

Overcoming Distorted Illusions

Examining the Latina Struggle with Body Image and
Self-Perception in American culture

Whitney Porter

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Professor Esther Allen and Professor Carla Bellamy
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Women are under constant pressure to measure up, quite literally at times, to certain standards of physical beauty. Many women, especially in the cultural and ethnic melting pot of New York City, are under pressure to fit into multiple standards of beauty at the same time; one standard might be that of an individual's family, while another standard might be that of outside culture or peer opinion. This beauty trap has a particularly interesting impact on those women who identify as Latina or Hispanic. Latina women in New York City, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 30, are in a difficult position¹. Many of them are daughters of immigrant mothers who desperately want them to be American (an identity which, as I will discuss, often means "white") and Latina at the same time – a difficult and delicate task. One of the major elements of *being* (identifying as) Latina is the adequate representation of a specific but, ironically, completely inconsistent, standard of physical beauty. Women of all ethnic backgrounds encounter similar struggles to reach an ideal that is for all intents and purposes unreachable. The goal of this paper is to examine how conflicting standards and suggestions of the "ideal" woman influence the perceptions of cultural/ethnic identity (e.g. *who* is Latina) and self-image among individual American women living in the Harlem and Washington Heights areas of New York City who self-identify as Latina.

My own experiences of Latina culture in the Harlem led me to conclude that the Latina perspective on beauty was far more flexible than that of the majority of American "Anglos." It became evident though, that the "Latina standard of beauty" – displayed in curvaceous, voluptuous mannequins, tight clothes, and salon prepared nails and hair on many of the young women in the neighborhood – is not the definitive standard of beauty I made the mistake of assuming it is. First, Latina women are in a difficult position to find a concrete identity because many of the younger women living in Harlem and Washington Heights identify as both Latina and American. Their identity, then, is shaped by the standards of what it means to be Latina and what it means to be American, definitions that vary widely from person to person. Also, many Latina women struggle with "passing." Rosie Molinary mentions in *Hijas Americanas* that Latinas are often racially ambiguous, especially those with lighter skin, which not only makes an established cultural identity aesthetically difficult to decipher, but also adds

¹ This particular age range was decided upon based on the fact that this age range is more likely to be either first generation American, have living immigrant or foreign-born parents, and is the target market age of popular media, which supposes that popular media (magazines, TV, movies, etc.) has had at least some influence on the women in this range.

confusion to the woman's self-image (26). She goes on to say, "As white women are often projected as beautiful and valuable, it becomes almost second nature to value 'brighter' and 'whiter'" (109).

This same notion of the value placed upon whiteness and "passing" is presented in Nancy Etcoff's *Survival of the Prettiest*. Etcoff states, "Those who can 'pass' as members of the group in power are more likely to rise in status and be considered 'attractive' by that society's standards" (117). By this logic, if a Latina woman of a lighter complexion pursues the desire to be valued and achieve status by becoming part of, or at least by passing as part of the group in power (a group that is predominately white or "Anglo"), it might seem as though she will gain an advantage over Latina women of darker complexion. In reality, however, light skinned Latinas are no less alienated by the notion of color or "passing" as the gateway to acceptance, both of the self and by others, than those of a darker complexion. Both groups are at risk for being stamped as "white" or "Latina" without the chance to embrace a dual or multifaceted ethnic identity. Further, because of the value placed upon "whiteness" in American culture in particular, "white" and "American" are often conflated identities. This makes the task of parsing out exactly what one "should" strive for in terms of beauty more complicated. If a Latina is told from a young age that she should be American, but not sacrifice her "true" heritage, and being American means being white, what is a girl to make of the mixed signals being thrown at her?

The notion of beauty in America is murky and socially constructed, but young women of all ethnicities are prone to believe that beauty has a single definition. American concepts of beauty, like concepts of beauty in other nations, are shaped by extremes and "ideals" featured in a wide range of elements of popular culture. The existence of these extremes creates a "beauty spectrum" that asserts an absolute "best" which, in turn, requires an absolute "worst." The problem with this spectrum is that American women who fall somewhere in the very realistic middle often feel inadequate, having achieved only "average" status, but not "actual" beauty. A *New York Times* article on the subject "Body and Image: One Size Definitely Does Not Fit All" calls the American woman's struggle with beauty and body image a "plague of body hating that...is deeply ingrained in American women" (Duenwald 2).

Beyond the "body hating" that can develop from this stringent ideological spectrum is the demonization of those closer to the fictive ideal. For example, authors writing books that demonize skinny women have claimed

to be advocating for “body loving.” This is no better a solution for a woman struggling with body image than a Latina woman struggling to settle on her ethnic identity by putting forth her best effort to “pass” as white, and “fit” into a prepackaged ideal. Both instances only allow the woman to pick one definitive identity (thin or “big”, Latina or American). This robs the woman of the richness of a multifaceted or unlabeled identity can provide. In the culture of American beauty there is a serious lack of in between, which seems to equate to a significant disconnect between imagined ideal and reality.

This lack of an in between is especially problematic for young Latinas who are developing their identities and their own notions of beauty. There are so few Latina models depicted on American magazine covers that it undoubtedly suggests to young Latinas that there is something more appealing and something more inherently American or inclusive about achieving whiteness, a thin, airbrushed body, large breasts, pouty lips, blue eyes and blonde hair. This could lead young Latina women to conclude that the farther their ethnicity places them from the extreme of “whiteness” on the beauty spectrum, the less desirable they become as women and as Latinas.

Etcoff discusses the use of beauty as a value judgment and states, “We treat appearance not just as a source of pleasure or shame but as a source of information” (39). American society, which in many cases permeates global societies, places so much value on appearance that it has become the source for how the American public, at least some of it, perceives the worth of a person. These value judgments depend upon the perpetuation of the extremes of the beauty spectrum. “We may know that skeletal or obese bodies don’t look as good as average-weight bodies, but we value them as emblems of status and desire them the same way we do any other accoutrements of wealth” (Etcoff, 200). The pervasive cultural awareness of the value ascribed to extremes presumably suggests the potential for collective resistance to perpetuating them. Despite this potential for resistance, many Americans continue to struggle to adjust their perspectives.

One of the obvious reasons for this inability to adjust our “beauty lens” is the overwhelming flux of media images that suggest that extremes *are* reality. “...Magazines overvalue a thin body image as the acceptable standard for female appearance and the primary formula for a happy life” (Koenig and Pompper 89). The ability for magazine images and articles to conflate a particular body image with improved quality of life is one way the media and popular culture are upholding extremes as both ideal and attainable. “Body dissatisfaction...stems from

two assumptions -- that a body can be shaped at will, so that ‘the only thing that lies between any woman and perfection is effort,’ and that an imperfect body reflects an imperfect person” (Dunewald 3). Body dissatisfaction as a result of these two assumptions is clearly influenced by the fact that women’s magazines often display glossy photos of fit, smiling women behind bold headings claiming to hold secrets like “How to lose 5lbs in a week!” and “10 Keys to Happiness” followed by pages of tips about diet and exercise. The associations made by women exposed to these images and words make sense. But when those associations are so powerful that they influence a woman’s understanding of not only her own physical appearance, but also her value as a person, it becomes evident that American women’s focus should be shifted away from the extremes and back to the “in between” (Wolf 187).

The associations this kind of media evokes for white American women are complicated enough, but for Latinas, the struggle is even more complex, and potentially more destructive to healthy body image and self-confidence. For one, the aforementioned underrepresentation of Latina cover models on American magazines bombards young Latinas with images of a very specific type of white woman – tall, thin, blonde hair and blue eyes is the market ideal for high fashion magazines while teen magazines are generally more diverse (Carr 2) – which has the power to establish a beauty norm. Latina women, especially those growing up around diverse American peers might use American magazines as a source for identity formation, and without women “like them” on the covers, there is the potential for Latinas to feel “outside” or “otherized.”

In a 2002 New York Times article David Carr explains the underrepresentation of nonwhite women on the covers of high fashion and other popular magazines is shifting to include a more diverse range of models, but even in this positive trend, there are some serious problems. The statistics do not account for the fetishization of “exotic” ethnicities that seems to have allowed for the increase in nonwhite representation in the media. For example, of the 12 cover models that appeared on *Maxim* magazine between 2001 and 2002, just under half were nonwhite. Editor Keith Blanchard commented, “I think there is a certain attraction to *exotic* women²” (Carr 2). Beyond the fetishization of nonwhite women, not much in terms of positive Latina representation is available in popular media. In fact, when Latina cover models do appear they are “allowed” because they appear as “a

² Emphasis added

different kind of white person” (Carr 2). The ways in which media finds it necessary to either make ambiguous or fetishize Latinas in print media in particular complicates even further the process of identity formation among Latinas who turn to the media for clues about what is desirable or acceptable in terms of appearance.

Latinas growing up in homes with immigrant parents are especially susceptible to media influence because immigrant parents often push their children to *be* American without clearly conveying exactly what that means. Koenig and Pompper comment on this conflicted element of identity formation for Latinas;

Surely, attempts to conform to English-language magazines’ representations of the ‘ideal’ body image and U.S. social standards, while clinging to a cultural heritage that focuses on food and dining, creates a major conflict for Latinas living in the United States who in their everyday lives negotiate between two cultures (100).

Molinary comments on this “negotiation” between cultures as well, claiming that the necessity to be American without losing the Latina parts of oneself can be confusing and also has the capacity to instill a lack of confidence in personal identity (36).

Negotiation with cultural identities for young Latinas is difficult for obvious reasons, but one important roadblock in establishing the dual identity mentioned earlier is the pervasive sense that a choice between cultures must be made. Molinary reflects on her experiences in college and recalls that people would often “disqualify” her status as a Latina because she wasn’t pregnant, was in school, and overcame other ethnic stereotypes (19-20). The fact that any individual believes that they have the authority to “disqualify” another individual’s identity is reflective of the need that many in American society have to label “what” an individual is.

As I mentioned earlier, “Latina” is a category that loosely groups a hugely diverse range of women with certain common bonds (namely language, and self-identification within a group) but there is no way to say “what” a Latina is. In order to escape the presumptuous and reductive processes of many of those “labelers” in American society I chose to conduct street interviews with several Latina women to hear first-hand accounts of what it means to them to be Latina in America. Three women who provided in depth commentary will be introduced here. The way they see themselves and the way they understand beauty is useful information for gaining a grasp on *the* Latina standard of beauty.

Becky, Nicole, and Victoria are three self-identifying Latina women who live in Harlem (in varying locations). Each is in her mid-to-late twenties, and each offered a unique set of responses to my questions about

beauty and body image. Their willingness to share their personal experiences and perspectives allowed me to explore more deeply the complexities of what it means to be a Latina in New York City.

Becky is in her late twenties and identifies as Cuban and Puerto Rican. When asked if she felt pressure to appear a certain way based on her ethnic background she responded, “I don’t let my culture mold who I am.” She told me later, though, that perhaps many of the choices she makes are unconsciously linked to some of the same pressures other Latinas face. Despite her adamant claim to an identity independent of ethnic or cultural influence, she often lumped herself into the group of “Spanish women” (Spanish, meaning Hispanic/Spanish speaking, but not necessarily of Spanish descent) she described when answering interview questions. I asked her what pressures/standards she believes pervade her culture and she responded, “Spanish women in general...we worry about how big our butt is...a lot of Spanish women like to be thick, wear tight clothes, [dress] very sexy...” She identified Spanish women (Latinas) as a group that she was a part of, but insisted she was separate from the generalizations she explained. Her perspective on the general trends of what is physically attractive in a woman was similar to that of both Nicole and Victoria.

Nicole is in her early twenties and identifies as Puerto Rican. She responded that she feels explicit pressure to appear a certain way saying, “I do feel like there is a pressure to be thin and thick at the same time.” She went on to provide very particular measurements for how the female body should be shaped explaining a woman should be, “high 30s in the bust, 20s in the waist, and maybe 30s or bigger in the hips.” My own reaction to this, though I understood the “hourglass” figure she was explaining, was surprise at the specificity of the ideal. It raised questions about whether this ideal existed in her culture as an extreme that can be sought, but never fully achieved, or if failing to reflect the requirements of this standard had the potential to lead to feelings of inadequacy.

Victoria, also in her early twenties, who self-identifies as Dominican, Spaniard and American, clarified some of the questions raised in Nicole’s responses. Victoria touched on the same degree of specificity in the overarching standard of beauty for Latinas. She explained the ideal figure as, “curvy but fit...I wouldn’t get bigger than...like if you’re over 150 pounds, and if you’re going less than 120 then that’s bad.” Her notion of the beauty standard is specifically linked to weight rather than measurement or proportion, which is related to the

same kind of specificity and unattainability of the standard discussed by Nicole, but suggests that variation on what exactly is most important in terms of physical appearance depends a lot on individual opinion rather than cultural “truths.”

According to the study “Do Real Women Have Curves?” “...body dissatisfaction and low body esteem have been found to be higher among White women than among Latinas and other ethnic minority women” (21). The same study goes on to report, though, that other studies have uncovered quite the opposite. This seems to suggest that perhaps the presumption of Hispanic cultures appreciating a “bigger” figure are based on generalizations, much like those I made entering into my research. It seems, based on the responses I received from the women I spoke to, that weight and body shape are incredibly important in terms of gaining acceptance and personal satisfaction whether the goal is to identify as American, Latina, or a hybrid of the two.

Throughout the interviews the words Becky, Victoria, and Nicole used to describe a physically attractive woman were: “sexy,” “voluptuous,” “thick,” and “fit.” Acknowledging the varying individual and cultural understanding of these terms is important for understanding how they shape their larger meanings. For one, the fact that many American Latinas agree that white women dominate media images suggests that in order for beauty standards to become attainable, a “white” woman’s body and a Latina’s body must be (separate) definable things, when, in actuality those two “bodies” represent an immensely diverse pool of different representations of “curvy,” “fit,” “skinny,” “sexy,” “voluptuous,” etc. women.

What then is the standard of beauty in Latina culture, when the standard is both ambiguous and specific? The way specificity functions alongside ambiguity points to something important about perceptions of beauty in general. Individual perception of the standard of beauty, at least in this particular instance, is reflective of personal experiences and individual opinions, but also is shaped by the expectation that there is a standard and hence, an ideal. I discussed earlier the predominately American desire to label, define and “understand” the “other.” Perhaps the fact that Latina women in America are applying this model to *the* Latina standard of beauty can in part be attributed to the influence of American standards/processes for identity formation on Hispanic culture.

This conclusion is due, in part, to the fact that there is such a similarity between the relationship drawn between physical attractiveness and “sexiness” – a very specific type of beauty equated to beauty in general. Each

of the women I spoke to discussed sexualized beauty, with emphasis on large breasts, hips and bottoms. Why does this connect to adherence, at least in part, to American notions of identity formation and what it means to be Latina? There is a prevalent relationship between Latinas in popular culture and sexuality or sexiness. Molinary deems this the “Latina Mystique” she discusses the unfortunate lack of diversified roles for Latinas in television and film. Despite a few exceptions, she says, Latinas typically play the mysterious, sexy role even though character roles have grown over the years (e.g. Sofia Vergara or Jennifer Lopez – light skin, hourglass shapes and cast for roles in which sexuality is their primary “weapon”). She calls the white woman’s parallel media influence the “Barbie Mystique,” which means the tendency for white media and pop culture to value and emphasize the appeal of women who, like Barbie, are tall, thin, and symmetrically beautiful (e.g. Charlize Theron or Uma Thurman – tall, thin, blonde hair and blue eyes and cast in diverse roles that allow for the consequent wide range of perceptions of what a white woman is). Molinary goes on to clarify that, “The Latina mystique, the Barbie mystique, mystique *period*, is based on mystery, not reality” (Molinary 131).

As much as these “mystiques” might be rooted in myth or fantasy of certain stereotypical images, they can have a very real influence on Latina youth struggling to balance different ethnic identities. There is clearly some link between the highly sexualized imagery of Latina women in American pop-culture and the tendency for Latinas to identify attractiveness as synonymous with “sexiness.” This is, of course, speculation that would provide grounds for further research more specific to this idea.

Based on the constraints of my research, the agreement about being “sexy” as part of what constitutes the ideal woman is the overarching goal of the delicate, specific, and entirely unclear balance that the respondents proposed. A good example of the notion of existing somewhere in between extremes was proposed by all three respondents when I asked them to explain the physical standard/ideal for beauty in their personal opinions:

Becky: “Physically...boobs big, but not too big, butt big but not too big, nice hips...a curvy woman, I think, is the most beautiful.”

Nicole: “Fit would be good, and still thick...but fit doesn’t always mean a good thing. People say that my legs are fit, but they really just mean they’re skinny and toned. I don’t want them to be skinny and toned I want them to be thick.”

Victoria: “The image I wouldn’t want to have is to be too skinny or to be too overweight...skinny on top and thick on the bottom.”

Each woman responded to the question fairly quickly and assuredly. The notion of balance as an important component of the overarching Latina standard of beauty, though, comes through loud and clear in the ways that each woman makes sure to explain that a woman needs to fall somewhere within a specific and, at least from their representation of their perception, widely agreed upon range. The definitive but ambiguous ideal goes beyond body shape and weight, into the realm of hair, makeup and clothing, which each woman did not agree upon. Becky said that form-fitting clothing is the most attractive, but Victoria said, “Less is more.” Nicole essentially felt that there is no one style that represents “Latina” style, but rather it is a matter of preference.

It is evident that, at least for these women, standards for physical beauty depend more on body type, weight, and measurements than on other aspects of beauty (e.g. clothing, hair and makeup). Is this uniquely Latina? The simple answer is no, but it is important to remember the specific notions of attractive body type that repeatedly came up. This suggests, as mentioned previously, that there is a strong correlation between Latina identity formation and self-perception and the need to reflect a certain body image that is a hybrid between white American high fashion/magazine cover models, sexualized Latinas in American media and the reality of certain cultural factors (e.g. diet, exercise, etc) and the extent to which those realities allow Latina women to appear a particular way.

One of the primary focuses of this paper was to uncover how *the* American standard for beauty has impacted self-perception for Latinas living somewhere in between that standard and the Latina standard of beauty. Though it is not clear whether or not these standards can ever really be determined, it is evident that Latinas face a complex struggle in terms of understanding their identity and their place in the “in between” that is so often left out of popular culture, media, and even social discussion.

I asked Becky, Victoria, and Nicole if they were satisfied with their appearance. There was a certain discomfort at the question for all three women, but for the most part, each woman responded that they were in fact happy with their appearances despite the fact that they didn’t exactly fit the standard. I was pleased to see that such beautiful, intelligent women weren’t falling into the “beauty trap” that has managed to bring down many young Latinas in the quest for developing and understanding their identity. Each of these women represented a

different ethnic group, but each self-identified as Latina, a symbol of unification among women sharing some common bonds. Perhaps this unification is leading towards an acknowledgement that the extremes of the beauty spectrum (whether the spectrum is strictly white American, strictly Latina, or somewhere in between) are not necessarily reflective of body images that exist in reality.

The majority of my outside sources point to women's ongoing struggle with body image and self-confidence caused by the beauty spectrum and the influence of the heavily idealized and overstated importance of weight, shape and measurements that pervade American culture. It is certain that this struggle will not be easily overcome, but the fact that many young women are standing up against the influence of the "mystique" is a movement towards healthier, more self-assured, and happier lives for women in general. The Latina struggle with these issues presents a challenge that requires the defeat of conflicting influences that dictate what it means to be Latina and an abandonment of the influence of media, which merely perpetuates a fictive notion of a definitive Latina identity.

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