

NI SANTAS NI PUTAS, SÓLO MUJERES: DISRUPTING APPROPRIATE  
LATINA FEMININITY THROUGH RAUNCH AESTHETICS ON INSTAGRAM

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Ni Santas Ni Putas, Sólo Mujeres: Disrupting Appropriate Latina Femininity through Raunch Aesthetics on Instagram

This thesis analyzes how Latinas on Instagram actively resist social and cultural conventions of sexuality, propriety and femininity through the adornment and arrangement of their bodies. Taking into account expectations of women's behavior in public spaces, I examine the ways social media as a digital public sphere reliant upon user-generated visual content creates opportunities for rejecting mutually exclusive understandings of womanhood. The Latina users in this study employ raunch aesthetics and the performance of productive perversity, as theorized by Jillian Hernandez (2014) and Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) respectively, via accessories and nonverbal behavior to problematize racialized and classed representations of gender.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Growing up in a family that was mostly women, I was accustomed to hearing my *tías* (my aunts) and my mother tell me how I should or shouldn't act. "Andrea, sientate bien." "Arreglate bien. Nunca vas a encontrar novio así de despeinada." "Las mujercitas no deben andar en la calle de noche." Over and over, a deluge of opinions - undoubtedly well-intentioned though arguably misguided - on how to dress properly, how I should appropriately arrange my body, how to make myself presentable in a way that would be appealing to potential suitors and on spaces I should avoid were a common occurrence. But these same women, who immigrated to Los Angeles from Mexico as children, raised assertive daughters who grew to stand their ground. My female cousins and I were encouraged to continue our college education, some even moving to different parts of the country though not without a fair amount of push back. This exposure to the outside world was unsettling for them. Would we be safe all on our own in these unfamiliar, potentially dangerous places? The concern these ladies in my family had for us was not because they questioned our ability to succeed but rather because our choices were so far removed from what they knew. Despite this ingrained tendency to restrain what they believed to be inappropriate or compromising behavior, I also saw in them a personality so counter to the demure attitude they felt we needed to exhibit. Resilient and highly capable, my *tías* also made sure to tell us to hold our ground against anyone who tried to take advantage of us. How was I to make sense of these seemingly

contradictory ideas of being a woman? On one hand, I was told and expected to look presentable in public and not draw negative attention to myself while on the other, I witnessed my *tías* being vocal and assertive with strong personalities I admired. As much as I continued to appreciate their endless nurturing, I also grew more conscious of the fact that certain behavior or attitudes that I did not see as particularly harmful were adamantly condemned and shamed.

Often this coincided with my position as a U.S.-born Latina Millennial such that the perspectives of older family generations would clash with my own coming of age in an increasingly networked world. Research supports the idea that social media platforms create a new digital public that carries many of the same social expectations as the “real world” and my immersion in this virtual world was doubly worrisome to older family members. Because social media applications like Instagram are so publicly visible, my reputation as a “good girl” is even more at stake. Not only do I inhabit spaces alone as an adult, those choices are solidified in the images I choose to post on social media. After years of Facebook dominating the top spot in popular social networking sites, mobile media platforms have forged new methods of digital social interaction that are now fundamental components to the lived experiences of young adults.

Instagram allows users to upload self-generated photos, as well as visual content created by other parties, onto their profiles that then appear on a newsfeed page seen by those who follow their account. 64% of users are between the ages of 18-24-years old (Pew Research Center, 2018) and 88% of this age group uses the photo-sharing app daily. One of Instagram’s key features is the “Explore” tab,

which displays a collection of photos or videos from other Instagram accounts curated from data based on the specific user's in-app activity, demonstrating the potential for social media to reflect fundamental aspects of cultural identity and construction of self. My own experiences participating on Instagram speaks to the pervasive discourse about appropriate behavior for women in public and virtual spaces. It seems inevitable that as a Los Angeles native and daughter of Mexican immigrants, I would be instinctively drawn to social media profiles that speak to those parts of myself but more importantly, I began to recognize an entire cyber-community of young Latinas focused on visually articulating both a recognition and rejection of policing appropriate femininity within Latino culture.

Images from one Instagram in particular stood out to me that resonated with much of the tensions I experienced about being a good *mujercita*. With angular eyebrows, dark-toned lipstick, large gold hoops, posing against graffitied urban background with stoic facial expressions, @themamicollective exuded a classic *chola* aesthetic. This style rose to prominence among Mexican-American women after being reimagined during the 1960s Chicano Movement from the original Latina bad girls, the *pachucas* of the 1940s zoot suit era. Their association with criminal life and inhabiting public spaces with edgy femininity subverted mainstream Anglo beauty standards as well as putting in stark relief the idea of demure and domestic Mexican women. Remnants of this unapologetic approach to womanhood are present in the Mamis' Instagram account in a way that I initially struggled to articulate. The way they consciously adorned and arranged their bodies in these very public, urban spaces reached the

subconscious desire I had to negate and speak out against all the mandates I had internalized but was unable to express. Dressing and moving in ways that many would describe as raunchy or sexually excessive, the Mamis employed this perversive attitude towards appropriate Latina femininity in ways akin to the *pachuca* evolution. Given the academic approach to social media as a digital extension of the public sphere, I decided to explore how these Latinas operate in this new virtual public with guiding questions aimed at the intersection of femininity, culture and performances of self. How are Latinas using digital public platforms like Instagram to disrupt cultural and mutually exclusive understandings of female sexuality? What cultural components are visually present among these Instagram accounts that speak to this community? How do vernacular terms reaffirm these modes of opposition to the notion of “bad women”? What meanings are produced through displaying how they adorn and arrange their bodies?

The advent of networked technologies like social media has changed the power dynamics of representation by allowing Latinos to shift from audience to producers. The majority of current research on social networking platforms focuses on sites such as Facebook or Twitter that perform this sociality on multiple levels within a single platform. But a visual platform like Instagram creates its own unique set of social circumstances that have not previously been examined, especially when taking into account how social standards of female propriety and sexuality revolve around clothing affect or physical appearance. The development of digital technology and networking sites has created new

academic inquiry that requires extending our understanding of social spaces in this cyber-context in regards to representation, especially since Latinos participate online in growing numbers; 72% of Hispanics use social media and 38% use Instagram specifically. While it is important to acknowledge the term “Hispanic” as problematic in ways I will later address, I use it here to remain consistent with data from American industry demographics. Although statistics show 39% of women in America participate on the photo-sharing app, there is scant information available about Latina women in particular; the only applicable research indicates that Latinas reported using Instagram at a rate 64% higher than non-Hispanic women during a 30-day period (Nielsen, 2017) and utilize social media primarily as a way of socializing with their communities (Nielsen, 2017). This scholastic gap is significant when considering how the Latina body has traditionally been sexualized or exoticized in media and popular culture representations; networked technology has allowed Latinas to switch being represented to actually representing themselves is a key component of how they perform these representations of “excess”.

Despite providing these communities an established presence by virtue of operating within these platforms, social networking sites also inherently reflect many of the same social problems found in “real” public sphere such as gendered and racialized stereotypes that complicate methods of participation for users of specific minorities. U.S. Latinas in particular must negotiate discourse from both a mainstream and their heritage cultures. But the imbedded premise of social media platforms like Instagram as participatory can quite literally create

opportunities for visibility and self-representation through user-generated visual content. To that end, I situate this study within the framework of Jillian Hernandez's (2014) raunch aesthetics and Celine Parreñas Shimizu's (2007) performance of productive perversity. These two concepts address how ethnic bodies are inherently sexualized, classed and seen as excessive, which the women-run Instagram accounts I examined acknowledge by consciously subverting this through the adornment and arrangement of their bodies. Looking specifically at @diosafemme, @gorditapplebum, @mala\_munoz and @themamicollective, I conducted a textual analysis of how these women perform this productive perversity through raunch aesthetics as resistance against cultural hegemonic discourse of appropriate Latina femininity.

There are certain scholarly limitations to this study, such as a tendency to approach American society as a black/white binary or else concentrate on a Mexican-American/Chicana monolithic identity of *Latinidad*. For this reason, much of the literature here draws upon the already established framework set forth by black and Chicana feminist scholars. This actually serves to underscore the need for continued scholarship on Latinas from various perspectives. But these Instagram users are based in Los Angeles and, as such, are heavily influenced by Mexican culture in many ways despite the fact that not all of them are of Mexican descent specifically. The cultural markers evoked by the accessories and nonverbal behavior these Latinas display are still valuable to constructing oppositional self-expressions of femininity. By first exploring the trajectory in regards to traditional expectations of women in public spaces



followed by how these manifest within the Latino community and in visual media representations, I highlight the implications of what these Instagram users are intentionally resisting by displaying themselves in these ways online.

## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Women Occupying Public Spaces*

Female behavior in public spaces has historically been socially controlled, and feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s argued that excluding women's open participation in the public sphere reflects and reinforces dominant patriarchal power structures (Lerner, 1986). Nancy Fraser (1990) approaches the notion of public space as not solely "an arena of market relations" but "an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (p. 57). As such, this space creates potential for reconstructing gendered ideology that becomes significant when considering that social media technology extends the scope of what constitutes public space. Some scholars address how the development of information and communication technologies aided in dismantling traditional dichotomies. Donna Haraway (1985) specifically examines how this affects binaries such as man/woman and organism/machine as well as public/private so that they then become ambivalent. She argues this fluidity reveals "the fragility of dichotomies" in such a way that allows for "new processes of negotiation" (Wischermann & Mueller, 2004). So while some feminist critiques oppose these distinctions as detrimental dichotomies, others look at each sphere in terms of reinterpreting them relationally. This becomes even more valuable when taking into account that social media as a digital public also contains social elements of tangible public spaces, especially since mainstream approaches to these distinctions are

Eurocentric and result in the need to rectify the perceived deviant behavior intrinsic to women of color (Patricia Hill Collins, 2004).

One example of how this social control manifested is the notion of respectability politics, which aimed to facilitate integration for the black community into previously barred social spaces by rejecting lingering Antebellum-era stereotypes such as the sexually wanton jezebel figure. Black Baptist women emphasized respectable, moral behavior in order to challenge negative stereotypes with more acceptable presentations and consequently self-define outside racist discourse (Higginbotham, 1993). But while respectability politics grew from an effort to contest race and gender oppression, it nonetheless continued reinforcing the hegemonic white American ideology (Higginbotham, 1993).

As feminist and ethnic studies have progressed, closer attention has turned to cases of resistance against these negative associations for minority communities by reclaiming and celebrating previously derogatory terms so as to explicitly move past the need for respectability. In the case of American black women, the jezebel figure morphed into the “ratchet” woman, a term sonically derived from the word “wretched” as said with a Southern accent. There are several circulating terms to reference excessive depictions of sexuality, such as “porno-chic” (McNair, 2002), as well as urban socioeconomic affect, i.e. “ghetto” in its modern vernacular. Jillian Hernandez (2014) extends this to theorize “raunch aesthetics” as distinct from ratchet because “although certain expressions of raunch could be considered ratchet, as raunch does carry

racialized 'low-class' significations, not all forms of ratchet could be considered raunchy" (p. 94), such as verbal or physical altercations; she uses the *chonga* woman to exemplify this notion, a term regionally used to describe Latinas demonstrating what she calls sexual aesthetic excess (2009). To further explain how these racial, sexual and classed assumptions coalesce on the Latina body, I move beyond the American binary evident in academia of "mutually exclusive categories of black and white populations" (Valdivia, 2007, p. 133) and turn to the comparable Chicana *chuca* or *chola* figure, a woman censured for inhabiting public spaces at her own discretion.

#### *Callejeras: Latinas on the Streets*

Similar to ratchet being "an evolution of terms like 'crunk' and 'ghetto,' both of which bring to bear the simultaneity of acknowledging racial expectation and shedding it" (Pickens, 2014, p. 43-44), the *chola* archetype is derived from incarnations of the *pachuca* from the 1940s. Rosa Linda Fregoso (1995) introduces the *pachuca* as an eroticized and subservient counterpart to the gangster lifestyle embodied by the *pachuco*, a Chicano power symbol of masculinity and counterculture. Catherine Ramírez (2009) details the *pachuca* style consisting of broad-shouldered coats or zoot suit coats paired with fitted, knee-length skirts—considered borderline indecent—or slacks, equally unacceptable for women outside a work setting. With thin eyebrows, heavy up-dos and dark lips, Anglo society viewed *pachucas* as distorting the recognizable Hollywood glamour of the time and thus their physical appearance "undermined exclusionary definitions of ladyhood" (p.58). Despite displaying beauty attributes

similar to their white counterparts in the form of neat chignons and makeup, this aesthetic of ladyhood was exaggerated and hyperbolic, thus seen as threatening as opposed to appropriate. Newspapers and popular culture discourse emphasized their dress in terms of sexual excess and exaggerating their female form with tight sweaters and fitted, short skirts. Words to describe the color tones in their style highlighted their racial difference, such as dark hair and brown knees. During this wartime, *pachucas* represented the promiscuous opposite of patriotic white women at the homefront: they autonomously participated in the working-class sphere for survival, not as self-sacrifice to preserve domestic American patriotism.

From within the Latino community, Fregoso summarizes the general aversion to the *pachuca* as an example of inappropriate female behavior *en las calles* (in the streets) that more importantly in this regard subverted masculinity and patriarchy:

In their appropriation of the public sphere, pachucas set a "bad" example. Most importantly, in their rebellion, pachucas failed to do what the Chicano family demands of girls and women. They rejected and challenged parental norms by refusing to stay inside the home. Their provocative language and dress style served to further refute la familia's authority. Boldly displaying their sexuality, pachucas refused to be confined by domesticity. The *pachuca* is therefore the body that marks the limits of *la familia* and is also the one who introduces disorder into its essentially patriarchal project. (p. 318-319).

By operating within the public sphere and all its inscribed masculinity, *pachucas* threatened the traditions that Mexican mothers knew as familiar, if not necessarily safe for their American-born daughters.

The demands Fregoso mentions result from power dynamics found in many Latin American cultures are intrinsically gendered as evidenced by the concept of *marianismo*, which details the cultural expectations of female roles in the community as well as the idealized virgin girl and self-sacrificing mother (Denner & Dunbar, 2004). Scholars have shown that older Latina immigrants reproach what they perceive to be shameless American women moving freely in public with no sense of propriety, as it stands in contrast to the constantly circulated cultural belief of women who should stay within the appropriate bounds of domesticity, complacency and silence (Hirsch, 1999; Zavella, 2003). Further exhibiting these deeply entrenched gendered responsibilities, the emotional labor falls upon Latina mothers in this collective cultural model to properly teach their daughters how to behave so as not to jeopardize their reputation; much like the term wretched/ratchet used by the Baptist women's movement, girls who behave in an unladylike and selfish manner are called *malcriadas*, as in badly raised. The core concern here is the possibility of bringing shame to one's family if a young girl's sexual reputation is threatened or damaged and often attributed to *andando por las calles*, being out in the streets. The streets constitute "semiotic terrains" as public sites of danger where girls can become *pachucas* and *callejeras*, meaning women who roam the streets (Fregoso, 1995). This poses a threat primarily because it alludes to sexual

promiscuity and a contradiction to the Catholic virginal ideal intrinsic to female propriety in Latino culture, a “bad” woman.

*Virgen o Puta: Codifying Latina Sexuality*

One of the ways Chicana feminists have codified this female standard in Latino identity politics is through the Tres Marías Syndrome, a typology to describe the three biblical primary roles ascribed to women. Following the definitions outlined by Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2014), the first character is María as mother whose defining characteristics include being the woman who lives for her children and family as well as being nurturing, caring and protective. Sexual knowledge for *María la madre* can only be associated with procreation, which is significant because it assumes a mutually exclusive understanding of femininity as either maternal or promiscuous. Since only mothers are privy to intimate knowledge, *María la virgen*/the virgin characterizes the innocence that comes before motherhood. This María is innocent, obedient and does not go out in public with men unless she is in their care; for example, any male family member such as a brother or uncle. She does not live outside her family home until marriage, demonstrating an exchange in power and ownership from father to husband. Underscoring the focus of this paper is this virginal trope of María as “*la que se viste y se porta decentemente*” (she who dresses and behaves decently) (p. 60). This leaves *María la prostituta*, referring to Mary Magdalene, as the only possible role outside these two favorable portrayals. Her attributes go beyond solely prostitution to include any behavior that encourages women’s participation in sex, such as taking contraceptives or simply enjoying pleasure, regardless of

*que diran* (what people will say) and at the cost of causing her family shame or *vergüenza*. Arguably the most damaging trait associated with this trope is that her inappropriate sexual behavior merits any negative consequences that come of it. This demonstrates very tangible repercussions for failing to comply with socially policed standards of appropriately performing womanhood in public.

The role of Mary as *puta* or whore is a religious reference to the quintessential “bad” woman, a figure whose trajectory seems to exist outside temporal or spatial constraints. From the ill-fated La Malinche of the Spanish conquest to the defiant Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz from Spain’s Golden Age to America’s own Salem witch trials, Gaspar de Alba groups these historical figures as “bad” women whose presence is “confrontational to a patriarchal worldview, from the pre-Columbian past to the transnational present” (p. 7). For Chicana scholars, this reference to pre-colonial time is especially crucial because their hybrid identity necessitates distinguishing their Mexican heritage from Spanish influence as well as being contextualized within their immediate American society and culture. While La Malinche or “La Chingada” functions as “the prototypical fucked one” (Gaspar de Alba, 2014), *la Virgen de Guadalupe* serves as the image for both mother and virgin. A Catholic epithet for the mother of Jesus and unifying figure of national Mexican identity, *la virgen de Guadalupe* as a Chicana feminist icon can be traced back to its pre-Columbian origins in the indigenous deity Tonantzin. This earth goddess was conflated in the Christian perspective during colonial times with similar mother deities such as Cihuacoatl (“serpent woman”) and Coatlicue (“serpent skirt”) that reflected “Christian beliefs



about paganism, the devil, and female transgression as symbolized by Eve” (Lara, 2008, p. 101). These allusions to “morally transgressive” women and serpents such as the ones that tempted Eve are seemingly rectified by the figure of *Virgen Guadalupe* whose name phonetically resembles the Nahuatl word for serpent and is often depicted crushing a serpent’s head; in this way, the Catholic image of feminine virtue is elevated and conquers temptation in a way the native counterpart allegedly failed to do. The fact that *la Virgen de Guadalupe* appeared to Juan Diego, a Mexican peasant, and spoke in his native Nahuatl further strengthens Catholicism overwriting indigenous beliefs.

Chicana scholarship has recently devoted more emphasis to decolonize this reading of Tonantzin because “virgins” and “whores” as such did not exist in traditional Nahua thought (Lara, 2008). Like many other aspects of indigenous culture that were reformulated in trappings of Christianity, Tonantzin was vilified by the Spanish and denigrated as the heathen version of Guadalupe. This parallels the difficulty Latinas in the United States face in navigating both Anglo and Latino culture as well as an attempt to publicly discipline female figures into Anglicized, Eurocentric standards. Exacerbating this experience is the widely accepted public opinion of a sole Latino identity, demonstrated in one-dimensional media representations of Latinas that repeatedly fall under this tropicalized virgin/whore dichotomy. Understanding the American media context within which Latinas negotiate these (mis)representations creates a foundation for examining how these stereotypes are being contested in newer digital media such as Instagram. A foundational component to analyzing Latina

representations is unpacking both the terms and the visual representations used to identify the Latino community in media.

*Latinidad: Representations in Media*

The creation of a common “Hispanic” identity dates back to the 1970s for census and demographic purposes, and Davila (2001) argues that one of the most powerful influences on this consolidated cultural categorization is the advertising industry. However, this term is controversial as it inaccurately groups together all Spanish-speaking individuals under a pan-Latin identity. Drawing specifically from media scholars and sociologists, Jillian Báez (2007) discusses how the concept of “Latinness” or *Latinidad* has been treated in the communication field as a way to commodify the framing of the Latino community into a uniformly pan-ethnic entity (p. 110). In describing “Hispanic” as the socioeconomic marketing term for this homogenized ethnic group, Báez asserts that “*Latinidad* is simultaneously imposed from the outside (e.g. through the U.S. Census and marketing industries) and reconstructed by the inside through Latina/os organizing social and political alliances among various nationalities” (2007, p. 110).

Similar to the way “Hispanic” or *Latinidad* terminologically consolidates Spanish-speakers in the U.S., traditional visual media representations of Latinas have also conflated, tropicalized and hypersexualized these women. Early examples of Mexican film actresses pursuing careers in America during the 1920s were held to standards of female propriety from both countries. Lupe Vélez, known as the “Mexican Spitfire”, starred in several feature films during her

seventeen-year career and was harshly described by critics as epitomizing the negative characteristics of Mexican femininity: “hot-blooded, volatile, sexually promiscuous” (Fregoso, 2007, p. 51). Comparisons made between Vélez and her silver screen contemporary Dolores del Rio exemplified these two extreme expectations of feminine propriety:

At the time, critics in Mexico often measured Vélez against another exotic Mexican star in Hollywood of the period, the “sedate and lady-like” Dolores del Rio, who was “carefully crafted” by the industry as a “high class ethnic woman of impeccable morals.” They vilified Lupe Vélez as a “commoner” (*populachera*) and “vulgar and unmannerly” (*una chica incorrigiblemente vulgar*), or, as one Mexican critic would write, Vélez has “traces we notice solely in lower class people, without culture, nor ideals, nor patriotism.” (Fregoso, 2007, p. 52.)

In doing so, this popular discourse reflects the social class hierarchy present in both Mexico and the United States as well as a commentary on those who entered the U.S., predominantly lower working class citizens who bore the responsibility of portraying appropriate Mexican womanhood in American publics.

Film stars such as Vélez and del Rio were held responsible for representing Mexicanas in “Greater Mexico” or areas influenced by people of Mexican heritage in both Mexico and U.S (José Limón, 1998). More contemporary public media figures are also scrutinized through this lens of proper womanhood, such as popular culture icon Selena Quintanilla-Pérez. Heralded as the Queen of Tejano, Selena broke through the male-dominated genre of Tejano music while

highlighting herself as distinctly feminine through provocative stage costumes. Beaded bustier bra tops and sparkling form-fitting jumpsuits are essential components of her most memorable outfits, all tailored to accentuate the curves of her figure. In naming her “the Mexican/Tex-Mex/Latin Madonna”, media outlets used Madonna as a reference point for Anglo audiences grasp the scope of Selena’s popularity among the Mexican-American community (Willis & Gonzalez, 1997). This nickname thus ascribed that pop culture icon’s sexually provocative and explicit image onto Selena but ironically caused confusion in the Latino community who connected Madonna to that of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* (Willis & Gonzalez, 1997). Juxtaposing the antithetical responses to this moniker demonstrates the Tres Mariás Syndrome in practice; Selena is either sexualized or virtuously idolized. Limón (1998) reminds us that the Mexican woman “always teeters on the precipice of harlotry either as constructed by mexicanas, often both female and male, and Anglos” (p. 14). He argues that Selena’s image was able to circumvent this through a narrative of “good girl” acts offstage, such as time and donations to charities, a focus on being family- and community-oriented as well as deferring authority primarily to her father as both parent and manager. Selena’s controversy as an acceptable public female figure is contested even by renown Chicana feminist writers; Cherrie Moraga claims Selena encouraged exploring Chicana sexuality while Sandra Cisneros was famously quoted for being opposed to having Selena seen as a role model (“Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena”, 1999). But focusing on her sexuality specifically within the context of what a Latina body should look like bolsters “its affirmative cultural and political

consequences for a community still under pressure from the dominant ‘Anglo’ society” (Limón, 1998, p.22).

Selena’s cultural and social impact extends beyond her own lifetime as this same debate over authentic and accurate representations of *Latinidad* is echoed in the public response to casting Puerto Rican-American actress Jennifer Lopez as the lead in her biographical film (Dave Karger, 1996). Although the physical similarities between the two women—most notably a voluptuous behind—are undeniable, his casting decision was intentional because Lopez’s ethnic fluidity helped Warner Brothers target both Latino and American audiences (Isabel Molina-Guzman, 2010). Despite this, Lopez was one of the first actors to embrace the burgeoning Latina label resulting from the popularity boom in the early 1990s of U.S. Latino culture through her physicality. Lopez used her body as an ethnic marker, capitalizing on her (then) “dark hair, light-brown skin and curvaceous body to establish her ethnoracial difference and communality with U.S. Latino/a media audiences” (Molina-Guzman, 2010, p. 60) with a very specific focus on her buttocks, much like the Tejana singer she portrayed in her breakout role. This emphasis on what specific components make up the ideal Latina body, as in full bosoms and buttocks, epitomizes the majority of Latina media representations. But much like the Latino community discourages a panethnic term, there have been efforts to shift attention away from this specific corporal model of Latina identity.

One such example is the 1993 independent film *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) that centers on the lives of a group of *cholas* in Echo Park, a suburb of Los Angeles.

Widely recognized as a classic example of Chicano/a film, *Mi Vida Loca* was one of the first films to focus on alternate representations of Latinas in terms of physical appearance different from the voluptuous figures mentioned above. Though the plot arguably centers on a dispute between two friends over a shared romantic interest, *Mi Vida Loca* also explores the various accoutrements fundamental to Hernandez' definition of raunch aesthetics in addition to the nonverbal behavior of ratchet culture. *Cholas, chucas*, homegirls; by whichever name they are called, these women are seen as threatening for their "bad girl" behavior. They exhibit attitudes that generally interpreted as masculine, such as aggression and forming female-exclusive groups. Ethnographic research by Norma Mendoza-Denton (2014) also shows that the beauty choices of cholas reflect a "power-based interpretation of...makeup practices" (p. 156) such that lipstick and eyeliner become figurative weapons of strength. The connection to their Latino heritage is also present in ways akin to that of *pachucas* as conscious aesthetic choices:

Both signifier and signified, the cholas' bodies were inscribed with the traces of conflict: assimilation, ethnic pride, covert prestige, and the pride of survival were all etched on the surface of their skins, rewritten every morning in the mirror with the help of Maybelline, Wet n' Wild, and Cover Girl. (p. 152)

In this way, cholas perform raunch aesthetics as a mode of resistance by decorating their bodies in ways seen as excessive, classed and perverse because of their otherness. This particular example helps ground the definition of class in

raunch aesthetics as one that hinges on socioeconomic status and assumptions therein of taste and propriety based on an urban community or context that supposedly lacks these qualities. Arguably the most important contribution of *Mi Vida Loca* comes from having been funded and created in part by *cholas* themselves. This signaled a shift of Latinas' role in media from audience to producers that is amplified by the development of digital participatory technology like social media.

### *Women in Cyberpublics*

Social media has been examined through the lens of participatory culture, defined as one that enables digital consumers “to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (Henry Jenkins, 2008, p.331). Feminist media scholars address how this notion overlooks is the lack of gender inclusivity that pervades media studies research. Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg (2011) argue that Jenkins neglects gender despite naming contributions primarily made by women in his work; furthermore, they state feminist writers were at the foundation of the shift in defining an active audience, making reference to the negotiated responses of romance readers as examined in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984). They also expand participatory dynamics by incorporating its social function:

Participation in online cultures becomes a means of coping with alienating real life pressures and the allusion to a system that recognizes the potential for both coping and distraction brings with it a whole model of how such cultures are presumed to work (p. 569).

Much like Radway's argument that certain types of spaces for participation allow women to exert autonomy, Driscoll and Gregg examine online participation through users' self-produced contestations of socially normative media discourse.

More recent studies have begun to examine exclusively how young women carve digital spaces for themselves within an ever-changing media landscape. Keller (2012) describes the ways young girls assert their place in political discourse and facilitate feminist activism through the world of blogging. This is because networked technologies have facilitated the ways young women can push back against expectations of maintaining domesticity. Lincoln (2004) discusses how "bedroom culture" was a form of opposition to external patriarchal environments that led young girls to retreat or stay sequestered inside both figuratively and literally; the bedroom provided a space where young women more actively could explore understandings of femininity and sexuality. This can also accurately be applied to the new digital culture. As such, "the potential for resistance is amplified by networked technologies because the virtual bedroom is no longer relegated to the private sphere [and]...these technologies provide girls with unrestricted access to the public sphere" (Steeves, 2015, p. 155). But although the "real" world cannot fully account for sociality in virtual worlds, digital spaces still reflect certain components that are present in offline society, especially gendered and racialized social expectations of behavior. Visible female representations of sexual subjectivity on social networks are often subject to gendered criticism and violent scrutiny (Megarry, 2014) while studies of what Dobson (2015) terms "heterosexy" imagery on sites like MySpace explore how



digital images of oneself can be used to confront the judgmental male gaze in online spaces. She explicitly addresses the notion of oppositionally-produced imagery by highlighting that “some images seem...a direct kind of hostility toward viewers [and] play with the conventions of viewer-viewed relationships” (p. 58). More importantly, she explains that these subjects understand they have actively constructed this specific self-representation (p. 58).

One heavily censured self-representation social media convention is the “selfie” or a photograph taken of oneself by oneself, a common practice for which the majority of women tend to be negatively judged. Despite a long history and continuous adaptation of self-portraiture with evolving technology (Holiday, Lewis, Nielsen, & Elinzano, 2016), digital selfies are assumed to be indicators of low self-esteem and negative body image. Social media users are profoundly aware that an arbitrary line exists between what constitutes an acceptable level of personal affirmation through selfies and what is considered distasteful (Steeves, 2015). But because selfies are constantly devalued, Abidin (2016) asserts “it is exactly this casual dismissal...as mere frivolity that has enabled Influencers to partake in quietly, subversive acts, by reappropriating the selfie for...self-actualization pursuits” (p. 16). Though Abidin does focus on the marketable potential of Instagram influencers who profit from these commodified selfies, the negative backlash to what are deemed appropriate visual expressions of female body image through selfies is constant. A similar quantitative analysis of the “slut-shaming” phenomenon on Facebook (Papp, Erchull, Liss, Waaland-Kreutzer, & Godfrey, 2017) examined participant assumptions regarding both the

“slut” (woman in the photograph) and the “slut-shamer” (woman who verbally criticized the photographed woman’s appearance) in terms of perceived socioeconomic status and sexual behavior solely by passing judgment on the woman’s attire. This social control manifests within virtual publics as shame because it is “the interface of subjectivity and sociality” (Pajaczkowska, 2008, p. 110). For the Latino community, this shame is solidified through the Tres Mariás Syndrome. However, much of this research on social media as participatory culture still ignores issues of class (Fuchs, 2014) and ethnicity. Despite mainstream research like Dobson and Abidin regarding conscious oppositional content, there is minimal information about how Latinas participate in social media as producers of counter discourse to proper comportment.

*“Virtual Barrio”: Latinas Online*

Constructing Latina representations is vital in a larger scheme because marginalized groups must “discover [their] own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor” and thus “become visible to itself” (Catharine Mackinnon, 1989, p. 31). Negotiating identity and representation for Latinas involves complex layers and social media sites such as Instagram can quite literally provide public visibility for this marginalized group to construct explicit portrayals of self-defined womanhood and *Latinidad*. Although I have demonstrated that mutually exclusive dichotomy of femininity is not solely applicable to Latino communities, scholarship exploring the ways Latinas actively engage in resistance on social media is sparse. One obstacle, as I mentioned, is breaking through the internalized black/white binary where African-American is automatically seen as

the opposite of the Anglo baseline; this could be attributed to the fact that the institution of academia is largely inaccessible to underserved populations. Although the development of black feminist studies and the subsequent findings on black women's sexualized media representations (White, 2013; Patterson-Faye, 2016) are inarguably essential to overlapping issues of gender and race in this country, this oversight can potentially create an academic vacuum where other marginalized groups continue to be neglected. As Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2001) states, Latinos ventured into the "virtual barrio" at a point when academic debates of cyberspace participation was already well underway and the utopian promise of this new technology had already been undermined; it resembled the social demographics of real life too closely. But as the Internet became a two-way channel of interactive content, the potential for resisting the pervasive and stereotypical representations of Latinas is renewed.

Research specifically focused on young Latina women show the possible side effects of internalizing negative responses on social media regarding self-image, such as Romo, Mireles-Rios, & Hurtado's (2015) study on beauty perceptions among Mexican-American girls in California. Romo et al. explain that Mexican-American girls can negotiate different body image standards if they are exposed to alternative images of beauty, particularly by other U.S.-born Latinos, as well as an explicit admiration for "thick, curvaceous bodies common among women of color in pop culture and Spanish-language media" (p. 492). But this approach still restricts Latinas to the role of audience members who absorb external visual representations. However, Instagram changes this so that Latina

users can create digital content as an outlet for expressing identity and sexuality that arguably rejects these blanket generalization and perceptions of the Latina body. This app primarily relies on users to circulate images and content that is self-produced; its algorithms amplify this by creating a virtual, networked audience to whom these images are displayed and, by extension, quite literally provide public visibility.

The previous sections individually discuss social conventions for women's roles in public spaces generally as well as specifically for Latinas; a typology used in Chicana feminism to situate female sexuality in Latino culture; representations of Latinas in visual media; and finally, the introduction of social media and Latinos' participation therein. These sections lay the groundwork for understanding how Latinas act as producers of self-representation on a photo-sharing platform like Instagram that relies on user-generated content. How do we account for circulating images of Latinas on these platforms that are consistently deemed too raunchy or low-class by both mainstream society and their heritage culture to be worthy of closer examination? To answer this, I turn to the performance of productive perversity as a vehicle for consciously employing raunch aesthetics.

## CHAPTER III

### NI SANTAS NI PUTAS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As described, the bodies of women of color are often socially perceived as markers of sexual excess and low socioeconomic class in such a way that deters them from attempting to celebrate sexuality. But film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) argues for a shift in how visual depictions of hypersexuality from women of color should be read as indications of “yearning” for better representations for marginalized race and gender groups. She explains this further within the context of visual media, stating that “instances of hypersexuality alert us to limited definitions of sexuality, race, and representation and therefore are crucibles for the creative formations of subjectivity” (p. 5-6). Shimizu examines film portrayals of Asian-American women through textual analysis and advances a theory of “productive perversity” such that these performances are a way for the women to take ownership of their sexuality as actors. Productive perversity is defined as:

...identifying with “bad images”, or working to establish a different identity along with established sexual images so as to expand racial agendas beyond the need to establish normalcy and standardization. To engage hypersexuality as a politically productive perversity pays attention to the formulations of sexual and racial identity that critique normative scripts for sexually and racially marginalized subjects. (p. 21).

Thus productive perversity critiques hegemonic normalcy regarding sexuality so as to understand the corresponding punishment for not adhering to it; this

relates to the previously detailed theme of social control over Latinas' behavior and appearance.

Although this work is primarily focused in film, the same theory can by extension be applied to women of color on Instagram as an image-based social media platform with content produced by the users. Shimizu affirms the film performers embrace the self-representations of their bodies as critiques of conventions on sexuality to illustrate “the seductive power of images and sexuality in representation” (p. 23). This resistance to normalized scripts of sexuality and gender rejects persistent marginalization by actively engaging in performances of productive perversity because the women are self-presenting. This is also the case in the “selfie” images on Instagram accounts because the photos are typically the sole product of the user. While I employ Shimizu’s performance theory of productive perversity in this paper to account for the physicality of the Latina body as seen in the selected Instagram accounts, I add Hernandez’s notion of raunch aesthetics as a framework for analyzing the physical accoutrements with which these Latinas adorn their bodies. Raunch aesthetics, as mentioned, situates hypersexuality specifically as “performative and vernacular” with a focus on celebrating “the movements, looks, sensations, and affects of bodies” (p. 94). Along this same line, I further approach these aesthetics as semiological since the accessories and nonverbal behavior are read as signs visually connoting class and sexuality in a conscious effort to subvert those assumptions.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHOD

The main research question behind this study was to identify how Latinas intentionally employ the visual aesthetics of adorning and arranging their bodies to challenge conventional notions of appropriate femininity from both mainstream U.S. and heritage Latino cultures. What intangible cultural meanings are inscribed as modes of resistance on the Latina body and the objects selected to decorate her? This requires closely analyzing these accoutrements and body positions considering the ways in which ethnic female bodies have traditionally been simultaneously controlled and sexualized in public spaces. This inquiry is also grounded in the perception of social media as a digital public that emulates these expectations with the new addition of Latinas participating as producers of representational imagery. As a result, a qualitative approach is the most suitable for examining the cultural meanings being produced by aesthetics and corporal performances through a textual analysis of selected Instagram accounts.

Because textual analysis interprets imagery and text, there is a semiotic focus that looks at the underlying workings of signs in this method. Charles Peirce (1977) defines a sign as the connection between the physical object and the concept or meaning it conveys as interpreted by the viewer. However, while this thesis draws upon this semiotic approach, I ground this textual analysis specifically within the confines of visual raunch aesthetics and nonverbal performances of perversity as signs. More specifically, I will be looking at imagery that simultaneously draws upon and subverts traditional conventions of

propriety and femininity from both Latino and Anglo perspectives. Although these cultural symbols are not new in their form, social media has created the opportunity for users to generate their own content in a way that contributes and amplifies conventional means of constructing identity in digital spaces.

The images for analysis were collected from four Instagram accounts: @DiosaFemme, @GorditaApplebum, @Mala\_Munoz, and @TheMamiCollective. Because new media scholarship on Instagram is still developing, there is no standard method for citing Instagram user accounts in academic work as of yet. I will refer to them by conventional naming methods (i.e. Diosa Femme) when describing them individually but also as “the Mamis” when referring to them all. The first three are the individual accounts for some of the founders of the Mami Collective, a page that documents the lives of “Seven fly mamis stuntin’ as resistance” (Instagram, 2016). The other collective members were excluded because not only do they live on the East Coast, but they also post inconsistently and display less deliberation regarding generating their Instagram content. Future research, however, can widen the scope of exploring *Latinidad* for other ethnicities as several of those members have Latin/Caribbean ancestry. These three Mamis were chosen primarily because their personal accounts are explicitly curated to reflect their culture and feminine identity; this is evident in several ways. First they incorporate Spanish words into their chosen Instagram account names or “handles”. *Diosa* means goddess, *gordita* is a diminutive for a chubby girl, *mala* means bad girl, and while *mami* technically means mother, it is used here as vernacularly akin to the endearment honey.



The large social audience that these individual accounts each have demonstrates their salience to Latinas of the Instagram community: Diosa Femme has more than 7,000 followers; Gordita Applebum has over 12,000; Mala Munoz has 8,519 while the Mami Collective has 5,283 fans. These women also live in Los Angeles, a particularly significant region because California has the highest state concentration of Hispanic/Latino population at 15.2 million (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Even without specific data on Mexican-American/Chicano demographics in Southern California, its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border accounts for a heavy Mexican cultural influence such that most research conducted in this area falls under Chicano/a studies. This is also necessary to consider because only one of the Mamis is half-Mexican, Diosa Femme, while Gordita Applebum is Salvadoran and Mala Munoz does not provide this information. Nevertheless, because they are based in a city with predominantly Mexican connections, the imagery and performances they employ are steeped in Chicano culture and are still applicable to understanding how they productively perform perversity and raunch aesthetics to display oppositional representations of Latina femininity in this digital public. Taking into consideration the physical adornments as aesthetics of raunch and the bodily arrangements as performance of productive perversity, I identified the following accessories and poses serving as signs through which these Latinas reject standards for feminine and sexual decorum.

## CHAPTER V

### ADORNING THE LATINA BODY

This analysis brings to light how decorated ethnic bodies are exoticized or censured for their otherness while non-women of color are not perceived differently when similarly styled. The following adornments are the physical manifestations of raunch aesthetics through accessories. The examples of jewelry in this section work through language, both English and Spanish, to claim recognition while the nail aesthetics requires consideration of class perceptions of taste. Though a full exploration into the history of this bilingual code-switching and its modern role is outside the scope of this study, it is nonetheless a recurring and significant component in relation to how these Latinas and similar accounts on Instagram engage with and subvert cultural understandings of identity in this digital public.

#### *Fashion Pins*

Perhaps the most unexpected finding from this analysis is the incorporation of fashion pins. These brooches have reemerged in popularity and the Mamis make full use of an accessory that inherently functions as a visual signifier. Similar to how nameplates linguistically serve to self-identify, fashion pins can include both text and images to signal any number of concepts involving cultural significance. This accessory is also easily portable given its relatively small size, allowing wearers to conveniently showcase them when worn in public. The pins worn by Diosa Femme, Gordita Applebum and Mala Munoz have overlapping themes but they do wear some concentrating on aspects that

illustrate key components to their cultural identities. Gordita Applebum displays pins on her feed with an overt political tone focusing on race politics; many in her collection demonstrate an open solidarity with the black community including a “Black Lives Matter” brooch and the Black Panther Party’s eponymous sigil. On the individual level, she also repeatedly posts photos of a two-piece gold pin of a heart that says “Mi Amor” (“my love”) with a removable cut-out key that can be worn separately. This is akin to friendship jewelry consisting of two or more corresponding pieces that constitute a whole but can be worn independently by each owner. Gordita Applebum sometimes sports both at a time but places them on different areas of her clothing, which can indicate self-love plays a major role in her personal growth since she keeps both pieces for herself; separate text-based posts on her account corroborate the significance of this theme to her sense of self both on- and offline.

Examples on Mala Munoz’s page relate more explicitly to her *Latinidad*, as with one post showing a cluster of pins rich with cultural signifiers. First is the word “Chicana” stylized in a recognizable cursive font popular in Latino street art. *La Reina de Tejano*, Selena, makes frequent appearances on all the women’s accounts in various forms but here she is commemorated in a simple circular portrait brooch. Next is a rectangular pin-version of a card showing a *nopal* or cactus from *loteria*, an image-based bingo game customarily played in Mexico. Cactus are often associated with Latin America and Mexico particularly as it features the plant on its national flag. There is also an idiom used to describe someone who looks “obviously” Mexican but more specifically indigenous by

saying the person goes around *con el nopal en la frente*, with a cactus on the forehead. While this phrase sometimes connotes negative perceptions imposed upon Latinos, Mala engages with the agency that social media enables by deliberately aligning herself with this symbol of hypervisible *Latinidad*. Another brooch follows the traditional *loteria* form of naming object but depicts a Cupid figure and titles it *El Pendejo*, which translates to “stupid man” normally used as an expletive. This along with a separate brooch in this grouping that reads “Trust No Man” potentially suggests Mala’s current attitude towards interacting with the male population. This pin more broadly reflects an emerging design trend of reimagining original *loteria* artwork with more modern examples, another approach through which U.S. Latinos engage with their heritage extends to the last of Mala’s brooches. An enameled rendering of Aqua Net hairspray is an unmistakable signifier of the *chola*-Chicana aesthetic. This particular brand is an iconic mainstream beauty item from the 1980s but is also widely recognized in a Southern California context as synonymous with *chola* culture of the 1990s. Aqua Net was both the most affordable and the most effective for maintaining the voluminous hairstyles that epitomized the homegirl look, a necessity for many Chicanas growing up in lower-income *barrios* who still wanted to express themselves through fashion. This brooch thus acknowledges an approach to Latina style as mediated through socioeconomic need.



**Figure 1.** Example of fashion pins with visible acrylics nails. Source from Instagram.

In another post, Diosa Femme shows off a pair of gilded pins that point to the gender ideologies that underpin the expectations of women in Latino culture. While one is entirely in Spanish and the other in Spanglish, a polarizing vernacular that combines Spanish and English, I situate Spanglish in this essay as it relates to the hybrid identity of bilingual U.S. born Latinos who discursively interact with both their American and heritage languages on a variety of levels. A black enamel brooch proclaims “DESTROY MACHISMO” in gold capitalized letters. *Machismo* is the notion of exaggerated masculinity and male pride prevalent in many Latin American cultures; considered the counterpart to *marianismo* in its approach to assumed male social roles, it has damaging repercussions in the way women are consequently subjugated. The idea that machismo must be destroyed is a Latino-specific approach to the mainstream feminist axiom of dismantling patriarchy. Though conventional patriarchy certainly operates on a larger scale with its connection to capitalism, *machismo* still comparably functions as an institution to discipline and minimize the very presence of Latinas. This appears on a second pin that states in Spanish,

“Calladita NO te ves mas bonita”, which roughly translates to “Being quiet does NOT make you prettier”. This reworks a common saying in many Latino households exemplifying this social control of silencing women wherein girls are told we are more attractive by keeping quiet and our purpose is to be visually appealing. The phrase parallels similar adages in other cultures that claim women are meant to be seen and not heard, demonstrating how prevalent and far-reaching gender role expectations can be.



**Figure 2.** Example of fashion pins with visible acrylics nails.

### *Nameplate necklaces and hoop earrings*

Nameplate jewelry is arguably the most commonly recognized urban accessory. All three individual women have gold nameplate necklaces that make frequent appearances on their photostreams. These necklaces have pendants that can be customized to spell out the wearer’s name or other words and its current iteration is more often associated with nameplates found in music videos of the early 1990s hip hop scene. Like many other components of hip hop and black culture, this specific type of jewelry is often seen as a socioeconomic marker

indicative of working-class status. These accessories permeated Latino culture and were adopted by the working class, a group that included gang members and *cholos*. Though nameplates most commonly appear in the form of necklaces, they can also be added to bracelets or earrings as well as non-gendered accessories such as belts and rings (Flower and Rosa-Salas, 2017). Flower and Rosa-Salas conducted interviews with wearers that explained how their first nameplate necklace held significant emotional value as an article associated with their coming of age and are frequently passed down as heirlooms. Living in the United States with a foreign name through either spelling or pronunciation has historically been a marker of otherness, one that rejects the Eurocentric hegemony imposed onto indigenous or immigrant groups (Flower and Rosa-Salas, 2017). Non-traditional names or those with unique spellings are difficult to find in other wearable artifacts bearing names in the United States despite its diverse population, highlighting what language or identities are seen as legitimate and what words are prevented from this (un)official American lexicon (Flower and Rosa-Salas, 2017). As such, the customization potential of nameplates inherently “declares selfhood and individuality” by demanding recognition through the naming process.

One significant finding is that these women opted to focus their nameplates on certain terms rather than names. Diosa Femme does regularly wear a gold necklace spelling out her given name in a standard font commonly called “simple script” as one of her two signature accessories. She also displays a gilded ring bearing the word “Nana”, which is likely a derivative of her name.

However, Mala Munoz and Gordita Applebum have nameplate chains with other words they use to self-identify. One of Mala Munoz’s two simple script necklaces spells out the Spanish word for “bad girl” and the first part of her Instagram handle, *mala*. Gordita Applebum has several nameplate necklaces that have appeared on her photostream that extend beyond just her name. One is of her Instagram username in simple script but she also has a chain with “VIRGO”—her astrological sign—in Old English font. The font itself here plays a role because it is recognized in Los Angeles for its association with graffiti and, by extension, gangs and *cholo* life. Old English was first used in L.A. graffiti by *pachucos* to mark their territories (Tatum, 2014) and eventually became synonymous with *cholos* and *barrio* life as Mexican-American gangs brought more attention to the graffiti form. This font was intended as a visible identity signifier for this particular Latino subculture, and younger Latinos have transformed this tradition by incorporating it into clothing apparel as a way to counter those negative stereotypes. Paralleling this opposition to negative perceptions of urban Latino youth, Gordita Applebum also has a second necklace indicating her hometown of South Central. A predominantly black and Hispanic community, this suburb was renamed South Los Angeles by city officials in an effort to disassociate the area from its pervasive stigma of criminal and gang activity (Los Angeles Times, 2003). By wearing this on her necklace, Gordita Applebum is proclaiming her neighborhood pride and aligning herself with a region stereotyped by lawlessness to deliberately counter this discourse.





**Figure 3.** Examples of customized nameplate jewelry.

As mentioned, nameplates can appear on a variety of jewelry and placing them on large gold earrings is another popular choice. Gold hoops or other geometric shapes such as hearts are equally emblematic of perceived socioeconomic status. A more explicit example of conscious aesthetic choices is a pair of gold nameplate hoop earrings spelling out “Fuck Trump” that Gordita Applebum frequently posts on her feed, undeniably inscribing her body with political meaning and resistance. This highlights how nameplates as a mode of defining self can manifest not just in the names alone but also other words that are significant in constructing identity. As such, women wearing these attempt to subvert how they are perceived via these ethnic and class markers by specifically identifying with certain terms. Diosa Femme owns a pair of heart-shaped mirrored earrings with the word “Chula” placed in the center. *Chula* is a vernacular term for a cute or pretty girl; yet the lived experience of this word sometimes involves unwanted attention from men as it is also typically used in catcalling. By purposely naming herself *chula*, Diosa turns it into a positive connotation and signals to others that she confidently embodies this trait.

Chunky and embossed, thin and rhinestone-studded, these earrings signal working-class women of color while also potentially criminalizing them since hoops are almost exclusively associated with *cholas*. Gordita Applebum directly addresses this correlation and the use of hoops as resistance in a graphic posted on her page from a third party that quotes her: “The more racism I experienced, the bigger my hoops got.” In this way, the larger earring size is meant to purposely exaggerate her visible otherness in response to negative social judgment. Noticeably large earrings are also required in terms of practicality so that the chosen word is legible and thus successful as a visible signifier. Regardless of size or including nameplates, gold hoops are perceived as a symbol of urban, low-class women. However, jewelry is not the only aesthetic accessory to carry distinctions of class.

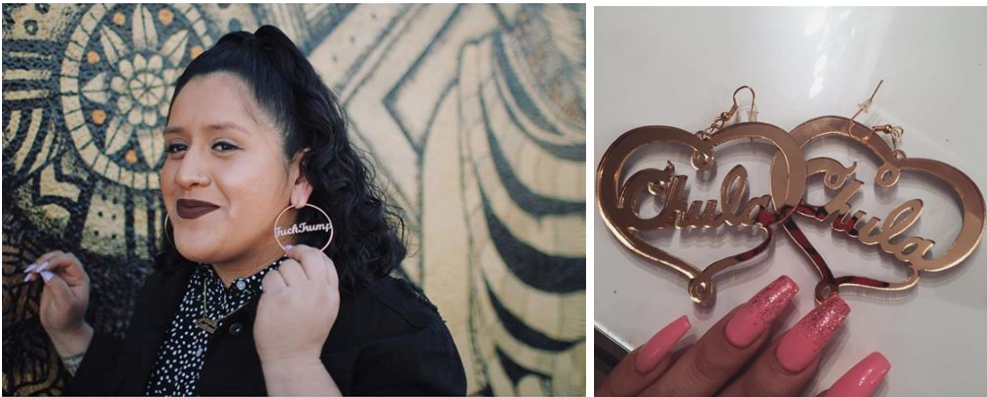


Figure 4. Examples of customized nameplate earrings.

### *Artificial nails*

Long, sculpted and often acrylic, artificial nails have historically been seen as “ghetto” or otherwise characteristic of urban, marginalized communities of color. While longer fingernails are almost universally perceived as feminine, the

different decorations and styles as well as the material of false nails also implies a certain category of woman since there is a prevalent nail aesthetic culture in communities of color. Bright colors, intricately painted designs or heavy use of gemstones all point to an aesthetic excess regarded as vulgar or garish on the hands of women of color, exacerbating standards of class and propriety. Extremely long nails are seen as impractical and obstructive in nature because they complicate the ability to complete a range of daily tasks such as typing on a keyboard or properly grasping objects. This may be a very specific example but one that builds on the notion that working-class women must rely on external factors to properly function in public and professional spaces. Yet these women intentionally showcase this adornment as another example of performing perverse and excessive femininity to supplant those negative assumptions and assert it as a positive expression of their feminine subjectivity.

Each of these women display their decorated nails, artificial or not, in a variety of shapes, colors and lengths. Mala Munoz posted a medium shot photo in the days prior to launching their podcast, *Locatora Radio*; the name is a play on the Spanish words for radio announcer, *locutor*, and a crazy woman or *loca*. In this post where they stand in front of a brick wall painted fuschia, the pair are looking down at their hands as Mala has her fingers curled inward while Diosa hands are outstretched with palms down. Both gestures are meant to draw attention to their nails, highlighting the connection between femininity and nail aesthetics. Mala Munoz's feed features long nails that are often neutral in tone with square, tapered edges but a more recent post shows a bright yellow color as

she delicately holds a plant vine. Leafy plants appear in several of the women's photos, potentially suggesting personal growth and self-care. Gordita Applebum often places accessories in her hand as she holds it palm side-up to ensure her colorful nails appear in the photo. Aside from headshot selfies or holding objects in ways that their nails are still visible, they also post stylized standalone shots of their nails, amplifying its importance in regards to constructing their identities on this digital stage. Gordita Applebum has a photo of her hand outstretched, palm facing upward and fingers curled inward topped by dark purple and green metallic chrome nails; the color combination is a stark contrast when set against the warmer tone of her hands. Metallic or neon colors, heavy glitter polish or other decorations on fingernails are considered tasteless on black or Latina women but this is not the case for white women.



Figure 5. Examples of acrylics nails.

Another example incorporating long nails as employing distinctly Latino signifiers is a professionally curated photo on Diosa Femme's page that combines almost all of these accessories within a single image. Here is a portrait in which her head is angled slightly off-center as she looks upward and away from the camera. The overall color scheme of the photo, with its various shades of pink and hints of gold, exudes a sense of gentleness and the feminine while contrasting

lines juxtapose soft and sharp edges. Her hands are held in a prayer position, adorned by long nails rounded into ovals and her signature gold ring. Thin hoops and her nameplate necklace are also visible but the central accessory is the ornate halo with its gilded rays of light. All of these elements unmistakably evoke *la Virgencita* but in a way that is very much grounded within the urban context of these Latinas' lives and the value that her image speaks to them. This syncretic depiction encapsulates not only the adornments themselves that signify womanhood for the Mamis but also introduces how Latina bodies are read based on how they are arranged contextually and within certain spaces.



**Figure 6.** Diosa wearing hoop earrings, nameplate necklace and ring as well as pink acrylic nails.

## CHAPTER VI

### ARRANGING THE LATINA BODY

Examining how the Mamis arrange their bodies in tangible and digital public spaces for self-presentation on Instagram provides insight to the particular qualities they aim to physically embody through this performance of productive perversity. The static nature of photos proves valuable to this analysis because it captures the self in a particular moment that has been thought out in several ways. The various elements in these photos—bodies and backgrounds—are carefully arranged as the Mamis explicitly display poses that carry symbolic meaning and require knowledge of specific cultural context. The arrangement of their bodies in specific ways creates a visual subversion and contestation of appropriate public female behavior. In the first pose, the Mamis maintain accoutrements meant to celebrate their feminine sexuality such as jewelry and dresses but engage in nonverbal behavior that traditionally function as masculine displays of power. The second pose embraces their hyperfemininity through an intentionally sexualized arrangement that focuses on their buttocks, both a recognition and affirmation of the popular discourse involving this particular area of the Latina body. A complete exploration of the impact of these arrangements must also take into account the physical places where this posturing occurs because both digital and tangible publics converge in this category. These positions appear in a distinct spaces: outside against city walls *en las calles* at night. Lastly, I will also include posts from the Mami Collective as a fourth Instagram profile because these photos are often reposted to this group

account, which merits exploring these arranged poses as a cohesive signifier that proves its salience to the Latina community both on- and offline.

### *The chola squat*

The first corporal arrangement found in the Mamis' accounts is a squat that entails bending one leg to an almost kneeling position while the other is outstretched slightly more to the front of their body. The arm closest to the camera is also extended outward as the wrist rests on the knee. A variation on this involves resting the chin on this arm instead. This pose is identifiable as Latino when set in a Southern California context and is commonly referred to as "the *cholo* squat". Erich Goode (1990) describes this crouch as reminiscent of peasants creating makeshift chairs when a proper one was unavailable. In this way, the *cholo* squat historically involves arranging the Latino body so as to literally take up space in places that fail to readily offer room for it. With the chest lifted and angled forward as the chin tilts up but maintaining a direct gaze towards the camera, this seemingly aggressive nonverbal behavior is perceived as implicitly masculine. The Mamis are purposely subverting the perception of women as submissive by employing this power pose, such that this arrangement be renamed in the feminine as the *chola* squat. Of the three women, Gordita Applebum most frequently displays herself enacting this posture on her account. One example shows a stylish version where she crouches outside against a wall painted red that contrasts with the speckled gray sidewalk. Her outfit consists of lighter colors that, along with a dark lipstick, complement her tan skin and allow her chunky gold hoops to stand out as well. In a less polished example, she poses

at night on another sidewalk but wears black clothing and golden sneakers. A tattoo bearing her hometown on the back of her thigh is also visible because the camera is angled slightly upward. Again, she wears dark lipstick and heart-shaped earrings with a slight smirk. The photo bears a geotag (an electronic feature for identifying locations on social media) that places her in Boyle Heights, a historically low-income Latino neighborhood and an area that many would caution is inappropriate for young women to occupy. While issues of public safety are a valid concern regardless of gender and are not to be recklessly dismissed, the Mamis freely operate *en las calles* of their *barrios* in celebration of this part of their identity instead of gravitating solely to more mainstream areas.



**Figure 7.** The *chola* squat in various urban locations.

Another posts shows Gordita Applebum dropping into the *chola* squat in the middle of an empty street lined with palm trees during the day. In this example, she keeps her expression neutral as the focal point is the sequined designs on the sleeve and jacket. While the rose is often associated with singer Selena, the sacred heart symbol on the back is another example of Latino syncretism. Also called *el corazon sangrante* or “Mexican Bleeding Heart”, this



sacred heart is what Oliver Debroise (1991) calls “a perfect object for syncretic symbiosis” (p. 21) as its symbolism for submission and sacrifice stems from Nahua and Christian traditions representing sacrificial victims and Jesus Christ’s suffering, respectively. Because this holy image is so deeply entrenched in both spiritual philosophies, it can no longer considered solely indigenous nor solely European which parallels the hybridity that is intrinsic to understanding U.S. Latino identity. Chicana artists draw upon the bleeding sacred heart to identify their struggle for cultural recognition as well as within the often *machista* Chicano movement.



**Figure 8.** Examples of lowrider elements, including the *cholo* squat.

A separate post by Mala Munoz depicts an alternative arrangement to the *cholo* squat that references another marker of American and Latino cultural merging. She crouches next Diosa Femme in a black and white gingham skirt and a black halter top with a rose placed near the neckline. This demonstrates a more stylized retro variant of the *pachuca* style bearing closer resemblance to a pin-up girl of the 1950s and akin to artwork from lowrider culture featuring women. This subculture blends Chicano urban aesthetics U.S. mainstream automobile trends that are most recognized for their namesake frames that are much lower to the

ground than standard vehicles and often fitted with hydraulics to hop. These cars are often decorated with Chicano imagery, one of which is hyperfeminine merges urban Chicano *barrio* aesthetics with American automobile technology. The frames for lowrider cars are much lower to the ground than standard vehicles and known for the most common custom feature of hydraulics that allow the frame to hop. The cosmetics of these vehicles are meant to enhance the vintage appeal of the classic cars while the body is custom painted with culturally relevant symbols; these include images of the Mexican flag, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* or other pre-Columbian images. These exterior decorations are intended to be highly visible and claim recognition of their Chicano identity. Another post shows Diosa Femme casually lounging against the passenger seat of a classic automobile with the same halter top and a skirt resembling a *sarape* pattern, a colorful striped material commonly used as a shawl or blanket in Mexico. These posts emit distinctly L.A. Chicano aesthetics, from the way their bodies are arranged to the clothing fabric to the very palm trees peeking out from behind the *lowrider*-esque car. The Mamis elevate their feminine appearance more expressly in the second principle pose.

### *The “Look Back at It”*

This particular pose refers to being photographed from behind with the central focus directed towards the buttocks and slightly lifted to accentuate her curvy figure, as the woman suggestively “looks back” over her shoulder at either her rear, the floor or the camera. This can be executed standing or squatting and is vernacularly identified in several ways, most commonly as the “thot squat”

(Galore Magazine, 2017) and garnering media buzz for its proliferation on Instagram. As a derogatory acronym for “that hoe over there” (or the plural form), “thot” originated in hip-hop music and refers to both class and sexual behavior. Amanda Hess (2014) details how the thot, as referenced in hip-hop lyrics, extends the correlation of woman as commodity such that a thot is “a cheap imitation of a “good girl” who is good only for mindless sex, not relationships or respect” (para. 5). Again, we see remnants of this dichotomy towards women’s visible expression of sexuality as promiscuous if not contained to a relationship. The slight shift in the squat form from side angle to directly “popping” the lower body towards the camera quickly transforms the *chola* squat to the “thot” squat. This position’s appearance in hip-hop and rap videos has been explored within a black feminist framework and its association with objectifying women (Carney, Hernandez & Wallace, 2015). But Instagram’s primary focus on circulating self-produced imagery shifts the power dynamic of these Latinas from passive audience to active participants in their own representations. Similar to the way “ratchet” has recently been reclaimed in an effort to subvert the inappropriate nature of female sexuality for women of color, the Mamis deliberately employ the “thot squat” conscious of their bodies being read as an inherently political site.



**Figure 9.** Examples of the thot squat and “look back at it” standing pose.

This pose changes with the slightest variation, some more overtly sexual by fully crouching down to the floor while another frequent option is to stand against a wall. This standing version can be less obviously sexual than the others, as seen in a post with Mala Munoz and Diosa Femme. Here, the two are turned inward towards each other while their upper bodies are twisted more towards the camera. Instead of a suggestive gaze, the Mamis smile widely and Diosa lays her hand against Mala’s hip. The posts in which the Mamis are “looking back at it” display two distinct characteristics. The first is the apparent solidarity when the Mamis arrange themselves in these poses as a group. This particular arrangement actually appears less with the individual woman and more within the company of other Mamis. The second are the actual locations of where this productive perversity occurs with the Mamis dressed and posed in these ways. As mentioned in regards to the *chola* squat, urban areas are another element of these curated photos and merit close examination since location can indicate class as well as expected social comportment.

## CHAPTER VII

### ARREGLADAS Y EN LA CALLE

Considering these three women are part of a separate account called The Mami Collective speaks to the significance of community for these Latinas in both on- and offline contexts. Moreover, as demonstrated, they regularly make appearances on each other's individual accounts but these group shots are generally reposted on the collective account as well. The connection in this group translates easily between their digital and real-world lives in such a way that bolsters a shared value of resisting these mutually exclusive standards of propriety. Instagram creates a new public space for the women to actively construct their feminine and cultural identities to create what they believe to be more meaningful presentations of themselves. Additionally, photographing themselves *en las calles* sets the stage for their productive perversity via nonverbal behavior.

The description section of the Mami Collective Instagram account clearly states they are “Seven fly mamis stunting’ as resistance”. The slang word “stunting” has several meanings, all of which are applicable within the framework of raunch and productive perversity. One definition involves behavior that garners public attention by flaunting excessive money or jewelry to hint at a certain level of class. However, this behavior often gets dismissed as an act. It also implies these traits as somehow inherited and, taking this into consideration with culture as a heritage, is a fitting interpretation. Essentially, it is a word that proclaims a glorified version of oneself. However, I argue that the Mamis “stunt”

in such a way to problematize the attitudes towards hypersexual Latinas. The cases where they use this word in either the accompanying caption or posted as a comment on one another's posts demonstrate a positive response to engaging in productive perversity and an acknowledgment of its potential for resistance. This is also expressed in comment from a follower on a group post of the Mamis arranged in this sensual pose reads, "thotting and squatting", emphasizing how the posts resonate with this virtual community because there is a collective understanding of the cultural weight this nonverbal behavior holds. Often, the Mamis serve as photographers for one another, as seen in a metapost where Mala Munoz is captured photographing Gordita Applebum "looking back at it". Consciously utilizing this pose within social media, specifically Instagram, underscores how Latina users operate not only as audiences but also as producers in this digital space through self-created content.



**Figure 10.** Mala Munoz and Gordita Applebum in the thot squat and looking back at it, respectively.

Arranging their bodies is in itself an act of solidarity when taking into account how often they appear with one another in photos but these poses are also done with each other. For example, the *chola* squat can be done with a partner such that the lower bodies of both individuals' face each other while their chests are directed more toward the camera. They then clasp hands and rest their bent elbows on their knees. This stance done in a pair indicates two things. First, the bodies create the appearance of a barrier such that the two individuals physically act as gatekeepers. Given its association with gang life, this potentially reflects a need to guard the community from outside threats that can manifest both discursively and tangibly. The second element of joined hands signifies a sense of unity among group members, as it requires trust from both parties to maintain balance in this pose when gripping the other person's hand. Often the posts involving the "look back at it" pose require two of the Mamis to execute the "thot" squat so that standing members in the back can appear as unobstructed as possible in the photo. Other photos arranged this way show the Mamis lined up with their hands against a wall generally during nighttime and in urban places, which brings me to the importance of the physical spaces in which they perform this perverse comportment.



**Figure 11.** Examples of the *chola* squat with a partner and in a group.

As mentioned, these corporal performances appear mostly at night in a city setting, most frequently in Downtown Los Angeles. This cosmopolitan is an epicenter for both business and leisure, with an array of corporate buildings with a professional population during the day that translates into a bustling nightlife virtually any day of the week. Many areas play host to art events, cultural exhibits or corporate happy hour meet-ups, all of which establishes the very public nature of Downtown L.A. and the significance for the Mamis operating in this space with their raunchy displays both in terms of adornment and arrangement. Another noteworthy physical aspect apart from the outdoor location is the chosen backdrop as well. Sometimes the Mamis seductively lounge on gated fences, in others they prop up against commercial rolling fences. Several of the backdrops consist of street art or graffiti markings, once again connecting to the urban quality associated with Latino gang life. These murals and decorated walls reflect similar aspects such as Old English font or figures that signify certain characteristics that are significant to the perversive performance the Mamis are trying to project. Moreover, their decision to celebrate their sexuality in these



settings subverts the idea that only promiscuous women traverse the streets at night but even if they are displaying overt expressions of sexuality, that alone deserves to be recognized in its own right without judgement.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SÓLO MUJERES: CONCLUSION

Having situated this analysis within the framework of presenting the Latina self as racialized and sexualized within the digital public sphere that is Instagram, I identified the specific raunch style aesthetics and productive perverse behavior in which Latinas like the Mamis can deploy as oppositional sexual subjectivity. I also explore how these Latinas engage with perspectives of appropriate femininity from both U.S. and Latino cultures drawing upon visual signifiers that implicitly contest the aforementioned mutually exclusive understandings of publicly performing womanhood. The women participating in these public spaces, both real and virtual, intentionally make use of accessories, apparel and body language associated with negative perceptions of Latinas regarding socioeconomic status and comportment to challenge these expectations of female propriety within a Latino context. Instagram has provided an opportunity to examine the intersection of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and the public sphere in a digital capacity. The Mamis unapologetically celebrate their sexuality by the way they choose to adorn or arrange themselves in these public spaces, and as such actively refuse to be shamed for their seemingly excess sexuality or femininity.

*Andar en las calles* now includes the digital *barrio*, within which there exists comparable potential for resisting gender conventions of sexuality and womanhood in a new public space. Being seen as solely *una santa* or *una puta* is a trope that the Mamis are adamantly dismantling through their bodies as a literal body politic. This study traced how Latina representations have evolved

from *chola* to *chula*, from audience to producer, through raunchy performances of perversity to embody a spectrum of womanhood that can be as fierce as it is feminine and freely sexual without being subjected to shame; as *sólo mujeres*, to simply be women. Social media platforms like Instagram allow users to produce rather than be provided with representations while the performance of productive perversity through raunchiness contributes an aesthetic guideline for examining and problematizing scholarship on racialized and classed representations of gender. Media scholars must continue to approach social networking technologies as pertinent sites of study because the visual and textual elements incorporated into these digital media can illuminate other culturally salient methods of constructing identity and sexual expression.

With the various changes occurring about discourse on communities of color and efforts to create more visibility for these underrepresented groups, there are several ways future research can continue exploring the role social media plays in this on a broader scale. A political economist approach to the small businesses on Instagram that sell the Latino-influenced apparel and accessories worn by the Mamis; it would be remiss to ignore the commercial potential for the burgeoning consumer market but it is also necessary to acknowledge examples of collective support with the online Latino community. For instance, an Instagram account created circa 2016 called Shop Latinx serves as a database for Latino-owned independent businesses. The Instagram account alternates features on different brands that are part of their network, increasing visibility and providing an established audience. It would be especially fruitful to

study this through a more technological lens as certain features facilitate the process for potential consumers; the Instagram Story feature, for example, allows users to access the brand's website simply by swiping up on the Story screen. Additionally, media scholars can further examine how the members of these virtual communities engage with each other offline. The Mami Collective frequently hosts meet-ups with followers as do individual members, so examining both formal and informal reunions via ethnography can provide insight to how these parasocial relationships continue to develop in real spaces and the implications of collapsing the distinctions between on- and offline personas.

A different academic avenue could focus on untapped components to *Latinidad*, which is one limitation of this study. Because the influence of Mexico is so strong in these particular accounts, it cannot account for other ethnic identities such as Afrolatinidad; the East Coast Mamis not included in this study also identify as hailing from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. This connects to another element of Latina identity called *bruja* feminism. From the Spanish word for “witch”, *bruja* feminism includes mystic components of indigenous spirituality and relates to the previously discussed efforts by Chicanas and other Latinas to reclaim and honor the sacred feminine deities of pre-Columbian civilizations. Indeed, the word *bruja* has slowly begun appearing on many of the Mamis' personal pages; after all, the witch figure is quintessential example of a “bad woman”. As with many religious traditions, *brujeria* practices are full of semiotic artifacts that can be explored in connection to visual platforms and virtual communities.

Overall, the strong potential for exploring the interplay between cultural identity as implemented in both virtual and real spaces helps amplify the visibility of underrepresented groups in a way that positively contributes to constructing identity in mediated and tangible public spaces. While this study relates specifically to Latinas, the potential for women to use social media as a tool of empowerment and resistance is applicable across cultures and beyond boundaries. Media studies must continue to approach social media as a way to illuminate these representations and the significance of these self-produced representations to the community as a whole.

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