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Chicas de Alli: Defining the Latina Stereotype

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Introduction

I have always had an interest in cultures other than my own. When I was in high school, I studied the Hindi language and became obsessed with Bollywood films, Indian food, and all other aspects of the culture. Upon arriving to college, I declared my major as Spanish Education. As a requirement, I lived in Spain for a year. I was completely immersed in a whole different part of the world that, until then, only existed in pictures on the internet or in books. I realized that the most important aspect of a new place is the people. People in Spain are completely different than people from Puerto Rico, who are also different from people in Colombia. Interestingly enough, in many of my quotidian interactions, all of these people were smashed into one particular category.

In my Span 4890 class, we had to do a final project. After much discussion (and argument), we decided to make a video, seeing how media in the U.S. portrays Latina women, which in turn affects how the people of the nation view Latinas. We interviewed random people on campus, as well as family members, friends, and co-workers. It was important to have the points of view of a diverse group of people, which I believe we succeeded in.

This video, paper, and the topic as a whole are very important to me. Specifically with the video and paper, I have put in many hours talking to people on the topic. I was in charge of interviewing, editing the film down, and making sure everything worked in regards to the video. The paper includes not only discussion brought up in the video, but is an extension of the paper, touching on other important aspects of the Latina stereotypes in the United States. I hope the video and paper are of assistance to anyone who has an interest on the subject.

Chicas de Allí: Defining the Latina Stereotype

If asked to describe a famous Latina woman, the majority of people in the United States would probably name the same few: Jennifer Lopez, Shakira, or Sofia Vergara. These women all share very similar visual traits, which is uncharacteristic- given that Latina women have very diverse appearances. That one fact leads to the question: What is it that makes one woman appear “more Latina” than another? Is it the way they look? Or could it be that women who are “more Latina”-looking fit more firmly into stereotypical roles of attitudes or career choices? People often attempt to fit others, especially those racialized as “others” into certain mental schemas that they have developed, and the Latinas of the United States seem to be judged by certain standards of appearance. Further, Latinas also have been put into categories based on their actions. As Latinas are being judged by these two specific classifications, they are facing hurdles in the United States. Will they be able to surpass these hurdles, or will they constantly be confined to the role of the sultry woman who can’t keep her temper?

In my Spanish 4890 class, we created a movie on this topic, titled *Chicas De Allí: A Class' Struggle to Define the Latina Stereotype*. In producing the video, we gathered information using various methods. We interviewed different people, and were able to view firsthand the popular perceptions of Latina appearance that have emerged in the United States. We also spoke with a Latina professor at a more in-depth level. Furthermore, we supplemented the interviews with conversations the class had on the topic, as well as quotations from numerous sources. As most of the interviews were completed using younger subjects, the majority of which go to Bowling Green State University, it could be that these stereotypes and thoughts of Latina women

don't fit in with the "norm". However, we found other sources that were able to support the information provided in the interviews.

Throughout this paper, I will be utilizing sections from the video, as well as using articles and books not mentioned in the video, to build the argument that Latinas in the United States have been facing major and constant hurdles since the 1930s when Latina stars paved the way onto the silver screen. Being a Latina has also been a double negative, facing difficulties not only for not being White, but also for being a female. The stereotypes of Latinas are prominent in our everyday life, and continue to build. This paper will highlight the stereotypes that are connected with this group, as well as how the stereotypes negatively affect these females.

While we created the video, an important source of information and brainstorming came from Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall. In Hall's book, "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", he discusses what the difference is between a 'type' and a 'stereotype'. "We routinely make sense of the world using *types* – broad categories of things with common characteristics. This allows us to categorize things in a meaningful way, and in turn draw conclusions and extrapolate information about something based on previous experience of things of the same, or similar, type... *Stereotypes* on the other hand, while classifying people in a similar manner, reduce the person to those simplified and exaggerated characteristics, admit no possibility of change, and insist that these characteristic are natural. Any complexity is ignored and denied, and it is implied that everything that is necessary to know about the person can be known by referring to the traits of the stereotype. In essence a stereotype declares 'this is what you are, and this is all you are.'" Hall then goes on to describe how there is a process of splitting, which separates those who don't fit into the particular group they should fit

into. Splitting would occur, for example, when a Latina appears more African or European than “Latina”, or when she doesn’t have any of the other assumed attributes of a Latina.

When considering these stereotypes, it is necessary to consider what a stereotype actually is. The Merriam-Webster definition of a stereotype is “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern; *especially* : a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment” (*The Merriam Webster Dictionary*). Based on this definition, a stereotype has several important portions to it: members of a group share the mental picture, and it represents an opinion formed by the group that shares the mental picture. The mental picture of Latinas as sultry sexpots spread and became popularized with a small number of leading ladies coming to America with one thing in mind: fame.

What are these stereotypes that have developed about Latinas? The website *Being Latino* posted an article titled, “Latinas: Beyond the stereotypical sexy Mama”. Within the article, the author touches on some of the stereotypes. “Google the word “Latina” most of the links found on the first page of results focuses on the sex appeal of Latinas providing links to ‘sexy Latinas’, ‘naked Latinas’, and many links to ‘porn featuring Latinas’... It truly bothers me that in the media, online and in the boarder context of American culture Latinas are known mostly for their beauty, hot temper, and reputation of being sexual temptresses” (Pena, Yulietha). These stereotypes have been tied to Latinas since at least the early 1930’s.

The 1930’s were part of the Golden Age of Hollywood, producing amazing films which are considered classics throughout the world. During this time, the silver screen was filled with many “Latin lovers” or “fiery spitfires”. Several of the women who paved the way for the

Jennifer Lopezes of our time included Dolores del Rio, Lupe Velez, and Carmen Miranda.

Dolores del Rio was the first Latina movie star to become internationally acclaimed. She starred in fifteen silent films during the late 1920s. However, when movies gained sound, del Rio's noticeable Mexican accent was more of a burden than anticipated. Her comeback movie, *Girl of the Rio*, could be considered an integral part of the origin of the sexy, sensual Latina stereotype in Hollywood. "The film paraded debauched Mexican stereotypes, showcasing Del Rio as a feisty cabaret dancer. The Mexican government condemned the movie, a censored version was shown in Mexico, and the influential Los Angeles Latino newspaper *La Opinion* headline lamented "We Have Lost Del Rio!" A quick study, Del Rio subsequently turned down roles (*Viva Villa!* most famously) slandering her heritage, refusing to become a pawn in Hollywood's image machine." (Mulcahey)

Similarly, Mexican actress Lupe Vélez was more commonly known as "the Mexican Spitfire" and "the Hot Pepper". The first nickname came from several movies she acted in, sharing the same name. Her personal life was filled with many affairs, perpetuating the idea of the Latina lover. During her stardom, she was compared to another famous Mexican actress of the time, Dolores del Rio. "While Dolores del Rio was refined and educated, Vélez was untimely and brutal: she said what came to mind, and did not care for anything look good socially" ("Lupe Vélez"). Interestingly enough, this was also the time that Latinas began to play different ethnicities, a practice that has continued through to this day.

The most well-known star from this time period is the very famous Carmen Miranda. Carmen Miranda was known as a Brazilian Bombshell, and was known internationally for her acting, singing and dancing. "In the American movies, her image was a caricature of the Latin woman - jealous, hot-blooded, with a strong accent - which was encouraged by American

producers, although Carmen was fluent in English in real life. (“Carmen Miranda”)” Miranda to this day is recognized by many, and many designers take inspiration from this bombshell.

“Carmen Miranda’s distinguishing look has been continuously revisited to this date. Alexandre Herchcovitch, Icíarius, brands such as Salina, Rosa Chá, Sta. Ephigênia, as well as Carlos Tufesson and Napoleão Lacerda are some of the designers who have been inspired by her to create their collections – even Madonna has said that Carmen is one of her influences. As the subject of 2009 São Paulo Fashion Week, with an exhibition of the objects and costumes, to this day Carmen is a trendsetter for many important designers and brands. (“Carmen Miranda”)”

The lack of Latinas in mainstream media today perpetuates the negative stereotypes of the past. The Latinas that we do have in our television programs or music shape our ideologies of what they should look like, and how they should act. In the article “We’re Honoring You, Dude” by Stephanie A. Fryberg and Alisha Watts, they provide an answer for why that is. “This chapter illustrates the critical role that social representations play in providing people with a code for understanding ‘who they are’ and ‘how they are seen by others’...When minority group members enter a domain in which no representations of the group with which they are associated exists or only negative representations exist, they may experience additional barriers in their effort to belong.”

This idea is exemplified when one considers the Latina stars we are presented with on a daily basis. Salma Hayek, Eva Mendes, and Penelope Cruz are all Latina movie stars that fit the mold of how a “typical” Latina woman should look. They all have caramel skin, darker hair, and curvy bodies that are expected of them. Naya Rivera, who plays Santana on FOX’s *Glee* not only fits the ideal Latina looks, but her character also is fiery, sassy, and has a very sexual and

sensuous personality. Very rarely is America presented with Latinas who break the mold. Often, if they do step outside the boundaries of how a Latina “should” be or act, the American audience doesn’t realize she is Latina.

Some women will attempt to appear more Latina so they can play the role representing their own ethnic group, while some chose to allow spectators to view them as an Anglo actress or singer. Two women who respectively fit these categories are Sofia Vergara and Sara Paxton. Vergara, who is from Colombia, is a natural blonde, but wasn’t accepted as a Latina actress while she was blonde. She was quoted saying, “I’m a natural blonde, but when I started acting I would go to auditions, and they didn’t know where to put me because I was voluptuous and had the accent – but I had blonde hair. The moment I dyed my hair dark, it was, ‘Oh, she’s the hot Latin girl (“Celeb Quotes for Sept. 13.”)”. Sara Paxton is a half-Mexican actress, who doesn’t appear Latina at all, nor has she ever played a Latina role. In an interview with *Latina* magazine, when asked about this issue, Paxton said: “I’ve tried! Are you kidding me? I’ve gone on auditions and I’ve been like, ‘You know my family’s [Latin]... I’ve spoken a little bit of Spanish, and they’re just like, ‘Ha ha ha – that’s good!’ And I’m like ‘what?’ ... They’re not going to hire the ‘white girl’ to play Latina” (Hernandez)

Many people don’t consider how Latinas are portrayed in the media, unless they are faced with it head-on. In the article “The Sexualization of Minority Women”, author Donata Lockett describes what she sees on a daily basis- African-American and Latina women in magazines on newsstands, portrayed in great contrast to the Caucasian women on magazine covers. “What do you see? You see scantily clad Black and Latina women, usually wearing little more than a bra and a thong, with the focus on their assets. ...This is the sexualization of minority

women. It is one of the most poisonous and lethal effects of the media; it has contributed to the death of the respectable minority celebrity in the entertainment industry...It has everything to do with what the media believes is beautiful and minority women do not fit that image of beauty. So if they're not beautiful, then the only thing left for them to be is sexy. Therein lies the problem.” She continues to mention how the way that the newsstands are set up could cause the wrong message to be sent out to young minority females. If young Latinas, from a young age, are passing newsstands, or seeing on the television that the Caucasians are more accepted for how they look, are more mainstream and more successful, that in turn can cause horrible self-esteem and self-worth issues.

To properly recognize why these stereotypes are constantly repeated throughout history, it is necessary to look at society. More specifically, it is pertinent to look at who has control in our society. The United States can be considered a hegemonic power, ruled by the white, upper-class males. Where does this place Latinos, and more specifically, the Latina women? Author Lucila Vargas states “The regime of representation of the Anglo tradition of media and popular culture positions Latinos and Latinas as Other, but it makes important racial distinctions. This tradition has reproduced the ambiguous dual classification system that governs everyday interactions. While in general, light skinned, upper-class individuals with European features have been accorded some sort of honorary white status, the vast majority of Latina/os have been constructed as denizens, racialized subaltern subjects” (Vargas) She later quotes Carmen Huaco Nuzum as saying, “by erasing cultural specificity of national groups, sexualization and racialization have rendered all Latinas into the ‘sexually provocative generic Latina’ epitomized by the spitfire” (Vargas).

Interestingly enough, in the video *Chicas de alli: A class' struggle to Define the Latina Stereotype*, many of the people interviewed struggled to identify where the Latina women were from. When asked where a famous Latina star was from, a group of male students listed the following countries: Nicaragua; Afghanistan; Chile; Colombia; El Salvador; South Africa. One girl looked at a picture of Colombian singer, and responded that she was from “South....America. Mexico.” It’s interesting, and raises various questions, that virtually nothing is known about Shakira, who is currently one of the most popular Latina women in the United States. These two methods listed above are the most common methods people use when attempting to classify a Latina woman. It is very common that people guess all the Spanish-speaking countries they know (and some completely random countries, including Afghanistan), or people guess the whole continent of South America, assuming that the person will be from one of the countries within the continent itself.

Part of this confusion about Latin American and Spanish speaking countries, as well as the people who come from those particular places, could be involved with the U.S. history of grouping all of these people under the category “Hispanic” or “Latino”. “The process by which particular Latin American groups have come to be homogenized as ‘Hispanics’ (or alternatively, as ‘Latinos’) cannot be divorced from the ways in which such pan-Latino labels were first formulated by the U.S. Federal Government. The ‘Hispanic’ label was devised as a deliberate strategy of erasure...precisely at that historical moment of political crisis characterized by the racial militancy of the 1960s and 1970s” (Genova, Ramos-Zayas). During this time, Chicanos and other Puerto Ricans were fighting for recognition of their own particular heritage, the term ‘Hispanic’ was used to reign in these groups, and to force all of these diverse ethnic groups into

one broad category. The answer from the government was that they *were* receiving recognition - the group as a whole. This undermined everything that the Chicanos and Puerto Ricans were fighting for.

One of the big questions that arise is, “how does this stereotyping affect that Latinas who face it on a day to day basis?” These women are constantly considered to be outsiders, a lower class and race than the rest of the United States, used specifically for viewing pleasure. These stereotypes not only affect the Latinas who wish to break into a career in entertainment, but also adversely touch all Latina women. In the article “Media’s Portrayal of Latinas”, by Andrea Puente, she states, “I believe that the portrayal of Latinas in the media affects the people’s perspective of Latinas in day to day life. Many Latinas struggle with breaking into the business world because so many people want to believe that their priority is to have a family. As a Hispanic woman I know how difficult it is to get prominent business leaders to take my ambition to be an entrepreneur seriously. Not only is it difficult breaking the glass ceiling as a woman but throwing in the ethnic factor creates a whole other struggle. Considering that Latinas are represented as we discussed makes it very difficult to overcome these stereotypes. Unfortunately unless the media outlet is minority owned there are not a lot of public stories about successful Latinas that are not artists. As in any situation if you are not entertaining and beautiful most likely your success story will not be published.”

Puente then goes on to mention that unless the media is able to change, we will continue to view Latinas in this particular light. She states that Latinas are at an extreme disadvantage in the U.S., because they not only face racial prejudice but also gender prejudice. Latinos are rarely in the media for the positive influence they have on their community, or on our nation as a

whole. There are numbers of notable Hispanic-Americans who have contributed to our society, which are rarely recognized for their contributions. Sonia Sotomayor became the first Hispanic American woman Justice on the United States Supreme Court. She should be viewed as a role model to young women and Latinos, but even she fell victim to the prejudice and stereotyping of Latinas.

“Not even United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was able to avoid the Hollywood generated stereotype of the hot-tempered Latina. Republicans challenged Sotomayor, a woman of Puerto Rican heritage, to cool her alleged temper in service to the Court during her confirmation hearing in summer 2009” (Spigner) The New York Times ran an article titled “Sotomayor’s Blunt Style Raises Issue of Temperament”, stating that Judge Sonia Sotomayor, President Obama’s Supreme Court choice, has a blunt and even testy side, and it was on display in December during an argument before the federal appeals court in New York. The case concerned a Canadian man who said American officials had sent him to Syria to be tortured, and Judge Sotomayor peppered a government lawyer with skeptical questions” (York, Liptak) However, later in the article, lawyers and Supreme Court Justices alike all seem to agree that Judge Sotomayor is a positive addition to the Court, and one lawyer even stated that he feels that if Judge Sotomayor were a man (and maybe more so if she were a white man), she would not be receiving such negative feedback.

Furthermore, all Latinos in the United States face negative views when it comes to how everyone else sees them. In a survey done in Ohio, it was discovered that when asked questions that rated immigrant groups on certain characteristics, Latinos fared the worst. “Respondents were asked to evaluate a particular immigrant group and choose between two extremes in

stereotypical categories including wealth, intelligence, dependence, conformity and violence (for example: rich versus poor and self-sufficient versus dependent on government assistance).

Surveyed callers rated Middle Easterners as poorly as Latin Americans on 'violent vs. nonviolent' and "trying to fit in vs. staying separate from Americans," but Latinos were still rated the most negatively across the board" (Gates). People are uncomfortable with Latinos, even though many groups of Latinos have been in the United States for hundreds of years. This point was extremely pertinent during the 2012 presidential election, with the topic of undocumented immigrants being discussed in-depth at one of the debates. The words used by each Obama or Romney were in direct relation to how they saw the topic. Obama referred to people as undocumented, while Romney commonly referred to them as illegal.

This paper, and the video accompaniment are meant, not to provide a complete understanding of the stereotypes that we as a nation have created about Latina women over the years, but instead to initiate thought about how the media, as well as our personal experiences, shape the way in which we see, and react to, a certain group of people. Latinas have been portrayed a certain way for almost a full century, and it would not be an easy task to erase these stereotypes. Instead, we should try to be more accepting of this very diverse group of people. This isn't going to be easy, and Latinas are going to struggle to find a new identity that others accept- but being aware of how the media and mainstream culture affect this particular group is just as powerful as being able to fight against the injustices and inequalities they face on a regular basis.

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