, the head of a pharmaceutical company, has begun a relationship with Gonzalo, an Argentinean physiologist-reporter who studies the Dominican population. Sonia’s character is very independent and self-motivated. She has no fears of losing her love interest, but rather, her main conflict is ending one relationship that is stagnant in order to pursue a more committed one with Gonzalo. In the following quote Sonia is being admired by Gonzalo. The novel explicitly reinforces the acceptance and praise of the older body: “– Sos hermosa, Sonia. Tienes una figura magnífica, me encantas… Quiero contemplarte. Esos galanteos le agradaban mucho, y ella se derretía en sus brazos. Al diablo la celulitis y el excesos de grasa. Este hombre dice que le encanto, será que estoy bien después de todo, pensaba” (137). While her initial feeling was to become tense while Gonzalo starred at her body, thinking that her figure lacked appeal because of her un-toned stomach and generous thighs, she quickly dismisses these thoughts as she feels accepted and attractive to Gonzalo. Hence, the narrator brackets off all the female protagonists’ roles as mother/grandmother, and places them within the paradigm of sexually alluring feminine figures that are able to attract male attention, and ultimately be successful within the pattern present in other Chick Lit novels and mass media. All of the women experience some fear and anxiety about aging and their bodies, but not so
much as to make surgical changes, thus challenging the assumption that the body is malleable and must be altered in order to fit certain paradigms of dominant attractiveness. Instead, the novel creates a space for the older woman/body to be distinguished. In this way, they serve to broaden the range of acceptable body types by valuing a mature body and femininity, and establish a new path to power that is linked not to their physicality but rather to a socio-economic and racial ideal.

In summary, these two novels present two distinct genres of female characters, each belonging to opposite socio-economic classes and ages. In *Sin tetas*, for Catalina and her friends, the only means of ascension of the social ladder was connected to their ability to exploit their bodies, youth, and sexuality in order to gain access to a better lifestyle that they associated with conspicuous consumption. Despite the fact that the girls were still adolescents, they underwent various cosmetic procedures and surgeries in order to enhance their physical features, to fit a hypersexualized image of the Colombian woman. In contrast, the older female protagonists of *Ellas saben* already belonged to the elite socio-economic class, thus possessing a barrier against the overwhelming feeling of lack (anxiety) that the girls in *Sin tetas* felt. In addition, the female protagonists’ beauty in *Ellas saben*, follows the dominant racial preference within high Dominican society, allowing them more aesthetic supremacy in a racially mixed society. Overall, both novels contest the necessity of plastic surgery. Within *Sin tetas*, this is shown through the novel’s exaggeration and satire of Catalina’s character who is not able to resist the pressure to undergo breast augmentation. As a result of using the lower socio-economic class and an adolescent, the novel speaks to the damaging and psychological effect – at every level of society – that imperative paradigms of physical attractiveness that stresses
that the body is and should be malleable can cause. While Ellas saben also challenges the necessity of plastic surgery, by promoting older women who successfully gain the attention of men without cosmetic procedures that would acquire them the appearance of younger skin or a more sexualized body, it simultaneously upholds a socio-economic and racial preference. Thus, while Ellas saben disrupts an ideal paradigm of beauty, it substitutes it for a socio-economic and racial ideal, reinventing a new means to power.

III. Television

I shall now focus on the Colombian Spanish-language soap opera Las muñecas de la mafia. I have chosen to concentrate on a Colombian soap opera because the majority of the imagery and representations of women within Colombian television productions promote a hypersexualization of the female body that can be interpreted as the expectation for a youthful ideal femininity that women are presumed to model. Las muñecas de la mafia follows this pattern and, like Sin tetas and Ellas saben, permits me to juxtapose young and mature female protagonists, this time within the same cultural production. Thus, I am able to assess how age becomes a factor in the perfect body and femininity within certain paradigms of physical attractiveness.

Spanish-language soap operas are extremely popular and watched by both young and old, female and male viewers. Omar Rincón’s 2009 study on how the drug culture has influenced Colombian society and experience proves useful when examining the impact that television has in Latin America. Rincón states how “La televnovela es una esfera pública para pensarnos como sociedad y es el modelo narrativo para comprender la política en América Latina” (159). In this way, the narratives and gender models within the Spanish-language soap operas reflect society’s interests and anxieties toward
monetary issues, aesthetic expectations, and moral principles. He goes on to analyze the significance of the style, tone and characteristics of the modern Colombian soap opera and how it explicitly recognizes

que vivimos la cultura del narcotráfico en estéticas, valores y referentes. (…) 

Según estas historias, todo colombiano lleva un narco en su corazón. Son relatos de la narco.cultura que nos cuentan que es más importante un par de tetas que el esfuerzo del día a día y las ideas que imaginan proyectos, que hay que salir adelante como sea y a las que sea. Este, nuestro gran relato nacional, nos dice que por vivir aquí somos hijos del narcotráfico. (…) Así se naturaliza en la tele la exuberancia de colores, formas, carnes y morales de nuestra sociedad. (159-160)

The favorable reception of this aesthetic promoted the success within the last decade of various telenovelas based on real-life events, and centered on the drug and crime culture prevalent in Colombia. Examples include Los protegidos, El cartel, La guaca, Inversiones ABC, El capo, Las muñecas de la mafia, and one of the most well-known, the on-screen adaptations of Sin tetas no hay paraíso. The connection between these soap operas and the allure of drugs, violence, sex, crime, and young attractive bodies on-screen awarded them immediate reception among an inclusive Latin American, European, and Latino audience as it has been remade for Spain (Canal Telecino) and the United States (Telemundo).\(^\text{42}\) The ideal beauty that is modeled within the soap opera is one that follows an Anglo or Northern European paradigm: facial features, long straight hair of any color, white skin and light eye color, but with a voluptuous and sensual body

type associated with tropical exoticism. This body shape ideal is one that Massi de Casanova calls having *buen cuerpo*, where the curvaceous hips, buttocks, and breasts act as focal points of bodily attractiveness (298). Within Colombian mass media, this ideal beauty becomes transcribed as a national preference that essentially objectifies and hypersexualizes a perfect(ed) female body. Recalling, from the introduction, how national pageants are seen as the epitome of feminine beauty, and how plastic surgery has become a key tool in ranking contestants in Colombia, the bodies that inhabit the television (and streets) are an undeniable result of this influence. Rincón, explaining this phenomenon on-screen, states:

Las tetas de silicona, las prepagos ( putas finas) y el mal gusto no son solo mafiosos ni paisas, abundan en todos los estratos y regiones colombianas y son la marca de la televisión. Y es que las tetas abundan en la televisión, pues sin silicona no se puede presentar la farándula, ni se puede actuar en telenovelas ( ¡tetavisión!) La verdad es que, en Colombia, sin tetas no hay televisión. La televisión ha socializado el gusto mafioso, la verdad de silicona y la ética del billete. (160)

This hypersexualization and perfection of the female body affects both young and mature bodies. However, according to scholars like Rincón, the Colombian onscreen feminine archetype is mainly surgically produced, and thus fortifies the belief that the female body is malleable and must fit a certain ideal beauty, proving that only hypersexualized and

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perfect(ed) female bodies are glorified and rewarded among television productions. In this way, Colombian television produces artificial women, glorifying their ability to mimic a national preference constructed through the influence of commodification that stems from the prevalent drug culture. Turning my focus now to the Colombian soap opera, I analyze how the main female characters on-screen reflect and/or contest the assumed ideal beauty produced by dominant media practices and how age is a factor. Focusing on signs of youth and corporeal perfection, I analyze how the combination of sexuality, the perfected body, and youth gains favor for the young Colombian female cinematic characters of the soap opera *Las muñecas de la mafia* and contributes to their success over the older female characters.

*Las muñecas de la mafia*

The focal point of the Colombian soap opera *Las muñecas de la mafia* (2009) is the story of five young women – Olivia, Brenda, Violeta, Renata, and Pamela – who become involved, in one way or another, in the drug trafficking culture. What is notable about *Las muñecas de la mafia*, like *Sin tetas*, is the focus on the female characters within the drug cartel – instead of male characters – as the main protagonists, and the focus being on their friendship and love lives with a twist of delinquency and corruption. While this follows more of the formulaic genre of Chick Lit or even a Chick flick, the women onscreen are used to attract viewers of all sexes and substantiates a male gaze toward women. Apart from their breasts being the main attention of their outfits, they are seen primarily in mini-skirts, revealing dresses, and tight-fitting clothing. In this way, their alluring bodies are the main focal point on-screen. Thus, in the same way that their bodies are “used” by the mob (for sex, entertainment, to transport drugs), they are also
consumed by dominant media practices that render them as similar docile bodies readily available for consumption. Unlike the novels *Sin tetas* and *Ellas saben*, where all the characters belonged to the same high or low socio-economic class, here the group of friends represent a wide spectrum of socio-economic status. Both Brenda and Renata are from rural regions representing a lower socio-economic class. Olivia’s family owns a struggling business and lives in the city, representing the middle socio-economic class. Violeta’s family also lives in the city, in a modest home fitting the middle socio-economic class status, but only as a front to avoid suspicion, as her father works for the Colombian mafia. And Pamela’s father is a pilot who lives in a prestigious sector of the city. All of the five young main protagonists are beautiful by the standards of Colombian national beauty preference: Northern European or Anglo facial features, thin yet voluptuous, with long straight hair. Brenda is the only protagonist who could be considered plain because of her more modest wardrobe and less voluptuous body. Nonetheless, this does not keep her from having a main position within the plot. In fact her youthful beauty is not only what qualifies her to attract the main male mafia protagonists, but it is also what sets her apart from the male mafia protagonists’ wives. In this way, age in combination with the hypersexualization of their bodies becomes a powerful tool for the young female protagonists. As the plot unfolds, the lives of the girls and their involvement with the mafia reveals how the drug culture penetrates every sector of Colombian society. Thus, the hypersexualization (surgically produced or not) of the female bodies in combination with signs of youth within *Las muñecas de la mafia* gives the young female characters power over the older female characters.
The plot takes place in El Carmen, located in the department of North Santander, and recounts the development of a friendship among the young women and each one’s different involvement with the Colombian drug cartel. Uninterested in his marriage, Braulio, the most influential and powerful drug boss in El Carmen, seeks the company of younger women to satisfy his sexual desires. Lucrecia, played by Amparo Grisales, is married to Braulio. Lucrecia, although projected to be in her forties, mimics the younger women in dress, facial features, hair, and body type. The fact that Amparo Grisales, a Colombian actress well known for her enduring beauty, sensuality, and her exercise and diet routines, is chosen to play the “older” mafia wife demonstrates the extremely narrow and youthful requisites for female actresses in Colombia. An internet search for her displays an abundance of images of her practically naked or in very revealing outfits, and in provocative poses. Although in real life she is 58 years old, she is able to compete with women one-third her age, and is especially objectified by the camera within Las muñecas de la mafia. However, in the end, she is still replaced by a younger woman, thus highlighting the preference for the combination of both youth and perfection of the female body. The reference to “dolls and mafia” in the title foretell the soap opera’s focal points of beautiful women, sex, and crime. The use of “dolls” to describe the women gives the illusion of both plasticity and perfection of the female form, and the suggestion of youth, fantasy, and the objects with which one plays. The fact that the eighteen- and nineteen-year-old girls are favored over the older wives, sends the message that only a specific combination of sexuality, perfection, and youthful bodies are worthy of pursuit by the male protagonist. Accordingly, the bodies of the five main female protagonists are showcased throughout the series, and their bodies become symbolic of
their identities, success and failure. The younger women are seen as preferred companions because of their sexual potential. Their bodies become favored trophies that are used by the mafia as objects and possessions. Consumed by the camera, the women’s bodies dominate the screen, symbolizing the masculine desire of the mafia and the male gaze. However, simultaneously, women viewers are also given an example of their ideal gender which is young, slender, voluptuous, and sensual. While the possibilities for analysis are abundant within Las muñecas, I concentrate here specifically on the ways in which age and beauty are equated with the success or failure of the female protagonists. Thus, by highlighting the celebration of female youth and perfection, Las muñecas perpetuates particular narrow paradigms of physical attractiveness consistent with the Colombian national aesthetic ideal.

In addition to perpetuating a particular paradigm of physical attractiveness, the soap opera reflects the Colombian media’s obsession with the drug culture in both aesthetic form and conspicuous consumption. The fascination with easy money and the ascension of socio-economic class for both male and female protagonists is apparent. However, for the female protagonists, the coupling of physical attractiveness and youth becomes the key to their success. Menéndez-Alarcón’s 1993 study of the television culture in the Dominican Republic, affirms that social climbing, the desire for economic security, and financial ambition are constant elements in most Spanish-language soap operas. Menéndez-Alarcón goes on further to state that “the impulse behind these shows is not to gain social equality by fighting against injustice and exploitation, but to suggest the possibility of acceding to a superior class by marriage, social relations, or other individual means” (98). In addition, Spanish-language soap operas offer individuals – in
particular from the subaltern social groups – the opportunity to dream of escaping their everyday life of economic limitations and frustrations, by providing them opportunities to identify with the powerful and the elite, and with those of poor origin who become rich on screen. For many women who come from the lower socio-economic class and who live within a society that validates them according to their beauty, their bodies become the vehicle with which they are able to climb the social ladder. Within Las muñecas, like in Sin tetas, the association between the women’s bodies and their success, or failure, is evident from the very beginning, through the lyrics of the theme song and the imagery that follows. The music starts as scenes from the series and the names of the cast flash across the screen. While the younger women are seen in revealing outfits, it is the older woman Lucrecia who is most objectified, as she appears in her bedroom dressed in lingerie directly linking her with the sexuality. While this appears to be a validation of the “older” body, in reality it upholds the youthful standard because although Lucrecia is a mother and is projected to be in her forties, her body does not symbolize mature beauty because she has maintained a slim, taut, voluptuous body. In addition, at one point in the series she admits to having breast augmentation. On a deeper level, her objectification should be seen as a mockery because she, although beautiful, is ultimately too old for Braulio, the main male mafia character, who exchanges her for Olivia and then Brenda. The images of the women are intertwined with scenes from the drug culture, thus openly connecting the bodies of the women to crime, drugs, and immorality. The lyrics insinuate conspicuous consumption and the fascination with easy money common within the drug culture. The beginning of the theme song is an interchange between a woman and a man. The first verse is sung by a female voice: “Dame tu amor tu corazón en chapado en oro y
en billete mi amor. Hazme volar pero en avión yo quiero ser la reina de Miami a New York,” then sung by a male voice: “Te volveré una muñequita tendrás escolta, camionetas y hasta piscina.” The exchange between woman and man here sets the tone for the rest of the soap opera as each female character, in one way or another, finds herself in need of money or desperate for wealth. The exchange of companionship for profit communicates a strong desire for material things. While private planes, luxury vehicles, and swimming pools are associated with high socio-economic class, the simultaneous presence of body guards in this opening sequence indicates danger and reflects the association of the woman’s desires with potential tragedy. In addition, the use of “te volveré muñequita” by the male voice indicates not only a future act (she is not now but will become) but also a transformation of the woman into a doll, in other words, something infantile with unrealistic proportions. Wanting to replicate the “imagen perfecta,” as Rosenberg would say, seen in the beauty pageants and in mass media, the women become subject to the belief that their bodies are malleable, plastic, and should be unnatural. Thus, within Las muñecas the paradigm of ideal attractiveness links beauty to youth and an artificial perfection of the body.

The rest of the theme song is sung by a female voice:

Yo quiero lo mismo que cualquier otra que se aprecie un poquito
Un carro, cariño, que me saquen a lucir el domingo
Yo quiero ser hembra que se tropiecen cuando voy por la acera
Un yate carteras y quiero más quiero más quiero más

The repetition of “quiero” several times within these lyrics expresses the culture of consumption. By stating that she “wants to be” the type of woman men trip over when they see her reflects her desire to be the center of the male gaze, rendering her body – and
thus identity – an object, one that can be bought, transformed, and consumed. She willingly agrees to be molded through the activities and conspicuous consumption that is connected to those who participate in the drug culture, such as extravagant and expensive clothing, jewelry, frequent trips to the salon, and access to cosmetic procedures and surgeries. Rincón articulates how the drug culture in Colombia “no es sólo un tráfico o un negocio; es también una estética (...) que hoy se manifiesta en la música, en la televisión, en el lenguaje y en la arquitectura. Hay una narcoestética ostentosa, exagerada, grandilocuente, de autos caros, siliconas y fincas” (147). He elucidates how this aesthetic does not represent bad taste, but rather is a common aesthetic among deprived communities striving for modernity that have found, within money, their only possibility to ascend in the world. For men, this aesthetic is represented by possessions (luxury vehicles, estates, fine clothing and jewelry); but in order for a woman to belong to this aesthetic, again, she must fit a very specific physical description in which her beauty is exaggerated and her body hypersexualized even to the point of transformation through cosmetic surgeries. The last part of the theme song links the perfected beauty, as seen within beauty pageants, to the drug culture:

Quiero ser la reina pa’ cuando vuelva por eso quiero un hombre rico pa’ que me mantenga dile a todo el mundo que estás con una hembra
   Que tienes un juguete nuevo pa’ que te entretenga
      Todo lo que se consigue con una mini usi
   Una finca grande con jardín y jacuzzi méteme al certamen de reina de belleza
      No puedes pedir tanto con tan poco en la cabeza
         Papi y que quería

The connection between sex, crime, money, and narcotics within the drug culture unsurprisingly gives men with power the ability to have many girlfriends or wives among their acquisitions. For the men, this is a boost of their ego and a demonstration of their
power, while for women it becomes a fierce competition among the most physically attractive. The ability to attract and secure a relationship with a man in such a position, as Catalina does in *Sin tetas* and Olivia does in *Las muñecas*, guarantees them ascension into a higher socio-economic class, which for most, means overcoming initial financial hardship. The connection between the beauty pageant and wealth is reflective of the ideology behind the beauty queen and her representation not only of the elite socio-economic class, but also of a national identity.

The woman explains that she wants to be the “queen,” or in other words, the main lover – or girlfriend/wife – to the man. The word “hembra” in Spanish can indicate the female sex, in the sense of “mate.” Connecting this idea to “juguete nuevo pa’ que te entretenga” suggests that the “toy” the man has acquired is “new” in age, or a younger female than the one by which he used to be amused, and that women are disposable commodities. The women who desire the attention of rich mafia men must compete at a level so unrealistic that a series of cosmetic surgeries is assumed in order to correspond to the strict paradigm of ideal attractiveness necessary to not only compete in beauty pageants, but also fit the exaggerated and hypersexualized and youthful aesthetic set forth by the drug culture. Bobby Rosenberg, analyzing the correlation between plastic surgery and beauty pageants in Colombia, avows that

Las cirugías que hoy son aceptadas dentro del reinado se dan porque ha evolucionado la creencia de que hay mejillas, labios, senos o colas perfectas. Refuerzan la definición de la belleza de las partes, valoradas como los mejores cortes de carne, y no de la mujer como ser integral y natural. (…) En particular, en el caso de las reinas de belleza se ha tergiversado el concepto mismo de
belleza, a tal punto que vemos mujeres tiesas y falsas y terminamos definiendo la belleza como algo artificial. (41-42)

The social acceptance and influence of the malleability of the female form is established within these competitions. Thus, within the soap opera’s opening song if the woman’s status is to be determined by her potential beauty and sexual attractiveness – her ability to compete in beauty contests by exhibiting the combination of both youth and ideal beauty – then the man’s status is determined by not only what he can acquire through the use of violence and weapons (Todo lo que se consigue con una mini usí) but also a socio-economic standing (Una finca grande con jardín y jacuzzi) that renders him capable of affording her beauty routine and maintenance.

Researching the predictors of attitudes toward cosmetic surgery among U.S. and Colombian college women, Carrion et al. observes how Colombian women’s reasons for undergoing plastic surgery do not appear to stem from personal attempts to improve their self-image or self-esteem, but rather to conform to their particular cultural expectation of beauty. Carrion et al. suggest that one explanation for a greater acceptance of cosmetic surgeries among Colombian women is that cosmetic procedures among beauty pageants contestants influence women to accept cosmetic procedures for themselves, along with lower costs of cosmetic surgery procedures relative to the U.S. (288). Although they demonstrate that Colombian women are choosing social rather than intrapersonal reasons for cosmetic surgery, the resulting social pressures can still cause anxiety and affect the self-image and self-esteem of women.

In many ways, Spanish-language soap operas represent another space where beautiful, “perfected” women are showcased and, in a sense, compete with one another;
be it for a love interest within the plot or for the lead role. Within *Las muñecas de la mafia*, the theme song, and the juxtaposition of the images of the young women and the older women, establishes what will be revealed through the plot as a continuous rivalry between the wives of the mafia men and the girlfriends or young female protagonists. The “older” women are represented by Lucrecia, Braulio’s wife, and Noelia, the wife of Norman, Braulio’s right-hand man. These women are the prototype of a mafia woman, as explained by Olivia in the beginning of the first episode as: a woman whose main concern is to make herself beautiful from the time she wakes up to the time she goes to bed. They wear the best brand of clothing, jewelry, and accessories; they cause envy among other women because they have everything. They will not be with just any man, only with wealthy men. Examining the predicament of the wives, we find that these women stand to lose their position (power) when compared to the younger women because of their aging bodies. The preference for youthful beauty by the mafia men is presented through the many instances where the men actively seek out young women. For example, in the second episode Braulio opens a gym where women ages 16 to 21 years old get a free membership. This allows the men to have continuous access to young women. Norman becomes obsessed with Vanessa, who is a customer there, and this space provides Norman a way to pursue her. He eventually rapes her at the gym. Later in this episode, Braulio and Norman are seen at the girls’ high-school graduation party, where Braulio meets Olivia for the first time. In addition, the spectator learns, in episode fourteen, that Olivia’s hairdresser is actually a scout for the mafia, who convinces young women to get involved with the men by promising protection and money. Both Lucrecia and Noelia try desperately to hold on to their youth, setting aside
their roles as mothers, and desiring instead to remain the central sexual interest of their husbands as they mimic young girls in dress and exercise obsessively. In the end, both Lucrecia and Noelia are replaced by younger women, thus reinforcing the belief that they no longer fit the ideal set forth by the drug culture and dominant media practices.

The juxtaposition between the older women and the young female protagonist begins from the onset. The very first scene in episode one is of a woman’s legs, as she lies in bed in a provocative position. As the camera rises up her taut thigh, we see that she wears lingerie. The camera zooms out to reveal a large bedroom, with a king-size bed on which Lucrecia stretches out, as if posing for a magazine shoot. Lucrecia’s make-up and hair are perfect. The scene then cuts to another room, and the camera is zoomed in to show a much smaller space and full-size bed, on which Brenda, a high-school girl from a low socio-economic class, has just awoken. Brenda is Olivia’s best friend and becomes the liaison first between Olivia and Braulio, then Braulio and his men and her group of friends. Back in Lucrecia’s room, she jumps off the bed and walks over to a large window; when opened, lush greenery is revealed, symbolizing space and breadth. Back in Brenda’s room, the camera is again zoomed in, body-cropping her from the waist up; she has jumped off her bed and stands in front of a small window with bars, through which she sees houses and some trees, symbolizing limitation and congestion. Lucrecia walks from her window, around her king-size bed to leave her room, while Brenda has to jump over her bed to exit her bedroom. Lucrecia is next shown in an elegant bathroom; she has a glass of champagne, lit candles, and is taking a bubble-bath. The camera, mimicking the small space, once again zooms in on the shower-head in Brenda’s shower, showing the water falling onto her. The camera then is angled from waist-up showing the
backside of Brenda and the small corner of her shower space. Clearly, one difference between these two women is socio-economic class. The very next scene then reveals what becomes the most important difference between them: age. Brenda has met up with her friends on a busy school campus, while Lucrecia is seen with her husband leaving a large estate in the country. Lucrecia’s husband, Braulio Bermúdez, forces her to take her own car, justifying his demand by stating that after twenty years of marriage he no longer wishes to be seen with her. Despite the fact that Lucrecia is thin with a voluptuous bosom, has a very athletic and taut body, long straight hair, light skin, and dresses provocatively, she no longer holds the interest of her husband, and therefore falls out of the ideal projected within the soap opera. The perfection that Lucrecia possesses loses value because it is no longer combined with youth; this youth is personified instead by Brenda and the young women, thus reinforcing a precise paradigm of physical attractiveness.

Recalling Wolf’s connection of competition among women as a result of the beauty myth, age here is directly related to the division among women. Wolf avows that “Youth and (until recently) virginity have been ‘beautiful’ in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance. Aging in women is ‘unbeautiful’ since women grow more powerful with time” (14). She goes on to state how the links between generations of women must always be broken. Older women fear young ones, young fear the old. In Las muñecas, this fear is acted out through the wives’ attempts to keep the sexual attraction of their husbands, and through their fears of being replaced by a younger woman. For example, after finding out Braulio has opened a new gym, Lucrecia goes to the gym and confronts Braulio about the age of the young women who are seen there.
working out. Later that same evening, Lucrecia dresses up as a school girl and attempts to seduce her husband. She wears a school uniform of a white collared shirt which she ties in the front to show her midriff, a plaid miniskirt, knee-high socks and heels. However, her attempt at seduction is rejected by Braulio. While Lucrecia’s character is persistently projected in a sexual manner – always in revealing outfits, and perfectly primped, – Noelia’s character tries diligently to be seen as sexually enticing. Not only does Noelia dress in a similar manner to Lucrecia in revealing and sensual attire, but the scenes in which she is with her husband she is often seen in lingerie attempting to seduce him as well. Additionally, Noelia extensively exercises, spending up to three hours on the stationary bike. However, all of Noelia’s attempts fail as well, as she never triumphs in being intimate with her husband. Instead, Norman is seen pursuing the much younger Violeta and trying to avoid being seen with Noelia as much as possible. Noelia’s fears about her husband’s infidelity are confirmed in episode twenty-three, at the birthday party Braulio holds for his daughter. All of the young female protagonists attend this party except Renata who has married her older longtime boyfriend. In the scene where Norman is getting ready to leave, Noelia asks if he is going to take her with him to the party. Norman, of course, rejects the idea of her mingling with the drug culture crowd. However, Lucrecia later convinces her to go, inviting her to be her special guest to her daughter’s birthday party. Lucrecia hints at the opportunity to find out what Norman is up to, since Noelia has mentioned his preoccupied state of mind. Noelia dresses in a tightfitting gold dress that reaches above mid-thigh, and mimics a corset at the top. In comparison to the more sophisticated black backless dress Lucrecia wears, Noelia’s outfit, make-up, and hair are done in a fashion that projects youth, donning face gems,
and a large flower clip in her hair. At the party Norman has cornered Violeta in the
bathroom and comes on to her. Although Violeta ultimately rejects Norman, Noelia
walks in just as Violeta and Norman leave the bathroom. Norman takes Noelia into a
back room where he criticizes her outfit, and disciplines her by beating her with a belt.
The same night, Lucrecia is also rejected by Braulio when she attempts to come into his
room, who is in fact in bed with Brenda. Lucrecia, rejected once more by Braulio, has
been exchanged with someone who is about twenty years her minor. In this same way,
Noelia fears being replaced by Violeta. In the end, it is not Violeta but rather a young
twenty year old woman whom Norman kidnaps from the rival drug cartel who sexually
replaces Noelia. Ultimately both Lucrecia and Noelia no longer fit the ideal model of
what a mafia muñeca is, and are superseded by younger women. While both Lucrecia
and Noelia have aged well, they are both attractive women who are curvaceous yet thin
with Anglo or Northern European facial features. The only physical difference between
the wives of the mafia men and the young women is age. Accordingly, the message
being visually and physically sent is the celebration of a specific femininity constructed
within a particular paradigm of physical attractiveness that couples the female body with
not only perfection but signs of youth.

Wolf’s exploration of how women become more powerful as they age, and thus
becoming unattractive to the men who would prefer to control and manipulate women to
appease their own interests, is reflected within Las muñecas by the valuation placed upon
the women according to their youthful physical attractiveness and susceptibility. The
hypermasculine behavior and characteristic of the mafia men are emphasized by not only
their pursuit and conquest of women fifteen years their junior, but also the sexual
objectification of the young women’s bodies by the men and the use of those bodies for personal enjoyment and profit. While the young women use their beauty as a means to get what they want, in the end they themselves are used as objects. Renata is forced to transport drugs across the border in her stomach. Pam is forced to obtain buttock augmentation and a tattoo of the mafia boss’ name across her new derriere. Olivia is seen as a trophy girlfriend; her only function is to boost the ego of Braulio and satisfy his sexual desire. Their decisions to associate themselves with the drug cartel result in tragic endings for all of them. Renata dies in a Miami ambulance, as a result of transporting heroine in her stomach. Olivia ends up in jail after Braulio has been arrested. Pamela has to run for her life, escaping Colombia by allowing herself to get gang-raped by a “coyote” and his band of men so they will sneak her into the United States, where she winds up working as an undocumented maid. Violeta is killed after she takes over her father’s business and tries to avenge his death, at a meeting set up by the new bosses who have replaced Braulio. And Brenda winds up alone and pregnant with Braulio’s child, as he will spend no less than 15 years in prison after being extradited to Miami.

The young female protagonists’ position within the plot renders them as consumable docile bodies subject to the carnal and gluttonous gaze and use by the mafia men. Because of their naiveté, and often their socio-economic need, the young women are easily exploited by the men. Accordingly, within Colombian society, the mafia emerges as a cultural institution that serves as, borrowing from Foucault’s terminology, a social body that contributes to the governance over the young female protagonists. It is

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important to point out, as Susan Bordo clarifies, that, following Foucault, “we must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another; we must instead think of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain” (167). The power that the mafia men hold over the women is grounded throughout the plot by the assumption that there exists an ideal beauty, that consists of both youth and perfection, and that is exaggerated by the hypersexualization of women’s bodies – at times molding them through cosmetic surgery to fit a certain exaggerated aesthetic ideal – and by the use of those same bodies as possessions and as an exchange for services. The fact that the women are both young and beautiful places them within a specific paradigm of ideal beauty projected within the soap opera, which gains them favor over the older women.

In conclusion, the muñecas youth and beauty gives them an advantage within the drug culture and gains them access into the drug world of conspicuous consumption. However, their bodies – their main vehicle of ascension – are exchanged for a price. Similar to Catalina in Sin tetas, their naivety and hunger for status leads them to become involved in the drug cartel, which proves to be dangerous and ultimately brings a tragic ending to each of the main protagonists. Anxiety is shown throughout the series, primarily as a result of age, as the “older” wives are the ones who make a physical and aesthetic effort (through exercise or dress) to maintain their sexuality. In the end their efforts prove to be in vain, as they eventually are replaced by younger women. As Menéndez-Alarcón asserts, “It is common for people to comment on telenovelas, identifying themselves with particular characters or with specific events. The telenovelas are a subject of conversation at home as well as between neighbors (especially between
women)” (100). Though the programs are meant for entertainment purposes, they are, in fact, a kind of visual infomercial where patterns of the latest chiseled and molded female bodies are on display for the spectator to compare herself to, or upon which a man or a woman can build expectations of the female body. In this way, the series, then, perpetuates the already dominant paradigm that ideal femininity is directly linked to signs of youth and perfection.

As I have been analyzing throughout this study, cultural products, such as television (pageants, movie stars, and soap operas) as well as novels and fashion and beauty magazines, project images and messages that construct the celebration of dominant physical attractiveness ideals, affirming not only that the body is malleable and can attain this paradigm, but also that anxiety can lead some to undergo cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery in order to conform to the prevalent ideal. Projected ideal beauty, for Latinas, Colombian, and Dominican women within popular cultural productions, incessantly feature young, thin yet voluptuous women, with Northern European or Anglo features, long (mostly) straight hair, and light skin, thus eliding the varied physicality and racial scope across Latin America. The emphasis on young models, actresses, and socialites highlights a very selective paradigm of physical attractiveness that centers on juvenescence and the perfection of women’s bodies. Furthermore, these women have access to an economic standing that grants them access to beauty products, and medical and non-medical procedures that enables them to fit and/or be molded into the national aesthetic ideal. Within narrative, focusing on opposite socio-economic classes and age groups, this chapter has demonstrated how the coupling of the female body with signs of youth and perfection was directly related to the
ascension of the social ladder for the lower socio-economic class, thus producing more anxiety for those women who did not possess the ideal beauty/sexuality. On the other hand, the older women who were not distressed about their economic situation experienced less anxiety related to feminine ideals. However, one factor that is constant across all media studied thus far is age. Within magazines, age classifies real or imagined bodily changes as defects that require “correction” through beauty products and procedures. Within the novels, it becomes a powerful weapon coupled with sexuality that is used to measure a female’s attractiveness. On screen, these images come to life, as Latina and Caribbean women visually reinforce assumed national preferences in the U.S., the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. In this sense, women’s bodies are given the responsibility of symbolizing the success of their countries’ socio-economic systems. Thus, women go to great lengths, often involving surgical alteration, to attain Latin American ideals of beauty that require them to remain forever beautiful and youthful.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

In our postmodern world, beauty is regarded as an identity. It can be performed, it can stand in as a social construct, and it can even be formulated as a moral problem when those excluded from the accepted model of physical attractiveness are regarded as degenerate. In my investigation, I found that an invariable element to the process of the categorization of beauty is race. While one perception of beauty is that it is merely physical, in reality racial classification and the recognition of “legitimate” beauty have tangible impacts on social matters such as access to employment, marriageability, perceptions of education, civilization, decency, and purity. Thus, a constant focus throughout this dissertation has been to assess how beauty is racialized. Throughout this study – concentrating on the themes of hypersexuality, consumption, the age factor and cosmetic surgery – I have sought to identify strategies of representation used to propagate or instill certain beauty values and stereotypes about U.S. Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women and how those strategies either reflect or interrogate paradigms of ideal physical attractiveness.

Within the past ten years, the focus on a “particular” Latina and Latin American female body has exploded in mass media and beyond. Since we are unable to shut out the influence of television, radio, computer, and social media, we are constantly reminded of the importance and value of our appearance. When television and magazine imagery, films and narrative characters incessantly showcase beautiful (white) women, this permits the Beauty Cult’s fixation on race to penetrate our everyday lives. As we have seen, beauty and fashion magazines within the U.S., Colombia, and the Dominican Republic
tend to feature Latina and Caribbean women who have light skin tones, light hair and eye color, and more often than not straight hair and thinner bodies. Within the U.S, ethnic models are consciously used to draw attention to difference and signify a sensual quality. Within Colombia and the Dominican Republic, it tends to imply a primitive sexuality and many times also implies a lower socio-economic class. Although in both cases the use of more “Latin American-looking” models is meant to be inclusive, those same models are screened to create an emphasis on Anglo or Northern European facial features, hair textures, and bodies, resulting in an exploitation of their supposed difference. The same practices are seen in narrative, when the successful heroines are characterized by their ability to fit those dominant ideal beauty traits and/or their inclusion in the higher (white) socio-economic class. Among the cultural products examined in this study, the most explicit focus on race was found within the Dominican *denbow* song “*La morena*” by Toxic Crow. The title itself – not to mention the video imagery and lyrics – draws on popular stereotypes about the non-white woman’s overt sexuality. Additionally, the details of *la morena*’s straight hair and Anglo or Northern European facial features reinforce the negative framing of ethnic characteristics that don’t conform to a Eurocentric ideal. Thus, the mainstreaming of “brown as beautiful” and the acceptance of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican female bodies still reinforce racial construction of white superiority, and has the ability to create an increased anxiety. Not only is the standard beauty model Anglo or European, but there is even more pressure to conform when the ethnic models also contain the same traits. Even though this dissertation did not focus explicitly on sexuality, the heteronormative dimensions of these beauty standards – the dominance of the male-subject gaze upon the female object – also merits further
exploration. While heteronormative dimensions of beauty were standard throughout most of the cultural products studied, *Dirty Girls Social Club* included a homosexual female protagonist who pushed back against that heteronormativity by being the most attractive and successful among her heterosexual friends.

My analysis was influenced by cultural critics Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf, among others, who have outlined that certain paradigms of beauty exist for women within the media and society. I built on their theories about the body and identity by combining them with the tropes of Latinidad and Tropicalism that are specific to U.S. Latinos and Latin Americans within North American popular culture. In addition, I applied theories from critics who wrote specifically about Latin American culture in order to compare and contrast strategies of representation and power within the United States and Latin America. I found that the presence of certain themes such as the attributes of bright-colored clothing, rhythmic music, brown or olive skin, and narratives of sexual availability or sensual appearance – as conveyed through the trope of Tropicalism – shaped perceived sexual attractiveness as an important factor in not only the potency of a woman’s beauty, but also her potential success and/or failure. In addition, within the United States, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic we find limited and narrow definitions of ideal ethnic beauty. For many Latina, Colombian, and Dominican audiences, consumption seemed repeatedly to be linked with a specific body type and race, and implied that said body type and race could be purchased. Moreover, these products highlight features that align with dominant Anglo or Northern European beauty, thus marketing a specific Latina and Caribbean female body, and leaving out – and potentially causing feelings of deficiency for – the full range of racially mixed bodies and
beauty. Ultimately, the assumption that the body is malleable and can be transformed – whether through beauty products, fashion, non-invasive treatments (such as skin lighteners, hair straighteners, colored contacts) or cosmetic surgeries that form the body to flawless proportions, sometimes erasing the aging process and ethnic qualities – can also provoke feelings of inadequacy and shortcoming. This occurs when a ubiquitous presence of cultural productions promote the use of beautifying treatments and cosmetics in order to meet specific equations of beauty, racial superiority, and power. The fictional characters and imagery explored in the present study that purposely undermine these paradigms and representations also constitute evidence that, although we wish to believe we live in a post-racial society, there is still very much a focus on race.

In chapter 2 “Exótica es la palabra: Hypersexualization and Imagery of Latina and Latin American Bodies in Cultural Productions,” we examined the symbolic value and probable reception of the imagery of Latina and Latin American female bodies in the United States, the Dominican Republic and Colombia in relation to the continuous trend of racializing and hypersexualizing Latina and Caribbean female bodies within mainstream cultural productions. In particular, by concentrating on the perpetuation of ideas of exoticism, sexuality, and hyper-femininity, I explored how fictional, pictorial, and musical depictions of women maintain dominant practices of hypersexualization of women or if they question paradigms of physical attractiveness which defines female’s beauty by her hypersexualization and hyperfeminization. I drew on a variety of representations of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women within beauty and fashion magazines, narrative, film, and music in order to explore the various vehicles through which women derive their self-perceptions.
In chapter 3 “Accesorios grandes y poderosos: Consumption of Luxury Goods and Ideals of Glamour and Beauty,” we examined the connection among consumption, beauty, and power in various popular culture products and mass media. An important point of reference was to measure how the equation of accomplishment, power, and agency with pleasure of the self allowed claims of women’s participation in commodity consumption as symbols of successful womanhood. Likewise, within fictional, pictorial, and musical depictions of Latinas, Colombian, and Dominican women, the themes of race, socio-economic class, and gender were imperative in assessing which representations and female characters succeeded and/or failed.

The fourth chapter “Cuerpo perfecto desde todos los ángulos: Cosmetic Surgery and the Age Factor” corresponds with chapters 2 and 3 by expanding my exploration of the role of beauty as a powerful aesthetic and erotic symbol in the on-going search for identity. I once again introduced the correlation between beauty and power, but this time in relation to physical transformation. In particular, I was able to expose the assumed malleability of Latina, Colombian, and Dominican female bodies through diet, non-medical cosmetic treatments, and more invasive cosmetic surgeries, by concentrating on the value placed upon youth, race, and physicality of their bodies. Assumption that the body is malleable creates anxiety, and how particular fictional characters and imagery will either promote the use of beautifying treatments and cosmetic in order to meet specific equations of beauty and power, or, conversely, to undermine those paradigms.

Among each of these chapters, the idea of a superlative physical attractiveness is combined with the message of the interrelationship between the ability to fit a certain paradigm of ideal beauty and power. For Latina, Colombian, and Dominican women,
this ideal revolves around not only an ideal sexuality and exoticism, age and perfection, but also an ideal race. It is vital that we consider and raise awareness about these issues, and consciously debate whether we are moving in a good direction when these realizations may reinforce the prejudices associated with difference rather than diminishing them. While this exploration started out as a journey about my personal identity, the topic of this dissertation has impacted me in ways I did not anticipate. Now, as a mother of a young Latina daughter, I am more invested than ever in how she views herself within the world. The other day she looked into the mirror and said “I’m pretty.” She is only two years old and she already appraises her appearance, measured against manufactured ideals. I have to wonder if her perception of beauty as she gets older will be shaped by her light hair and eye color, her light skin tone and thin body? In what ways will the fact that I am a U.S. Latina and her father is Peruvian have an influence on the way the world sees her? The more cultural producers take charge in challenging these images – as some texts that we have considered here did – the better chance our female youth have at valuing themselves against a broader and more welcoming set of standards.
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Cosmpolitan for Latinas (Premiere Issue Summer 2012)


Eve (2010 No. 31 año 3 México)


La morena. Toxic Crow. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXsBOOluj2c

Las muñecas de la mafia. 2009 Produced by BE-TV and broadcast by Caracol TV.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LH6tccyE6I Accessed 3/16/2015 @ 1 pm.


Vanidades (2012 No. 8 año 52 Estados Unidos)

Vanidades (2010 No. 11 año 50 Estados Unidos)


Angela M. Postigo  
Curriculum Vitae

Department of Social Sciences  
One Main Street, S1015  
Houston, TX 77002  
postigoa@uhd.edu

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky (Expected May 2016)  
Dissertation director: Dr. Susan Carvalho

M.A. Hispanic Literature, University of New Mexico 2007
B.A. Spanish, University of New Mexico 2005
A.A. Liberal Arts, Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute 2003

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2007-2008 Visiting Instructor, Roanoke College

PUBLICATION

Book Article


FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

2013 Gender and Women’s Studies Graduate Certificate, University of Kentucky

2008-2012 Teaching Assistantship, The University of Kentucky
2012  Dissertation Enhancement Award, University of Kentucky Graduate School

2012  Sigma Delta Pi National Gabriela Mistral Award

2011  Travel Grant for Research in Latin America, University of Kentucky Latin American Studies Program

2011  Certificate of Achievement: HIGSA Award for Community Service, University of Kentucky

2008-2011  Lyman T. Johnson Award Fellowship, The University of Kentucky

2005-2007  Teaching Assistantship, The University of New Mexico

2006  Awarded Letter of Recognition for Teaching Excellence, The University of New Mexico (Spring)

2006  Awarded Letter of Recognition for Teaching Excellence, The University of New Mexico (Fall)

2006  Awarded Certificate of Excellence, Phi Lambda Beta Honor Society

CONFERENCE ACTIVITY/PARTICIPATION

Papers Presented


2010  “A Regime of Knowledge in Mario Vargas Llosa’s Pantaleón y las visitadoras.” 30th Cincinnati Conference of Romance Languages and Literatures. Cincinnati, OH. May

262
2007  “Estatuas de deseo.” 54th Annual Conference of the Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies. Santa Fe, NM. January

2006  “La nación, cuerpo y deseo en Santa.” 16th Graduate Colloquium, Department of Spanish and Portuguese. The University of Texas. Austin, TX. December

2006  “Entre civilización y barbarie en ‘El matadero’ y Amalia.” Céfiro 7th Annual Conference. Texas Tech University. Lubbock, TX. March

Panels Organized


2006  Co-organizer/ Volunteer. 14th Annual University of New Mexico Conference on Ibero-American Culture and Society. University of New Mexico. Albuquerque, NM. Spring

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Houston Continuing Education, Sole Instructor
Business Spanish Translation, (Fall 2015)

University of Houston-Downtown, Sole Instructor
Elementary Spanish I (Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015 online, Spring 2016)
Elementary Spanish II (Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015 online, Spring 2016)
Spanish for Heritage Learners I (Fall 2015)

Lone Star College – University Park, Sole Instructor
Intermediate Spanish I (Fall 2015 online, Spring 2016 online)
Intermediate Spanish II (Spring 2016 online)

University of Kentucky, Teaching Assistant (Instructor of Record)
Spanish Conversation (Fall 2011)
Spanish Grammar and Syntax (Fall 2011, Spring 2012)
Intermediate Spanish I (Spring 2010, Summer 2010, Spring 2011, Summer 2011)
Intermediate Spanish II (Fall 2010)
Accelerated Elementary Spanish I (Fall 2009)
Elementary Spanish II (Spring 2009, Fall 2008)

Bluegrass Community Technical College, Sole Instructor
Elementary Spanish II (Summer 2010)

University of New Mexico, Teaching Assistant (Instructor of Record)
Elementary Spanish II (Fall 2005, Spring 2006, Fall 2006, Spring 2007)
Elementary Spanish I (Spring 2006)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2012  Colombia: Dissertation Research, Dept. of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky
Visited several Colombian cities exploring popular representations of the female body. In addition I made academic contacts and acquired primary texts that explore contemporary popular culture related to the female body.

2011  Dominican Republic: Dissertation Research, Dept. of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky. Attended an international Caribbean culture conference, made academic contacts, and acquired primary texts that explore popular representations of the female body in popular culture.

SERVICE TO PROFESSION

2010  Editorial Board. *Nomenclatura*. University of Kentucky, Department of Hispanic Studies

2008  Nicaragua; International Service, Center for Community Services, Roanoke College

2006  Volunteer. Politics of Language Cross-Disciplinary Symposium and Workshops. The Invisible Majority of the Southwest, Learners of Spanish as a Heritage Language. University of New Mexico

Workshops Attended

2010  Written Spanish Workshop Series, University of Kentucky

2007  *ACTFL Workshop “Adhering to the ACTFL Standards in the Language Classroom”* Washington and Lee University
2006  Politics of Language Cross-Disciplinary Symposium and Workshops. The Invisible Majority of the Southwest, Learners of Spanish as a Heritage Language, University of New Mexico

EXTRACURRICULAR UNIVERSITY SERVICE

2011  Volunteer. ESL classes. Hispanic Seventh-Day Adventist Church of Lexington. Lexington, KY
2010–2012  President. Sigma Delta Pi, National Collegiate Hispanic Honor Society
2009–2010  Vice-President. Hispanic Students Graduate Association (HIGSA)
2006  Volunteer. Celebración de la mujer. University of New Mexico
2006  Volunteer. Celebración Celestinesca – Reading of La Celestina. University of New Mexico
2006  Coordinator/ Volunteer. GSA Brown Bag Event: Homenaje a Elena Garro, presentación de Andarse por las ramas. University of New Mexico

LANGUAGES

Native Spanish
Portuguese: good speaking, near-native reading
French: good reading knowledge

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS

Phi Sigma Iota International Foreign Language Honor Society. Fall 2011 – present.
Sigma Delta Pi, National Collegiate Hispanic Honor Society. November 2009 – present.