

Latina Identity and the Perils of Femininity

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Yvette thinks that Hispanic girls who bleach their hair blonde “look nasty.” Yvette refers to herself as Hispanic, even though she has been told by her college friends that “Hispanic” is a “government word.” Yvette is my friend from El Paso, whose great-grandparents came to the United States from Mexico and Spain. My brief description of Yvette illustrates some of the issues discussed in this paper: race and gender (Hispanic girls), class (college friends), a standard of beauty that idealizes whiteness (blonde hair), and terminology (Hispanic as a government word).

My project is a study of Latina fiction and its representation of Latina women, physical appearance, gender role and identity. I analyze fiction (including poetry and short stories), autobiographical fiction, and critical essays by Latina authors. The writings of contemporary Latina authors portray vivid examples of Latina females and offer insight into the intricacies of Latina identity. The Latina girls referred to in this study are the Latina girls depicted in the works of fiction by Latina authors. Their traits, desires, experiences, and beliefs are drawn from descriptions and implications present in fictive writings. My study of Latina fiction and its representation of Latina women exposes and contests the issues of physical appearance, gender role, ethnic identity, racism, minority culture and terminology.

Before studying a community of people, it is important to know with which words they refer to themselves and the significance of specific terms. The U.S. Government Census definition of Hispanic, as stated in Suzanne Oboler’s book *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*, states “a person is of Spanish/Hispanic origin if the person’s origin (ancestry) is Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Ecuadoran, Guatemalen, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Salvadoran; from other Spanish-speaking countries of The Caribbean or Central or South America; or from Spain.”¹

Oboler, as well as the other people interviewed in her book, reject the word “Hispanic” because it fails to do justice to the diversity of backgrounds of the people lumped together under this word. Oboler sees a gap between this imposed label and self-identification. What the word “Hispanic” fails to describe, according to Oboler, is the distinction of the Latino experience. Such variety exists among Latinos that far from viewing the Latino experience as a continuation of the assimilation patterns of past European immigrants, various new interpretations of Latino ethnicity are emerging, some of which focus on what Gloria Anzaldúa first identified as the culture of the borderlands, to suggest the impact of transnationalism, multiculturalism, and bilingualism in people’s lives (Oboler 11).

The term “Latina” allows for multiple countries of origin and has become the preferred term among writers and critics in the United States.² “Latina” and “Latino” are gender specific terms, while “Latino/a” and “Latina/Latino” serve to indicate both genders. The term “Chicana” came into common usage when the politicization of the U.S. women’s movement concurred with that of the *movimiento Chicano*.³ Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sandra Cisneros, for instance, refer to themselves as “Chicana,” which specifies Mexican or Southwest U.S. origin. This study defines Latinas as women of Spanish and/or Hispanic heritage born and/or living in the United States. While the writings included in this study are grounded in a Hispanic heritage, the influence of American culture cannot be dismissed. The formative elements of Hispanic culture combine with the contesting aspects of American culture to form Latino/a culture. “Latina” is the predominant term in my study because it accounts for multiple nationalities including but not limited to Mexican descent.

Within the last two decades, the number of Latina authors publishing in the U.S. has grown significantly. The 1981 publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* contributed to this emergence.⁴ An anthology edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back* has been both hailed and burdened as the representative text of feminist theory by women of color. Norma Alarcón discusses the intention of this work; Moraga and Anzaldúa, according to Alarcón, “believed they were developing a theory of subjectivity and culture that would demonstrate the considerable differences between them and Anglo-American women, as well as between them and Anglo-European men and men of their own culture.”⁵ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano expounds on the considerable differences which exist between women of color and Anglo women. In an article entitled “Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective,” Yarbro-Bejarano acclaims *This Bridge Called My Back* for documenting “the rage and frustration of women of color with the white women’s movement, not only for the racism, the tokenism, the exclusion and invisibility of women of color, but also for ignoring the issues of working-class women of color.”⁶

These exclusionary practices in women’s studies treat race and class as secondary to women’s subordination. But ignoring the significance of race and class in the identity of women results in an insufficient definition of identity. A Latina does not participate in an experience as a woman only -- she participates as a working class Chicana, or a middle class Latina mother. In addition to combating the dismissal of class-oriented issues, Chicana feminism developed in order to recognize cultural identity and solidarity. According to Yarbro-Bejarano, “the Chicana feminist also spearheads a critique of the destructive aspects of her culture’s definition of gender roles.”⁷

Latina fiction develops out of the social and political theories of Latina feminists. The issues of race, class and gender are incorporated into the characters, themes, and plots. In “Discourses of Gender, Ethnicity and Class in Chicano Literature,” Rosaura Sanchez claims,

It is perhaps this general marginalization in society, on the basis of class, ethnicity, and gender, that Chicano literature has reconstructed textually, sometimes to counter mainstream representation, sometimes in collusion with these same stereotypical representations, but more often in an effort to recuperate oral texts, memories, and recollections of past events that have long been ignored, erased, denied and dismissed.⁸

The recuperation and recognition of past events is transmitted in Latina fiction through the use of an adolescent female narrator. My study recognizes and focuses on the predominance of adolescent girls in Latina fiction. The authors employ a young female narrator who questions imposed social standards, challenges discriminatory media images, and exposes the pressures which burden Latina girls and young women. Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Beatriz de la Garza, Roberta Fernández and Irene Beltrán Hernández present their stories from the perspective of a young girl. Norma Elia Cantú bases her novel on the memories of her youth. Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Graciela Rodríguez, and Marisa Navarro recount specific episodes from their adolescence and teenage years which contributed to the formation of their respective identities.

A theme of contradiction dominates every essay, poem, short story and novel considered here. A young girl has the potential for failure or success. She desires to be pretty, but sees other pretty girls become victims of tragedy. The Latina protagonist often feels compelled to fulfill the dominant standard of beauty although it may conflict with her own inherent traits. The daughter simultaneously aspires toward and rejects her mother and the convention she symbolizes. These contentious ambitions spring from the tangled relationship of race, class, and gender. Each section of this paper emphasizes a particular theme found in Latina literature, offering a comparison of each work's representation of and response to the prominent issues. While similar themes can be extracted from each work, the authors vary in their treatment of beauty, family, gender role, and racism.

I. ADOLESCENCE & FEMININITY

In her novel *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, Norma Elia Cantú stands her thirteen-year-old character before the mirror asking, "Who am I?" (21).⁹ Searching for identity in front of a mirror implies a vital relationship between identity and physical appearance. Latina fiction often presents two dominant themes: a focus on adolescence and a conflicting representation of femininity. The authors either employ an adolescent narrator, portray an adolescent protagonist, or recall autobiographical accounts of their own adolescent experiences.

Female adolescence is naturally a time of turmoil. Questions are constantly raised and answers are not always ready. Naturally inquisitive, the young female character adds an element of doubt to the reality she depicts. An adolescent female narrator filters the events of her world through the uncertainties in her mind. While surveying the reality surrounding her, the young Latina protagonist confronts many

problematic and unresolved situations. One such problematic matter is femininity. For my study, the term femininity involves elements of gender, identity, and standards of female appearance.

Regardless of description, gender, identity and standards of female appearance, according to the Latina authors studied, exist in contradiction. Continuously depicted in terms of extremes which oppose and undermine each other, gender and identity become issues which at once demand and resist definition. The period of female adolescence begins the permanent formation of both identity and gender.

In the hopes of determining what is feminine and what is beautiful, Rocío Esquivel, an adolescent girl, asks herself the following questions:

What did it mean to be a woman? To be beautiful, complete? Was beauty a physical or a spiritual thing, was it strength of emotion, resolve, a willingness to love? What was it then, that made women lovely? (53)

She looks to four unique women in her attempt to determine femininity and beauty. Rocío narrates *The Last of the Menu Girls*, a collection of short stories by New Mexico native Denise Chávez.¹⁰ The story entitled “Shooting Stars” depicts Rocío as a young girl dealing with impending womanhood. She recounts a summer spent in Texas with relatives, where she meets four women who seem to embody the essence of femininity. Yet as her relationship with each woman progresses, the narrator finds that each ideal fails. The women are perfect only in their imperfections.

The first, Eloisa, “was sixteen, already a woman” (56). The slow pace at which Rocío believes she is maturing only enhances the rapidity with which others girls seem to reach womanhood. This status of ideal woman, while easily granted, can be denied for the slightest transgression. Rocío reveals how “that summer I carried Eloisa around with me -- her image a holy card, revered, immutable, an unnamed virgin. That is, until the Jeff Chandler movie at the Pasatiempo Theatre,” where she finds Eloisa smoking a cigarette (56-57). Rocío adopts a standard of extremes and applies it to the women who serve as her models. Eloisa is a casualty of the dichotomous virgin/whore model; she must be one or the other, there exists no in between. Eloisa quickly falls from the revered place of virgin to the slanderous position of whore when her honor becomes tainted by a cigarette.

After Eloisa fails the test of ideal womanhood, Rocío turns to Diana. Diana, who was “lovely” and “apparently guileless,” seems a perfect candidate (57). She marries her childhood sweetheart, moves away, and has two sons, only to return one Sunday in church, “mustached, wrinkled, with frightened eyes” (59). Diana succumbs to the aspects of womanhood which stifle beauty: marriage and motherhood. Rocío believes that marriage and motherhood give evidence of womanly maturity at the expense of more attractive feminine attributes, namely diminished beauty and forsaken youthfulness. Diana, as the example, has lost her loveliness, her grace, and her captivating influence, only to be ugly and timid with a husband who “left her periodically to live with her former maid” (59).

Rocío next proceeds to place all her hopes in Josie, whose pouty lips and accented cleavage attract all the boys from the State University. Josie cha-chas at all the parties, clicks her “black spike heels” and dances out the door “with tall, handsome strangers” (61). Rocío stands “in the darkness near the punchbowl,” knowing she could never attain such boldness (61). Josie is a pretty girl, vivacious and alluring, yet Rocío implies her disrepute. A less than honorable outcome subtly looms over Josie’s head.

The final prospect for the supreme female is Barbara, best friend to Josie. Rocío recognizes the irony in placing Barbara as the epitome of her gender, for “she was a tall and gangly woman who ‘did the best’ with what she had, and somehow managed to effect an attractiveness from her almost horsey features” (62). Described as “doomed to her mother’s face” and continually bleaching her hair, Barbara serves as an example of a woman striving to fulfill the white standard of beauty while maintaining pride in her heritage and her identity (62). She smothers herself with makeup and hair tint in an effort to conform her features to a set definition of beauty. Barbara defines her femininity not with gentle manners or swaying hips but with a painted face; she believes that she must extract beauty from her facial features in order to be feminine.

Rocío exemplifies the paradigmatic adolescent girl stumbling through contradictions in her attempts to define her identity. She asks vital questions concerning appearance, womanhood, family and behavior. Eloisa, Diana, Josie and Barbara serve as paradigms for the problematic aspects within gender. Involved in the issue of physical appearance is a divisive standard defined by my study as the virgin/whore model.

The virgin/whore model refers to the idea that a young Latina girl must be virgin-like, and if she is not, then she is a whore. No middle ground remains, and there is no room for compromise. One is either completely pure, or entirely disgraced. This standard occurs throughout the literature I discuss, and is usually applied by authority figures. Rocío’s application conveys the depth with which this ideal is rooted in the mind of young girls. Cherríe Moraga, in her book *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*, suggests a historical basis for the virgin/whore model:

The sexual legacy passed down to the Mexican/Chicana is the legacy of betrayal, pivoting around the historical/mythical female figure of Malintzin Tenepal. As translator and strategic advisor and mistress to the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernan Cortes, Malintzin is considered the mother of the mestizo people. But unlike La Virgen de Guadalupe, she is not revered as the Virgin Mother, but rather slandered as La Chingada [a derogatory term for non-virgins] or La Vendida, sell-out to the white race. Upon her shoulders rests the full blame for the “bastardization” of the indigenous people of Mexico... Ever since brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this “transgression.” ... There is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under her name even if she never hears directly of the one-time Aztec princess.¹¹

While this myth is not always explicitly referred to in works by Latina authors, a distinct dichotomy does exist with regard to female sexuality. La Virgen de Guadalupe remains the obvious representation of purity; the image of Malintzin is a vivid representation of the opposing role.

These conflicting roles of women continue in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, as the young protagonist embraces the idea of femininity and wonders what constitutes being a woman. Written in a series of vignettes, *The House on Mango Street* describes a neighborhood and its people through the eyes of an adolescent girl. The various characters in her community contribute to her notion of gender. Marin, for example, is a young woman anticipating a job downtown where she can "look beautiful" and "wear nice clothes" and meet someone to marry her and take her far away (26).¹² With her short skirts and pretty eyes, Marin attracts all the boys who pass by; an adolescent girl perceives such a correlation. Throughout the novel the narrator focuses on other images of female beauty. Another of the girl's neighbors, a young woman named Rafaela, remains locked inside her home for her husband fears she "will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79).

Clearly being female and being attractive presents a difficulty for Cisneros' young protagonist. In her effort to understand gender, the adolescent character must contend with opposing influences. Marin's beauty should lead her someplace safe, but most likely it won't. Rafaela represents something desirable which must then be confined. Beauty determines the outcome of the two women, and beauty continues to be perilous. Marin and Rafaela as women are portrayed merely as objects for viewing, objects for consumption. The negative connotation which is attributed to their beauty does not imply purity. Instead, these women are automatically categorized as "whore" based solely on their looks. The boys know to taunt and say "stupid things" to Marin, as the husband knows to lock Rafaela inside (27, 79).

While the adolescent narrators in *The Last of the Menu Girls* and *The House on Mango Street* aspire to imitate other women in their definitions of femininity, the narrator of *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* concentrates on her own body and how she can form it to an ideal. Written in the form of a memoir illustrated by black and white photographs, *Canícula* by Norma Elia Cantú is a nostalgic depiction of growing up on the border between Texas and Mexico. Told in the first person, the series of stories which form this novel contain autobiographical elements which add sincerity to the plight of the young character. The narrator remembers and describes herself as a "skinny twelve year old anxious about body hair and breasts that seem to be growing out one larger than the other" (21-22). Gender and identity for this adolescent signify changes and adaptations. Cantú's character is concerned with becoming a woman; once she gets through that stage she'll worry about being a beautiful woman. Unlike Cisneros' protagonist, this adolescent girl focuses on the tangible aspects of femininity. Growing and changing encompass her notion of womanhood; conforming her body to a beauty standard may come later.

II. CONFLICTING VIEWS OF SEXUALITY

In the quest to determine what defines a woman and what constitutes beauty, many Latina adolescents confront not only narrow definitions but also a range of discouraging consequences. The oppression inflicted upon girls described as beautiful hinders the adolescents' desire to achieve beauty. Cisneros' narrator presents Sally as yet another female character deemed perilous for her gender and her appearance.

Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke. The boys at school think she's beautiful because her hair is shiny black like raven feathers and when she laughs, she flicks her hair back like a satin shawl over her shoulders and laughs. Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble (81).

Sally stands alone at the schoolyard fence with her eyes closed, while the boys in the coatroom tell stories about her (82). Sally dresses all in black, removed from friends, and the young narrator describes her with a tone of reverence. The story implies that Sally's home life is oppressive and harsh, and the narrator wants Sally to be set free. Sally is not an engaging character, yet the narrator is fascinated by her. Sally's appearance is intimidating, and yet she is threatened by her father. After school, she straightens her skirt and wipes away her makeup before going home, where she is kept inside. That "he remembers his sister and is sad" serves as the only justification for the father's strictness and resentment of his daughter (81). Described as a dreamer, Sally continues to be admired by the narrator, who likens her to Cleopatra. While the boys in the coatroom and the children in the schoolyard ostracize Sally, the narrator remains intrigued. Sally is not popular among friends; her homelife is painful. Yet something in her appearance and her conduct captures, for the narrator, an aspect of femininity which can only be enhanced or stifled by the self.

Intaglio: A Novel in Six Stories depicts the stories of six women living in the borderland between Texas and Mexico. Written by Roberta Fernández, native of South Texas, the novel presents the female characters through the eyes of a young girl. The story entitled "Esmeralda" portrays a young woman, Verónica, near the age yet beyond the experience of the narrator, Nenita. After the death of her father, Verónica and her mother live with the mother's sister and her family. A shy twelve year old, Verónica befriends a boy who works on the ranch. Innocent and gentle, he gives her flowers, fruit, and one evening, a kiss. Outraged at the young girl's behavior, the uncle accuses her of "puterías" (whoring) and threatens to have his way with her anytime he pleases. After the incident, Verónica is shifted from one relative to another. Her painful experience remains repressed and hushed, a shame on the family. When the young narrator learns of Verónica's circumstances, she pities her quiet cousin. At eighteen, Verónica finds employment at the Palace Theater, sitting in the glass-enclosed box office for five hours a day. The owner of the theater brands her with the nickname "Esmeralda" for her striking green eyes. He publicly refers to her as a "beautiful jewel on display," and the entire town comes to admire the image which adorns the box-office window (113).¹³ One evening after work, Verónica is assaulted and raped by a group of boys who had taunted her daily from outside her glass case.

Verónica's experience leaves her scared and complacent. She is publicly reduced to an adornment, an object of consumption. The community exploits the young woman with their eyes; they indulge themselves under the guise of admiration. Her body suffers accusation, dissection, and finally assault. After being slandered a whore and then branded a decoration, Verónica becomes completely disheartened and obliging. Her body and her beauty are violated, and she remains helpless. Yet compassion for her character is scarce. The women in her family are nervous and hesitant to admit to the brutality of the men. The uncle insults the girl and violently threatens to rape her, and she is shuffled off and made to feel shame. A group of boys rape her, and the episode is hushed so that she might still marry. Oppressed by the men and repressed by the women, Verónica becomes a pawn for manipulation. Yet the adolescent narrator still respects and yearns for Verónica, for Esmeralda. Nenita sees that Verónica's attractive features and strength exist beyond the sufferings imposed upon her. The narrator believes that, if freed from her restraints, Verónica could define and fulfill herself as a woman and a mother.

Marisa Navarro also yearns to defy gender expectations without being compromised. Her essay entitled "Becoming La Mujer" opens with the following words:

I used to dream that Superwoman would fly into my life, her legs unshaven and her hair cropped short. She would swoop me up and take me somewhere that made me feel safe and beautiful -- a place far from the hell I knew as public high school. In this place, I would feel sensual for the first time ever, without feeling dirty. No one would assume I was destined to be a teenage mom, or that my brown skin marked me as a criminal. I wouldn't be "too dark" or "too fat," and my intelligence would never be compromised.¹⁴

The young woman dreams of a place that is "safe and beautiful." Her reality cannot ensure safety in the presence of beauty. Navarro wants to feel "sensual" without feeling "dirty." An automatic association exists between these two words. She resists compromising her intelligence, yet she is judged by her appearance. Safe, beautiful, sensual and intelligent -- attributes which form this writer's femininity, a femininity which can only exist in a dream world.

In her autobiographical essay, Navarro recounts the threat her gender posed. She is fully aware of the fine line between sublime and disgrace, for:

Early on, my parents reinforced that message, and there could be no margin of error. 'It's out of love we tell you this, *mijita*,' they'd say. 'Be quiet. Study hard. Don't have sex. Go to college, and then get married. A good daughter doesn't dress like a slut. A good daughter doesn't pierce or tattoo herself. A good daughter doesn't rock the boat.' If I messed up, my whole future would be over. I must be a good *hijita*.¹⁵

Her parents transmit the standard, but they are not the source. Her parents' status as recent immigrants (her father came from Mexico and her mother is a first-generation American) heavily influences their strict regulation of their daughters. Although she

does not excuse their reproachful attitude, Navarro understands the forces that motivate her parents. The stigma of the accent and the memory of blunt racism and hard labor live vividly in her parents' minds, fueling the determination that their daughters will surpass them. Race and class are essential factors in the formation of a system which represses Navarro during her adolescent and teenage years. However, racial and economic discriminations do not motivate the community-based policing models found in both *The House on Mango Street* and *Intaglio*. Cisneros' characters are all of a relatively low class status; the community described by Fernandez is predominantly Latino. What the three communities do share is a contentious view of the role of women.

The belief that femininity perches warily above dishonor is ingrained, and each story identifies a different source for this belief. In *The House on Mango Street*, Sally's father labels her beauty as trouble. The community in *Intaglio* makes Verónica an object of exploitation. Marisa laments how her parents have adopted and enforced society's stereotypical view of Latinas; this code to which her parents adhere prohibits her from being judged as an individual and instead sees her as a continuation of provocative female qualities. Sally, Verónica, and Marisa are not identical. The history and experience of each woman is distinct, yet the message remains: a pretty daughter means impending disgrace for the family reputation. Sally paints her eyes dark black, she is sullen, and alone. Her father sees her as threatening to abandon and disgrace him. Verónica, nicknamed "Esmeralda" by the town for her green eyes, is a beautiful image perched in full view for the public. She, too, is a threat of dishonor to her family for her beauty and her awakening interest in romance. Evicted from her uncle's house, Verónica is branded with shame, with corruption, with immodesty. Sally distances herself while Verónica cannot avoid being surrounded.

Marisa Navarro recognizes the complexity and the intimidation looming over female gender when she reveals that, "In my family, being a good *hijita* meant more than simply being an obedient daughter. It also meant being desexualized."¹⁶ This process of desexualization, for Navarro, began when her father forbid boys from entering into the house and her social life. The process evolved into clothing inspections; her father called her a slut if she wore lipstick or a tight shirt, and he called her a boy if she cut her hair short and wore baggy jeans. Navarro describes feeling pressured to fulfill her father's "macho idea of sensuality, a classic Madonna/whore tightrope that demanded we be attractive yet pure. We were expected to be skinny, have long hair and wear clothes that showed our womanliness. Yet, we had to carry this off in a way that let men know we were unavailable for sex."¹⁷

As an extension of or escape from her dismal situation, each woman is associated with an alternate, more fantastic, role. Cisneros' narrator likens Sally to Cleopatra; the community in *Intaglio* refers to Verónica as Esmeralda; Marisa dreams of Superwoman. The narrator of *The House on Mango Street* exercises this comparison because Cleopatra is a dark-skinned, powerful woman who was isolated by her people and by her own choice. Cleopatra's self-destruction is intimated in the veiled description of Sally. The community adopts the epithet "Esmeralda" to make Verónica

a commodity. As an “emerald,” she is valued and displayed for her precious beauty. Navarro chooses to identify with the model of Superwoman, an aggressive, powerful, invulnerable, independent female figure. Superwoman could combat the stereotypes, the restrictions, and the harsh reality The discontent each woman possesses for herself does not originate within; each woman channels her emotions in a distinct manner. Sally dreams while retreating from those who label her. Verónica submits to those who impose upon her. Navarro relates her rebelliousness, her attempts to defy society’s definition of gender. Navarro describes her anger and her resentment. She reveals the turmoil of her emotions when she writes:

I start to hate everything that makes me look like a woman -- the breasts, the hips, the long hair -- because I’m getting lots of attention, but no self-esteem... By now I hate myself for turning men on, for being a “slut.” All I want is for someone to love me for my mind. I’m tired of having my body picked apart by my father; being a virgin but made to feel like a whore. I figure since I’m already dirty, having sex won’t make it any worse.¹⁸

Each woman is subject to judgement and a range of painful emotions, yet the motivation for each woman’s debasement varies. Sally’s father bases his strictness on his sisters, although the circumstances are not revealed in the story. Verónica’s virtue is attacked by a man who is abusive to his wife. Marisa’s father compels her to “transcend the racism” that he had experienced and “surpass society’s low expectations.”¹⁹ Cisneros, Fernández and Navarro do not depict the same or even similar characters. The author is responding to a reality, portraying a theme, presenting a problem in terms of a female character. Out of the focus on the body develops a derisive view of female sexuality. A maturing body signifies emerging sexuality, which must be repressed, violated and censored. Although in a different manner and from various sources, ingrained in each woman is the belief that female sexuality is an entity to be eradicated.

III. ETHNIC PRIDE & MEDIA RACISM

In a story entitled “Body Hair” from the novel *Canícula*, the physical appearance of the protagonist is directly attacked. Her classmates openly ridicule her for “unplucked brows” and “hairy legs.” The eighth-grade narrator is reduced to tears by the harsh words of girls she considered friends. Wanting to resist this standard of beauty, Cantú’s protagonist seeks comfort from her Chicana friends.

During lunch time, I’m reading in the cafeteria. Nearby, Sarah, the daughter of the Jewish family Mami worked for before she married, is talking to Susan and Janice in a loud voice and clear so I can hear, “All I know is unplucked brows and hairy legs and underarms make a girl look like a boy.” The tears streaming down my hot face I run to the bathroom where some of the chucas are smoking. I blurt it out, what they said; they’ve been after me to pluck my brows, shave my legs. We talk about them as if they were from another planet. “No les hagas caso

a esas pendejas,” says Rita, who came back from El Norte, wearing makeup and talking dirty (60-61).

One group of friends confronts her with a definition of beauty contrary to her body’s appearance. Shaving and plucking are not drastic transformations, yet this problem of body hair serves as a line of distinction for the narrator. The narrator describes herself as “torn” between the beauty ideal imposed by her white classmates and the model presented by her mother and her Chicana friends, who don’t shave or pluck. She is directly confronted by the authority of her rich, white classmates. While the narrator feels compelled to conform to the beauty standard of her white peers, she recognizes that she will never satisfy their idea of perfection. Rather than feel ashamed for her flaws, the young girl motivates herself to excel in school and outdo the *pendejas* academically. Cantú’s protagonist experiences a split between her rich, white friends’ ideal of feminine beauty and the feminine beauty of her Chicana family and friends.

The issue of body hair is also an object of contention for Marisa Navarro in her essay “Becoming la Mujer.” She dreams of a Superwoman with “legs unshaven and hair cropped short.”²⁰ Navarro presents body hair as a natural aspect of appearance which becomes a pestilence. The young narrator of *Canícula* finds herself in a situation similar to Navarro’s. The femininity, represented by body hair, of her mother and her Chicana friends is being opposed by the femininity of her non-Chicana classmates. The white classmates represent a higher social class; they represent the idealized whiteness of American culture; these girls represent the standard to which the Chicana protagonist feels compelled to conform. Race and class are tied into this issue of body hair. The adolescent narrator wants to comply with the ideal of appearance posed by her wealthy classmates while retaining pride in her Chicana identity and culture.

In “The Beauty of Me and My People,” Lorna Dee Cervantes confronts a discriminating ideal of appearance. Her words imply indignation toward “whiteness” as the standard for beauty.

Funny how I never noticed it before
but there’s beauty in my smooth amber skin
in the rich ginger-chocolate perfection.
It was foolish to think that pale
white, veined skin
was beauty.
My hair is also a wonder -- raven black
sexy -- against the whiteness of a pillow.
Thick and strong
deep and dark

shiny...
And my dark Spanish/Indian eyes
glossy and clear
a deep mahogany brown,

in dim light they blend in darkness...
And the dark of my eyes
And the dark of my hair
against the amber background of my skin
paint a very pretty picture.²¹

The author admits to having adopted this narrow concept of beauty, yet she never identifies the source of the ideal. Having internalized the authority of this standard, Cervantes focuses on overcoming conformity and forging pride in one's distinction. The narrator of Cervantes' poem responds to the idealization of white beauty in a manner different from Cantú's protagonist. The narrator in *Canícula* admits defeat with regard to the white standard of beauty, but counters with the ambition to conquer intellectually. The figure in Cervantes' poem takes a bold step to subvert the white beauty standard and form her own ideal of beauty. While Cantú's narrator labels the source of her insecurity and seeks vengeance for the injustice, the character in "The Beauty of Me and My People" acknowledges her credulity and proceeds to focus on her own attributes. The language of the poem confers a sense of superiority over the absurdity of a white regulation for beauty. The author disdains the belief to which she once subscribed, declaring herself "foolish to think that pale/ white, veined skin/ was beauty." She emphasizes her own attributes with vigorous words like "wonder," "sexy," "thick," and "strong."

The narrator of *Canícula* is never fully convinced that her white classmates are wrong. The figure in Cervantes' poem is amazed by her hair, the very trait which torments the protagonist of *Canícula*. Cervantes directly positions "raven black" hair against a white pillow, a symbol of her "rich ginger-chocolate perfection" positioned against the white beauty standard. Cantú's adolescent laments the appearance which Cervantes describes as a "very pretty picture."

The exclusion of Latinas from the white beauty standard is reiterated in "Breaking the Model." In this essay, a young Latina describes her experience in the modeling industry. Eighteen-year-old Graciela (Chely) Rodriguez recounts her pursuit of popularity and physical perfection which ended in hospitalization for anorexia and bulimia. Rodriguez attributes her distorted view of self, in part, to the images presented in the media while recognizing that, "Everyone from magazine publishers to television producers has suggested that Latina and African-American girls aren't likely to develop eating disorders, that we're less influenced by the skinny-girl images than our white peers."²² As a young teenager, Rodriguez won a contest which granted her the opportunity for modeling classes. The agent who took her measurements the first day of class informed her that she exceeded the average size of a model and recommended she drop weight quickly. Rodriguez recalls the episode and her reaction:

For motivation, Pat handed me a stack of fashion magazines. He suggested I study the models in *Teen* and *Seventeen* and watch *Beverly Hills 90210* to "get and idea of what real models look like." It didn't matter that I was only thirteen years old and not even fully developed. I was expected to either lose the weight or get lost. I left depressed, thinking I would never look like a model because I

came from a line of full-figured Mexican women. Even if I lost the weight, I would never look like the girls in the magazines. I remember wishing I'd been born with blond hair, blue eyes, and a small waist.²³

Cantú's character suffers humiliation on account of a beauty ideal; Rodriguez risks her health. Both women are subject to this exclusive standard at a tender age. Stereotypical white beauty as a requirement for femininity becomes grounded in the minds of these two adolescent Latina girls. The characters respond with self-loathing and the conviction that each must transform; the protagonist of *Canícula* desires to shave her legs while Chely Rodriguez, reacting more drastically, harms her body. It doesn't occur to either girl to question the standard.

Unlike Cervantes, Rodriguez identifies the origin of the standard for beauty which deteriorated her self-esteem. She shares a longing with Cantú's character to appease her peers and be popular, however non-Chicana classmates are not the source of her degradation. Rodriguez directly accuses the media for negatively influencing her young mind with regard to gender and ideal beauty. While her mother had always worked to maintain an attractive figure, Rodriguez acknowledges how,

My mother's example didn't spark my desire to model, even though she supported my decision. I feel the media's and society's images of women were more responsible. Like they do for so many girls, these images promised acceptance and happiness if I could only look like them... I wasn't the only one, though. Many of my friends -- who were mostly Latina and African-American -- were going through the same thing. Although there were few models who looked like us in *Teen* and *Seventeen*, we read those magazines anyway and bought into their messages (191-192).²⁴

While Rodriguez narrates the process by which she overcame the discriminating standard, Cervantes does not disclose how she achieved satisfaction with herself or what road she traveled to develop pride in her appearance. Cervantes' poem does not detail the process of an adolescent associating with an ideal which inevitably rejects her. Cantú's story portrays an episode and Rodriguez recounts the entire story of a young girl confronted with a prototype of gender which opposes and demeans her own identity. Cervantes describes the turning point, the moment when a woman becomes aware of both her own superiority and the flaws of the established standard. Cantú's protagonist absorbs the criticism of her rich, white classmates. She submits to their authority regarding beauty, but intends to surpass them through other measures, namely academics. Cervantes' narrator transforms from resignation to rejection of the outside authority; she undermines the white model by creating her own model. Rodriguez assimilates the dominant message of the media. Yet with counseling, peer involvement, and renewed self-assurance, she comes to recognize the fallacy in the white beauty standard. Each woman responds differently to her own submission. Achieving recognition for intelligence and not appearance becomes the focus for Cantú's protagonist. Cervantes creates an ideal to rival existing ideals. Involvement in her community leads Rodriguez to the realization that most girls do not look like fashion models. The narratives of these women provide resolution, a direct response to an

oppressive ideal. Although the three characters do not react in similar manners, each finds consolation, either from Chicana friends, from herself, or from counseling.

The story “Margarita” by Beatriz de la Garza does not offer such a definite and positive conclusion. “Margarita” opens with a description of the title character, a twenty year old woman full of self-imposed derision:

Margo had always hated the time and place in which she was born. She did not really wish she had been born someone else since she had a warm, affectionate family of whom she was truly fond, but if she could have transported them all to Paris or New York, or if they could have all lived in fifteenth-century Spain, or been French or Anglo-Saxon whenever, she would have been happy. But to have been born in South Texas in 1964, in the shadow of the Alamo -- both the building and the movie -- as a Mexican, that was to be one of fortune’s stepchildren (167).²⁵

Attending the University of Texas for summer school, Margo Ancira remains reserved and uncomfortable in the large coed university so unlike her small familial college in San Antonio. By chance one evening she meets blonde, blue-eyed Mike, and they talk over coffee and go on a date to the movies. Margo’s shame regarding her Mexican heritage is immediately evident. She hesitates to give her last name, and outright lies when Mike asks what the name “Margo” is short for. Margo’s discomfort with her identity culminates with a startling remark from Mike. When she expresses interest in meeting Mike’s mother, he unwittingly responds, “‘Oh, but I couldn’t take you home...’ His words hung in the air for several seconds before she felt their impact like a solid blow. She went very still then, and felt as if she were shrinking in size by the minute” (192).

Classmates and popular magazines criticizing a girl’s appearance is distressing, but a boyfriend condemning a woman’s identity results in complete anguish. A magazine holds less direct and less personal implications than a classmate. A girl does not share with a ridiculing classmate the intimate relationship that she shares with a boyfriend. Cantú’s mortification, Cervantes’ indignation, and Rodriguez’s determination to overcome are all captured in the moment of Margo’s reaction to the situation:

As they drove home through the dark streets, Margo tasted humiliation, bitter as gall, rising again in her throat, in a surge of self-loathing. The next morning though, she thought, “I can’t go on like this for the rest of my life. I am who I am. If others don’t like me, it’s their problem. I belong in this country as much as they do, down here even more than they because we were here first (192).

Within Margo’s reaction lies pride in her heritage. Her boyfriend demeans her ethnicity, and she responds indignantly. When she first meets her boyfriend, she hesitates to reveal her Mexican heritage. By the end of the story, she is rebuking her boyfriend for his racism and weakness.

In the face of discrimination, the Latinas discussed in this chapter find strength and power in their bodies, appearances, sexuality, language and heritages. These

women conquer, in varying degrees, the racism from classmates, boyfriends, magazines and other outside sources. For many of the characters, the aspect of their identity which is most harshly criticized becomes the foundation of intense pride.

IV. CONCLUSION

Latina authors present adolescence as the point in life when girls begin to question and explore the subjects of identity, appearance, family structure, and cultural values. These issues develop significance for the young Latina characters as their awareness of social and political customs increases. The protagonists realize that race and class are involved in the formation of identity, which is not defined simply by gender. Rich white girls teasing a lower class Chicana for her hairy legs is evidence that race and class complicate the issue of identity. In American culture, “rich” and “white” have authority over “poor” and “Chicana.” The tension is not a result of gender but of race, class and gender. For Cantú’s character, a contemplation of identity begins with a contemplation of appearance.

In the texts discussed in my study, standards of beauty become more important for Latina girls as they get older. Increased concern with appearance leads to increased awareness of how whiteness is idealized by the media. An ideal of beauty which specifies one color of skin and one color of hair blatantly discriminates against women who possess a range of skin and hair colors. An ideal of beauty which requires maintenance and mass product consumption immediately excludes the working and lower classes. Many Latina characters desire to fulfill a standard of beauty, but the ideal they strive to achieve often prohibits their features and disadvantages their economic standing.

However, the questions that may be asked by Latina girls do not result in despair. Most Latina authors are not denying their heritage but rather reclaiming it. They go beyond criticism in an effort to find a reason, an alternative, a compromise. Their characters are not willing to comply with an unsatisfactory order. Through adolescent female characters/narrators, Latina authors are reexamining and redefining Latina identity and gender. Included among the Latina authors mentioned in this paper are college-educated professors, writers, and essayists. The education, professional experience, and elevated class status (and hindsight) of each author allow her to reflect on her own adolescence and recognize the formative aspects. From this retrospection, the authors create a young female character confronting experiences with the perception and wisdom of an educated woman. The focus on adolescence implies a sense of urgency. Latina writers urge a woman to challenge and examine while she is young, before the effects of racism, oppression, and constant contradiction diminish her pride and her power.

Also pervasive in the texts I have discussed is the dichotomy of the virgin/whore. This identification with and measurement by the virgin/whore model is in many ways specific to Latino/a culture. Rooted deeply in Catholicism, Latino/a culture extends religious doctrine condemning fornication and promiscuity into social mores

associating attractiveness with immoral behavior. A society which sees the female as the generator of seduction equates feminine features with moral transgressions. Each author, and therefore each character, react differently to this automatic classification. Marisa Navarro recalls wearing baggy clothes to hide her breasts and hips. Rocío judges women strictly according to the virgin/whore model. Cherríe Moraga validated this ingrained dichotomy with a historical account of the culture's dominant female figures. La Virgen de Guadalupe and Malinche are key figures of the sexual legacy of women of Mexican descent. A virgin and a whore, respectively, they embody the two foremost classifications for women. Recognizing that not every Latina subscribes to the images of La Virgen and Malinche, it remains true that both figures are specific to Latino/a culture.

Garcia-Bahne incorporates the virgin/whore model when she describes the struggle of Chicanas to develop an independent lifestyle. She asserts the need for prominent models of Chicana liberation. According to Garcia-Bahne, this lack of alternative opportunities contributes to the difficulty with which a Chicana may enhance her capabilities in the face of traditional expectations.

A Chicana may either be limited by unsubstantial funds or by her lack of learned assertive social skills and self-confidence. The obstacles are great, considering the dichotimization of Chicanas into the good and bad woman. The worst enemy of the Chicana, sometimes, is herself for having internalized these polarities. She must call on personal conviction, support from friends, and have some basis of political awareness in order to act on her own needs. The "good," socially acceptable woman, it follows, embodies the qualities of the Virgin: purity, selflessness, mysticism, and respectfulness. The "bad," unacceptable woman, who is viewed suspiciously, actually demonstrates more independence, assertiveness and is more socially mobile, moving toward self-determining behavior (41).

Garcia-Bahne identifies a "subtle, but potentially powerful social control" as the main impediment for a Chicana's dissent from the traditional role. Implied in this social control is the view of a female's independent behavior as "synonymous with sexual libertarianism and as being more masculine than feminine" (Garcia-Bahne 41).

The notion of an absolute split can invade a Latina's response to sexuality, her definition of femininity, her treatment of appearance, and her view of herself. If there is no middle ground between virgin and whore, then Latina girls, in the words of Navarro, cannot feel sensual without feeling dirty. Latinas who share Navarro's attitude cannot be attractive without assuming the iniquity of the man who would be attracted. This concept burdens many of the characters studied (Verónica and Marisa, for example) with undeserved guilt while excusing the male from any and all responsibility. The model of virgin/whore defines femininity as intrinsically perilous. A set of extremes leaves no room for individual determination. Becoming a woman is reduced to assuming a predetermined role which permits little variance; this is not an optimistic prospect for adolescent girls who desire to create their own gender definitions.

The complexities involved in the virgin/whore model span the various elements of Latina identity. Race, class, and gender contribute to the virgin/whore model. La Virgen and Malinche provide a basis within Mexican culture, yet not every author identifies Malinche as the root of negative views of female sexuality. Every author does, however, present a character who struggles in the precarious state between pure and disgraced. Unlike the persistent struggle, wealth is not an attribute of the characters in Latina fiction; the economic status varies, but remains middle to lower class. The Latina girls of this class confront the virgin/whore model, while the wealthier girls are exempt from any such judgment.

The men depicted in Latina fiction are not subject to scrutiny under the virgin/whore model either. In fact, the men are not responsible for their sexuality at all. In *Canícula*, the Anglo man rapes the young Chicana and suffers no consequences. A group of boys rape Veronica and disappear from the story. The infidelity of husbands is mentioned as a passing detail.

The white beauty standard also has implications regarding the virgin/whore model. Idealized beauty sparks the desire to be pretty, but does not address the effects of not achieving this goal. In her efforts to fulfill the dominant standard, a Latina might forsake or alter her natural attributes. Cervantes writes of finding beauty in her features only after she abandoned the white standard. The pressure to conform placed Cantú's protagonist in opposition to her mother and the girls of her race and class. The media and consumer emphasis on ideal beauty does not take into account that beauty for certain Latinas leads to victimization. A curvaceous figure results in harassment for Navarro. Sally's attractiveness induces her father's distrust and abuse (82). Veronica's beauty is so exquisite that she becomes an object for visual consumption and sexual assault (113). Latina authors emphasize adolescence in an effort to revise their own childhood and advise the formation of today's young Latinas. The fictional character created by the authors combines the innocence of a child with the wisdom of a grown woman. The adolescent narrators represent the girls that the authors might have been, as well as diverse new ideals toward which some modern Latinas may strive.

NOTES

¹ Oboler, Suzanne. *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*.

² Milligan, Bryce, Mary Guerrero Milligan, and Angela de Hoyos (eds.). *Daughters of the Fifth Sun*. New York, NY: Riverhead, 1995, p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Moraga, Cherrie and Gloria Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Watertown: Persephone, 1981.

⁵ Alarcon, Norma. "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism." *Making Face, Making Soul, Haciendo Caras*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 1990, p. 356.

⁶ Yarbrow-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.). New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1991, p. 733.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sanchez, Rosaura. "Discourses of Gender, Ethnicity and Class in Chicano Literature." *Americas Review* 20(2):1992, p. 74.

⁹ All page quotations from Cantu, Norma, Elia. *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

¹⁰ All page quotations from Chavez, Denise. *The Last of the Menu Girls*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1994.

¹¹ Moraga, Cherrie. *Loving in the War Years*. Boston: South End, 1983, p. 99-100.

¹² All page quotations from Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

¹³ All page quotations from Fernandez, Roberta. *Intaglio*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1990.

¹⁴ Edut, Ophira. *Adios Barbie: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity*. Seattle, WA: Seal, 1998, p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²¹ Tashlik, Phyllis (ed.). *Hispanic, Female and Young: An Anthology*. Houston: Pinata, 1994, p. 36.

²² Edut, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191-192.

²⁵ All page quotations from De la Garza, Beatriz. *The Candy Vendor's Boy and Other Stories*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1994.