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“NO UGLY WOMEN”

Concepts of Race and Beauty among Adolescent Women in Ecuador

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Current research on construction of the female body focuses on non-Hispanic women in the United States. The idealized Latina body, however, is rapidly becoming commodified and objectified in global popular culture. Using standardized and open-ended surveys and group and individual interviews, the author examines the negotiation of sociocultural ideals and body image by adolescents at the intersection of gender, race, and beauty. These young women hold racist beauty ideals but are flexible when judging the appearance of real-life women. They perceive two competing or complementary prototypes of beauty, one white and one Latina. This study fills a gap in the literature on beauty and the body by examining a non-U.S. sample that does not fit into the usual Black-white dichotomy of race.

Keywords: *beauty; body; race; adolescent women; Ecuador*

In studies on the United States and other countries, unrealistic beauty standards are often implicated in low self-esteem and unhealthy behavior among adolescent girls. Scholars in fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and public health have addressed this topic, placing teenage girls' perceptions of their bodies in the context of cause (impossibly thin and perfect media images of women) and effects (i.e., low self-esteem, rampant dieting, eating disorders). Relatively few studies discuss in detail the differences in beauty ideals and body image between Black and white American women, perhaps because of the many findings pointing to a greater prevalence of unrealistic ideals and eating disorders among white women. The studies on the topic of racial differences that do exist shed no light on how women who are neither Black nor white navigate the personal and social

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consequences of beauty standards. Now that Latinos are the largest ethnic minority in the United States, the Black-white paradigm of race common in much of the literature is insufficient and exclusionary. No in-depth studies of body image in U.S. Latinas or Latin American women or girls currently exist; in fact, it is difficult to find any studies on body image in countries outside North America. In this article, I examine the intersection of race, body, and beauty as a site of conflict and daily negotiation for women of Latin descent.

This project attempts to fill a gap in the research on adolescents and beauty in several ways. First, the population studied differs from the usual subjects of such studies in that the young women surveyed are not white, not Black, and not North American. Second, the article describes a cultural context in which both U.S. and Latin American cultural products are consumed. Third, because the study compares girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds, inferences can be drawn about the role of class in the perception of beauty. Most of the relevant studies performed in the United States do not address the possible contributions of class status to body image and ideals. According to the findings of this study, class is an important determining factor in self-concept and body image but does not have a significant effect on personal ideals of beauty. Finally, the young Ecuadorian women participating in this project articulate a new media prototype of beauty that can be referred to as the "generic Latina" type. Further investigation of this nonwhite beauty ideal is warranted, both in the U.S. and Latin American settings. The generic Latina model and the phenomenon of Latina success in international beauty pageants and other media forums would make an excellent point of departure for initiating a dialogue about body image among women of Latin descent both here and abroad.

I will argue, using the case of adolescent girls in Ecuador, that although teens are influenced by sociocultural ideals and media images of feminine beauty, they adapt these to their everyday lives and are frequently able to examine them critically. Based on a review of the literature, two types of possible responses to media ideals can be identified. The first is the pattern described in most analyses of white American girls, which involves subscription to a prototype of beauty that is thin and Caucasian in appearance. The acceptance of this ideal is linked with negative body image and unhealthy behaviors. The second response is found in studies on African American girls, where the dominant white ideal is questioned or even rejected in favor of an approach that values a wider range of features and body types and places a premium on personal style and uniqueness. The perceptions of beauty among the adolescents in this study represent a third alternative. These young women openly espouse ideals of beauty quite similar to (and in some cases identical to) the Caucasian prototype, while tending toward less rigid judgments of beauty in everyday life as well as supportive peer interaction. Thus, in theory, these girls claim to hold standards similar to those described among their white counterparts in the United States, whereas, in practice, their behavior is comparable to that of African American adolescent women. When examining themes of beauty and body among a sample of Ecuadorian teenage girls, U.S.-based Black-white dichotomies give way to

the more nuanced conceptions of race, class, and gender that are articulated by young Latin American women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Importance of Beauty

Recent studies on the construction of the female body suggest that physical appearance is a social as well as a personal issue. Feminist scholars view the body as a site of direct social control through harsh regimes of beauty and thinness (Bordo 1989; Brook 1999; Butler 1993; Grosz 1994). The representation in media—magazines, movies, and television—of unattainable beauty ideals is often implicated in the high incidence of eating disorders and low body image among teenage girls (Duke 2000; Lovejoy 2001; Parker et al. 1995). Concerns about adolescent behavior and self-image are often premised on the idea that young people are somehow more impressionable or less sophisticated media consumers than adults. Idealized images of beautiful women are a major factor affecting young women's personal ideals and body image; other influential factors include peers and family and the perceived preferences of the opposite sex. It could be said that the media are the most important determinants of abstract ideals of beauty, whereas self-concept and judgments of the attractiveness of real-life women allow for greater influence from the individual's personality and social context.

Research shows that beauty, understood here as an attractive or above-average appearance (and all the practices or resources employed to achieve such an appearance), has significant social and economic implications for women. According to Naomi Wolf, " 'beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard . . . in assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations" (1991, 12). Wolf described rampant job discrimination based on the "professional beauty qualification." According to recent research, "conventional attractiveness is . . . a realistic route to power for women"; women deemed attractive are "more popular . . . more likely to marry and more likely to marry men of higher socio-economic status . . . more often hired, more often promoted, and paid higher salaries" (Weitz 2001, 673). Feminine attractiveness is often a preliminary requirement: Women lacking an acceptable appearance may not even be allowed to fill out an application or interview for a job.

Nonwhite Women and Beauty

Although the majority of academic research on beauty deals with the topic of white women in the United States, the intersection of race and gender has been the subject of some recent attention. Scholars are beginning to address the situation of African American women's perceptions of their bodies and attractiveness in comparison with white women. Traditionally, social scientists, psychologists, and

others assumed that the orientation of U.S. culture toward a Caucasian ideal of feminine beauty led to lower body image and self-esteem among Black women and to self-hatred among Blacks in general (Bond and Cash 1992; Rosenberg 1989; Trepagnier 1994). Recently, however, empirical studies have found higher levels of body image and self-esteem in African American women when compared to whites, which seems to be linked to more flexible conceptions of beauty and rejection of white ideals (Bond and Cash 1992; Jaffee and Mahle 1995; Makkar and Strube 1995; Molloy and Herzberger 1998; Ofusu, Lafreniere, and Senn 1998; Wade 1991). These observations hold despite class differences, Black women's objectively greater body weight, and previous studies supporting the self-hatred hypothesis (Lovejoy 2001).

It could be argued that the survey instruments used to measure body image among white and Black women are designed with white women in mind. For this reason, Parker and her colleagues (1995) designed questions specifically for Black women and used Black researchers to conduct interviews. Parker et al.'s work stresses the importance of cultural factors in the development of personal ideals of beauty and body image. The Black girls studied were not preoccupied with thinness or attaining ideal beauty or bodily perfection, as were their white counterparts. Instead, the young African American women articulated a different standard of beauty based on "making what they had work for them" (Parker et al. 1995, 108). Peer feedback among these girls was positive, whereas white girls engaged in competition and jealousy over appearance. The study concluded that "African American perceptions of beauty are flexible," accounting for greater body satisfaction (Parker et al. 1995, 108).

Duke's (2000) study supports Parker et al.'s (1995) claim that peer and family influences are more significant to Black teens' standards of appearance than mainstream or media ideals. This study emphasizes Black Americans' greater concern with style and attitude than with physical perfection. African American girls recognize the inapplicability of white standards of beauty to themselves and tend to reject or ignore these messages. Both studies imply that one reason for Black women's satisfaction with heavier bodies is that this is what they perceive Black men to look for in romantic partners.

Miller's research on Jamaican adolescents examined how ideas about race influence body image and perception of attractiveness, since in many former colonies, "colour has been an important determinant of social niche, economic status, and personal worth . . . [and] Whiteness has become associated with the desirable and Blackness with the undesirable" (1969, 72). The participants, when asked to describe the ideal boy and girl, consistently valued Caucasian features, straight hair, and light skin. The ideal body was slightly heavier than the current U.S. ideal, with a "big bust, small waist, broad hips, and long legs" (Miller 1969, 85). Miller concluded that the ideal of physical appearance among these adolescents was characterized by a valorization of whiteness and that participants who more closely approximated this ideal displayed more positive body image. Conceptions of race

in this study were not limited to assumptions about skin color but included certain facial and bodily features for each racial group.

Race and Beauty in Latin America

In Latin America, the topic of beauty and race has been studied little, and this is especially true of Ecuadorian studies. As Miller's (1969) study implied, colonialism created a cultural affinity for whiteness and a link between white appearance and class status. Rigid colonial caste systems have become blurred over time; however, nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* (race mixture) in many Latin American countries continue to maintain racism. The myth of *mestizaje* promoted by the state, the media, and popular culture proposes the progress of the nation through *blanqueamiento*, or the gradual cultural whitening of the population (Rahier 1998; Stutzman 1980; Wade 1997). According to former Ecuadorian president Guillermo Rodríguez Lara, "We all become white when we accept the goals of national culture" (Stutzman 1980, 45). The idealization of cultural whiteness and European physical features represents discomfort with the demographic realities of the nation and the imposition of foreign standards of appearance on a mostly mestizo (racially mixed) population. The racist norms of beauty associated with developed nations (pervading the continent through U.S.- and European-produced media) combine with similar traditions in Latin American countries to create an exclusive, "the whiter the better" ideal of beauty.

As part of its glorification of whiteness, the ideology of *mestizaje* effectively excludes Blacks and indigenous people from the nation, rendering "racial and ethnic diversity invisible" by depicting the "prototype of modern citizenship" as white or white-mestizo (Rahier 1998). This exclusion is visible in Ecuadorian media depictions of women, where dark-skinned women are notably absent; when they do appear, they tend to be foreign (non-Ecuadorian). In Ecuador, beauty is often equated with whiteness and its characteristics: light skin; delicate features; straight/wavy, light-colored hair; and light eyes.

In 2000, the most popular soap opera in the world was the comedic, Colombian-produced *Yo Soy Betty, la Fea* (I Am Betty, the Ugly). Eighty million people in Latin America and the United States watched this program regularly (Andes lite 2002). Few experienced viewers were shocked by the eventual metamorphosis of Betty into a beautiful, happily married woman. As Jean Franco (2001) pointed out, this is one of many media products demonstrating that "images of the body are increasingly standardized according to global specifications." Set in a fashion design business, the show's supporting characters are *el cuartel de las feas* (the squad of ugly women), a group of secretaries that functions as comic relief. Each office assistant has a nickname related to her deficient physical trait: The ungainly tall character is *La Jirafa* (The Giraffe), and *La Pechugona* (The Big-Breasted) has an oversized bust. The only Black character is *La Negra* (The Black); her "ugly" trait is obviously her skin color. The connotation of the words *blanca* (white) with *bonita*

(pretty) and *negra* (Black) or *india* (Indian) with *fea* (ugly) is understood by all Ecuadorians.

The artificial split created between Blackness and beauty was publicly challenged in 1995, when a Black woman was elected Miss Ecuador. Rahier described the “unease” as well as the explicitly negative reactions to the approval by the judges of “a black woman as a symbol of Ecuadorian femininity” (1998, 425). The acceptance of “domesticated blackness” represented a compromise between local, national, and transnational ideals of beauty, and it must be understood in the context of an influx of images of sexualized Black women (in imported American media) and the small Third World nation’s desire to emulate cosmopolitan tolerance of diversity (Rahier 1998, 427).

THE ECUADORIAN CONTEXT

Ecuador is a postcolonial nation with an ethnically plural population and a mestizo majority. The largest minority groups are Quechua-speaking indigenous and coastal Black populations. Models of beauty are as demanding as in the United States, and the social meanings attached to feminine appearance are linked to self-image and life outcomes for women. The feminine ideal presented in the Ecuadorian media is Caucasian, thin (although not as thin as the U.S. ideal), and perfectly dressed. In a nation with a white population of only 5 percent, the racialized component of this ideal is irreconcilable with ethnic demographics. Most Ecuadorians are mestizo, with mixed European (Spanish) and indigenous origins. Nonmestizos may be classified as indigenous, Black (of African descent), or white (of European descent). These categories are somewhat fluid and depend on social class and cultural context as well as phenotype and ancestry (Stutzman 1980). The legacy of colonial racism combines with foreign ideals in a country that imports but does not export media images, leading to the valuation of whiteness as attractive and the devaluation of nonwhiteness as unattractive.

Such favoritism affects women’s life chances. In Ecuador, educated and qualified women are routinely discriminated against if they lack a “pleasant face” or “presence” (*Expreso* 1998). A 1996 newspaper article claimed, “These days, [women] don’t know if they are going to look for a job, or going to a beauty contest” (*Expreso* 1998, 1). In 2001, Guayaquil’s leading daily published a special feature labeling Ecuador “The Country of Prejudices” and including a list of racist and sexist comments collected on the city streets. Among them was the phrase, “She is ugly, she shouldn’t work here” (“El País de los Prejuicios” 2001, 8-9). An Ecuadorian informant told me of a friend, who despite being a talented engineer, could not find a job in her field because of her plain appearance. In addition to appearance-based hiring, looks can also affect self-esteem and possible marriage choices. In class-stratified societies such as Ecuador, marrying up is one of the few ways a woman can raise her social status; a woman considered attractive has a greater chance of marrying into a higher social class.

As a small and poor country, Ecuador is characterized by a high percentage of foreign media content, which accounts for more than half of television programming (Chapkis 1986). The abundance of foreign media implies an infusion of Ecuadorian popular culture with Caucasian-oriented ideals of beauty, versions of which are also present in domestic media. Most foreign television programming comes from the United States or wealthier Latin American nations. Ecuadorian popular culture is influenced by (and measured against) that of nearby Colombia and Venezuela, both recognized for their cultural emphasis on beauty and their success in international pageants like Miss Universe (Andes lite 2002). Although the amount of foreign media consumption varies by class, foreignness—especially American- or European-ness—remains an important source of prestige in cultural products. Not only does Ecuador import media; it is one of the few South American nations that do not export media to neighboring countries.

My project investigates ideals of beauty and body image in two groups of adolescent girls in the country's largest city, Guayaquil. Multiethnic Guayaquil is home to 3.5 million of the nation's approximately 12.5 million people. Although Ecuador is not associated with the type of beauty queen tradition for which Colombia and Venezuela are famous, pageants are extremely popular here. As Landázuri argued, beauty contests are "a sure way to get the public's attention in Ecuador; virtually every city in the country as well as numerous and diverse institutions elect a beauty queen annually" (1991, 13). The most widely read newspaper, *El Universo*, ended 2001 with a special feature titled *Reinas del Ecuador*, profiling the "queens" of various cities and provinces. I chose to study adolescent women because they are in a unique social and developmental position, constantly negotiating cultural ideals of feminine beauty, media images of idealized women, and their own changing bodies.

METHOD: INVESTIGATING BEAUTY AND BODY AMONG YOUNG ECUADORIAN MESTIZAS

My method combines ethnographic methods and social-psychological survey instruments. I conducted fieldwork at two sites in northern Guayaquil. Colegio Amazonas is a private, coeducational primary/secondary institution located in a *barrio marginal* (poor outlying neighborhood). Colegio Santa Fé is a private, single-sex, primary/secondary institution, which although only five minutes from Amazonas by bus or car is in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. (The names of both schools are pseudonyms.) Santa Fé students are from middle-class families and are well off in comparison to the Amazonas students.

In Colegio Amazonas, all 65 secondary students who were girls were invited to participate, and in Colegio Santa Fé, 10 students from each secondary grade (*cursos* 1 through 6) were randomly selected to participate. In total, 34 girls from Amazonas and 47 from Santa Fé participated. Participants represented all six secondary grade levels and ranged in age from 11 to 18. All participants completed

written questionnaires, and some were also randomly chosen to participate in group or individual interviews.

Two of three questionnaires are established standardized survey instruments used by sociologists and psychologists to assess self-concept. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1989), which has been effectively used with respondents of different races and ethnicities, comprises 10 questions answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale (see Appendix A). The second questionnaire is a slightly modified version of the Franzoi-Shields Body Esteem Scale (see Appendix B). This instrument is an augmentation of the respected Body Cathexis Scale but is more useful because it considers body image as a multidimensional construct (Franzoi and Shields 1984). The scale measures a respondent's satisfaction with various body parts or physical aspects, using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Since the Franzoi-Shields scale is simply a list of body parts, it is not culturally biased and can be used with Latino populations. The questionnaire was modified by eliminating three questions dealing with sexual organs and practices to avoid possible objections by parents, participants, and school officials. I also added two items of interest to my project: weight and skin color. The third questionnaire is an original and culturally sensitive, open-ended interview guide addressing socioeconomic status, access to media, beauty practices, beauty ideals, and body image. The original questionnaire was tested for bias and effectiveness with Ecuadorian informants prior to its use in the schools. Together, the three questionnaires were used to make generalizations about each aggregate group and to compare the two populations.

Group interviews posed open-ended questions to groups of 4 to 8 members of the same grade level, chosen at random from questionnaire respondents. In Amazonas, five discussion groups were held, representing five of the six grade levels, with a total of 26 participants. In Santa Fé, six discussion groups were held, one for each grade level, with a total of 30 participants. All interviews were video-recorded for subsequent transcription, except in cases of power outage at Amazonas. Images of women were chosen from fashion and teen magazines purchased in Guayaquil to stimulate discussion.¹ Individual interviewees were chosen randomly from group discussion participants. Two students from each of the six grade levels (*cursos*) were interviewed in each school. The 24 individual interviews were tape-recorded. In addition to answering open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to expand on questions or introduce new themes. I also interviewed one parent and two modeling agents to provide other perspectives and context for the students' responses. All responses were compiled and analyzed quantitatively (when possible) to generate descriptive statistics, and I also used qualitative content and discourse analysis to identify the key themes, which included a white abstract ideal of beauty, the meaning and importance of being *arreglada* in everyday life, and the two prevailing prototypes of idealized beauty.

I found that the presence of a white American researcher was more of a novelty at Colegio Amazonas, since foreigners rarely venture into the marginal and poor neighborhoods of Guayaquil. However, my fluency in Ecuadorian Spanish and my knowledge of the culture seemed to grant me a sort of insider status at both schools

TABLE 1: Summary of Survey Results: Colegio Amazonas versus Colegio Santa Fé

	Colegio Amazonas		Colegio Santa Fé	
		n		n
High self-esteem ^a (%)	41	33	83	47
Medium self-esteem ^a (%)	44	33	11	47
Low self-esteem ^a (%)	12	33	6	47
Average body esteem score ^b	101	33	125	47
High body esteem score ^b	141	31	153	47
Self-identifying as white ^c	15	33	30	47
N	34		47	

a. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

b. Franzoi-Shields Body Esteem Scale.

c. Open-ended survey.

as the participants were not shy about speaking freely and even expressed negative opinions about American women and culture. Since I am familiar with the relative formality and rigor of social manners in Ecuador, especially when dealing with people of high status or strangers, the openness that I found in the respondents of both schools indicated to me that there were not any strong interviewer effects to be weighed in my analysis.

LIVING CONDITIONS AND SELF-CONCEPT

Colegio Amazonas is located in a poor neighborhood without paved streets or running water, where electricity is unreliable. Tuition is five dollars a month, an economic strain on some families. Most students live in two-parent families with mothers who do not work outside of the home. Two-thirds self-identify as *canela*, cinnamon-colored. Fifteen percent of the Amazonas students identified themselves as white when asked an open-ended question about race. Most belong to the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder. Amazonas participants scored lower on the body and self-esteem questionnaires than did the Santa Fé group. The average score on the modified Franzoi-Shields Body Esteem Scale was 101 out of a possible 165, with a high score of 141.² On the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, 12 percent scored in the low range, 44 percent in the medium range, and 41 percent in the high range (see Table 1).

Compared to the total of 65 secondary-division girls studying at Amazonas, the high school students in the all-girl Colegio Santa Fé number roughly 620. These students' middle- and upper-middle-class families pay more than 90 dollars a month (roughly equivalent to the monthly minimum wage) in tuition. Most Santa Fé students' families have one or more cars, have live-in or daily domestic help, and own two or more color televisions with VCRs. Whereas the students of the Amazonas cohort had the goal of attending college, these young women have specific professional goals: Most plan to become doctors or engineers.

On the whole, Colegio Santa Fé students are lighter skinned and have more Caucasian-type features than their counterparts at Colegio Amazonas (30 percent self-identify as white, and 32 percent as mestiza). They are more likely to wear braces on their teeth and gold jewelry. Santa Fé participants scored higher on the scaled questionnaires addressing body and self-esteem. The average score of this population on the Body Esteem Scale is 125 (compared to 101 at Amazonas), with a high score of 153 out of 165. On the Self-Esteem Scale, the Santa Fé group broke down in the following manner: 6 percent low, 11 percent medium, and 83 percent high. Nine participants displayed very high self-esteem, scoring the maximum on this scale.

It is important to point out the complexity of the concept of race in these samples due to the wide variation in self-identification and racial categories and the absence of a coherent racial classification system in Ecuador. In the United States, most people do not puzzle over which box to check on a form asking for race. Such information is not included in official documents in Ecuador, and multiple categories exist. For this reason, the respondents had great difficulty in choosing a race for themselves, and some even asked the researcher for guidance. The participants from Colegio Amazonas generally chose to identify themselves by skin color: cinnamon-colored, wheat-colored, and so on. Colegio Santa Fé students tended to use the accepted social scientific classification of mestiza, although some also employed skin color referents. A total of eight racial categories was created by the respondents, and some chose not to answer this question. In societies emphasizing the importance of whiteness and upward class mobility, the incentive to call oneself white is strong, as illustrated by the high percentage of Brazilians—53.7 percent—claiming to be white in a recent census, whereas the majority is Black or some mixture of Black and white (Brazzil 2002). The only respondents who seemed sure of their race self-identified as white, although some were brown-skinned or have dark complexions. Race and class are entangled in Ecuador, and most of the brown-skinned girls identifying as white were of higher social class than their fellow students. Objectively, most participants could be safely classified as mestiza.

RACIALIZED IDEALS OF BEAUTY

The ideal of beauty described by both populations is reminiscent of the ideals described by Miller (1969) and Rahier (1998) in the cases of Jamaica and Ecuador. The beautiful woman, as depicted in questionnaires, discussions, and interviews, is tall, is thin but with a figure or *buen cuerpo*, has long hair (with a preference for straight hair of any color), has light-colored eyes (hazel, blue, or green), and has white skin. One participant summed up this ideal as “tall, thin, long yellow hair, and light eyes.” When describing skin color, Colegio Santa Fé participants seemed equally satisfied with white or brown skin color. Several of the older Santa Fé students stated that skin color was unimportant. Colegio Amazonas participants described the ideal skin tone as white, but tan. Both populations found very dark

skin and very pale white skin distasteful. Looking at a photo of actress Drew Barrymore, one Santa Fé student said, "She looks dead"; comments such as "too white" or "too pale" were made about Barrymore and actress Cameron Díaz during group interviews at both schools.

The Santa Fé cohort's seemingly greater tolerance for darker skin color emerged during group discussions, where descriptions of ideals were more vague than in questionnaires. For example, the statement "Skin color doesn't matter" often came up in group interviews. Positive assessments of brown-skinned models' coloring were also common. As one older student put it, "[For me,] there is no prototype of woman that has to be blonde and tall . . . because I have seen girls who are pretty and don't have light eyes, they are dark-haired." Her classmate agreed: "A dark-skinned [Black], dark-haired woman can also be attractive." This apparent tolerance may result from participants' attempting to display a magnanimous and cosmopolitan attitude toward race or from their desire to counter possible assumptions that upper-class Ecuadorians are racist. However, this population does consume more foreign media products than the Amazonas group, and U.S. popular culture frequently features African American women. Santa Fé students are exposed to these images on MTV, HBO, and sitcoms as well as films, possibly leading to more acceptance. As Rahier stated, in the countries where these programs are produced, "the black female body is as much commodified as the white one" (1998, 426). By subscribing to an internationalist, diverse standard of beauty, these girls may be trying to present a sophisticated, progressive image and worldview. This tolerance for variations in skin tone among women in the media may not affect perceptions of Black Ecuadorians: Many Latin Americans perceive U.S. Blacks as more attractive and/or culturally superior to Afro-Latin Americans (Rahier 1998; Twine 1998).

It is clear that the beauty ideal expressed by most participants, regardless of class background, describes a woman with typically Caucasian features. The similarity in ideals of beauty in the two samples implies that while class status is correlated with differences in self-esteem and body esteem levels, class differences do not lead to substantially different ideas about beauty. The model of beauty described at both school sites fits with ideals portrayed in local and international media sources, as well as those described in studies of postcolonial societies including Ecuador (Miller 1969; Rahier 1998; Twine 1998). Although most Ecuadorians are mestizo and the constitution has enshrined racial equality, it is obvious that, as in the case of Miller's (1969) study of Jamaican adolescents, Caucasian features and light skin are still associated with "the desirable." When asked to describe ideal features, the words *finas* (fine) and *delicadas* (delicate) were often mentioned in both study sites; these are euphemisms for whiteness. It is evident that "the preferred face is Caucasian in character" (Miller 1969, 85).

The ideal body shape that participants described is slightly heavier than that popular in North American and European media; the woman outlined by these respondents has a large bust and hips, small waist, and long shapely legs. A third-year student from Colegio Amazonas described the ideal body as "a bit thick . . . shapely, with a nice rear end." A sixth-year participant stated that the ideal woman

must "have hips, and have a chest." If American supermodels were to come to Ecuador, the young women told me, they would be considered too thin, even "raquíticas" (sick-looking), although their Caucasian features would be considered attractive. The body shape ideal in domestic (Ecuadorian-produced) media images of women follows a pattern of being curvaceous and shapely rather than bone thin. The participants also identified this type of figure as being that preferred by Ecuadorian men. When asked what men look for in women, the participants usually responded with "buen cuerpo" (a good body) and mentioned hips, buttocks, and breasts as focal points of bodily attractiveness. This body type, unlike the idealized facial features presented by the participants, is not linked to any race or ethnicity (although it is often seen as Latin). It is, however, connected to men's perceived tastes and desires. As Latina actress/singer Jennifer López bluntly phrases the dominant stereotype, "Ethnic men like big butts" (Stein 1998). Again, ideal body size and shape did not appear to differ among participants of different classes, despite research in the United States suggesting that upper-class women may value thinness more than do women of lower socioeconomic status.

Cultural ideals are an important influence on the creation of personalized versions of ideal beauty. Miller stated in 1969,

The assertion that this concept of beauty has been learnt by these adolescents, seems indisputable. The point of dispute might be the mechanism by which it has been learnt. The speculative idea here is that wealth, authority, social status and education have become associated with a certain colour type in the society. Hence, physical beauty has also become associated with this privileged colour type. This association is strengthened by the values and interpretations passed on to these adolescents by significant adults in their upbringing, by mass media in an indirect way, and also through their own experiences of social interaction with others. (P. 98)

In both populations, only very light-skinned or white women are mentioned as examples of ideal beauty; all have Caucasian features regardless of body type. The one celebrity mentioned by both groups, pop singer Christina Aguilera (who is half Ecuadorian), perfectly embodied the white North American prototype of beauty: thin with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and white skin. Although the participants debated whether Aguilera should be considered Ecuadorian, they all agreed that she does not "look Ecuadorian." It is clear that the idealization of Caucasian appearance has tremendous influence over determinations of physical beauty in the case of both groups.

Along with the valorization of light skin and European features comes a subsequent degradation of nonwhite traits. This became especially apparent during group discussions in which photos of nonwhite women were used as stimuli. Photos depicting a Black woman and an Asian American woman were met with disapproval in both school cohorts, and photos depicting mestiza Ecuadorian models received mixed reactions. One photo of a light-skinned Black model in a simple black dress evoked strong negative reactions in nearly every discussion group. I

found this overwhelmingly negative response surprising in light of the model's attractiveness and light skin. The features that met with greatest disapproval were those that identified the model as a person of African descent—her nose, lips, and hair. A typical description comes from a *quinto curso* (fifth-year) student at Colegio Santa Fé: "[Her nose] is like a ball, and the lips are like really turned up." Frequently in both schools, discussion group members quickly labeled this model as ugly but were subsequently unable to pinpoint why, saying, "I don't know, but something about her is not right." In response to the photo of Lucy Liu, an Asian American actress, one Santa Fé student said, "She is rather pretty for a Chinese woman."

PERFORMING BEAUTY IN URBAN ECUADOR

Beauty ideals are more flexible when applied to real-life rather than media women; here, style and personality may count as much as looks. A popular saying in Ecuador is, "No hay mujer fea, sino mal arreglada" (in English, "There are no ugly women, just poorly-groomed ones"). What does *arreglada* mean to these young Ecuadorian women? The literal synonyms of "arranged," "well-groomed," and "well put-together" fall short of what this term means; it is more inclusive, involving physical self-presentation, fixing oneself up, being concerned with one's appearance and taking action to better it. Rather than natural perfection, an acceptable feminine appearance is reached through effort, articulation of style, and careful arrangement. The majority of participants from both high schools agreed that being *arreglada* was important to them and for women and girls in general. Although the participants speak of enjoying being *arreglada*, there is also a sense that it is compulsory: "A woman has to look good." Judgments of real-life women and girls do not follow the prototype described as ideal: Women are not expected to be very thin, hair and eye color are unimportant, and light- or medium-brown skin is generally acceptable.

Peers and family members encourage these young women to pay attention to their appearance, and from the participants' responses, it appears that the opinions of their school peers matter more than those of their parents or siblings. When applied to social equals (such as schoolmates), however, beauty is a flexible concept. Real people are judged by internal as well as external qualities, says one third-year Amazonas participant: "There are some ugly people, but with good hearts, and they are seen as beautiful." This sentiment was echoed in various forms by most of the participants. "It is not only the body" that makes a woman pretty, according to one Santa Fé student. Several girls pointed out that there are "different types of beautiful women" and even that originality and creativity in dress and self-presentation contribute to a woman's attractiveness. As did Parker et al.'s (1995) Black respondents, the participants in this study emphasized "making what you have work for you." One Santa Fé student said that clothing does not have to be expensive but should "suit the person"; a classmate added that the clothes do not

make the person, but vice versa. Attractiveness for these young women is achieved not by being born perfect but through "concentrating on your good characteristics." When asked to describe a beautiful woman, participants frequently included non-physical adjectives such as "down-to-earth," "honest," "respectful," "kind," "friendly," and "articulate."

The adolescent peers from both schools tend toward less competitive, more supportive interaction than that which has been documented among Anglo-American teenage girls. In Parker et al.'s study, white teenagers spoke of hating beautiful peers and labeling a pretty girl as a "bitch" or a "slut" (1995, 107). Similar labeling is discussed in Currie's study of teen magazine readers (1999, 236). Although they do engage in group surveillance of appearance, these adolescents do not hesitate to compliment one another on being especially *arreglada*; they also point out each other's best features and encourage their peers to emphasize these traits. All interview participants claimed that they routinely traded compliments on appearance with their friends and schoolmates. When asked if their friends said they looked pretty, one Amazonas participant stated that a friend in the group "told me that just now." In a Santa Fé group discussion, a fourth-year student addressed a classmate: "Short hair looks good on you, Pamela, you can work wonders with your hair." At other points in group interviews, participants complimented each other and directly reassured each other that their appearance was acceptable. In surveys and interviews of both cohorts, fellow students and friends were often listed as examples of beautiful women. The African American girls in Parker et al.'s study displayed similar group dynamics.

Participants claim to be *arreglada* for themselves, for self-gratification rather than to impress or gain the approval of others. Preoccupation with appearance is widespread among their peers and is related to social acceptance, said one respondent: "I think that all people our age take care of themselves, try to have a good image, to dress well, be in style, and above all, have friends." Statements such as "I dress well for myself, not so that other people speak well of me" were often followed in participants' responses by references to what others would think or say, bringing up the threat of criticism by *los demás*. *Los demás* includes all of the people, known and unknown, with whom a person comes into contact each day, as well as people who may know of or hear something about her. This is the ugly flipside of having to be *arreglada*: the possible consequences and negative repercussions if your physical appearance is not socially acceptable. The successful performance of gender entails walking a fine line between style and exaggeration, both in behavior and appearance. These young women always have the possible reactions of *los demás* in mind as they articulate their personal style in the social scene. Said one Santa Fé participant, "You always have to think about what others will think of you." Overall, participants agreed that looks can affect job as well as romantic opportunities and that those hurt most by the social judgment of appearance were women of color and poor women. This disadvantage helps to explain the lower body and self-esteem scores found in the Amazonas cohort.

WHITE VERSUS LATINA: DIFFERENT TYPES OF BEAUTY

Adding to the complex relationship of race and beauty is the perception that media and cultural ideals of beauty can be divided into two general categories or types: the Latina prototype and the white prototype. One participant explained, "We have different prototypes of beauty . . . we have the Latino prototype, and they have the European, or rather, North American prototype." The following comments were made during a Santa Fé group interview: "The blonde, the American [type] is like more liberal, and the Latinas are respectful"; "each [prototype] has its good and bad characteristics"; "for me, both [ideals] are equally pretty, but they are two different types, they focus on different things." The American ideal beauty was seen as less modest, more overtly sexual and "extravagant," whereas the Latina was "more covered up." Whereas the explicit sensuality of the American ideal said, "Look at me," the Latin ideal conveyed the message, "Look at me, but stay where you are," as one participant put it. The ideal Latina was also seen as having a different way of "interacting in society." Participants perceive the foreign ideal as originating in the United States and possessing Caucasian features and an ultrathin body type. The other is what I call a "generic Latina type" (Casanova 2002). This prototype still tends to be light-skinned and Caucasian-featured but with visibly Latin traits and a more voluptuous body. This ideal of beauty is not linked to any one country, and examples given by the participants include women from Ecuador, Colombia, and Mexico and U.S. Latinas. The two most commonly mentioned Latin beauties were Salma Hayek and Jennifer López. Of course, the image that propelled López to superstardom is one of domesticated Latinness, with pared-down curves and chemically lightened hair, as opposed to the fuller-figured, darker-complected brunette of *Selena*. The most striking difference between the Latina and American prototypes is the inclusion of internal qualities (respectfulness, politeness, modesty, etc.) in the former ideal, whereas the latter was seen as purely physical.

While explicitly espousing an exclusionary white ideal of beauty, these young women recognize that a generic Latina type is more accessible and applicable to their social and cultural context. Many participants from both schools expressed admiration for Miss Ecuador 2001, Jéssica Bermúdez, who is attractive with (or perhaps in spite of) her brown skin and mestiza appearance. This admiration went beyond physical characteristics to her fulfillment of qualities associated with a good Ecuadorian woman, such as politeness, respectfulness, articulate speech, and sincerity.

Participants tend not to compare themselves to idealized versions of white or Latina beauty, just as the Black teenage girls in recent studies of fashion magazines (Currie 1999; Duke 2000; Milkie 1999) displayed a similar reluctance to make such comparisons. For Amazonas participants, such comparisons were at odds with their socioeconomic status: When asked why they chose not to compare themselves with idealized women, these students responded, "They are from the media," "they have a bit more . . . experience," and "they also have money." Objections to the

artificiality of idealized media images were made by both cohorts. For some Santa Fé participants, the issue was self-esteem: Comparisons with women or girls in the media are tantamount to “denying what we are.” Some Santa Fé students mentioned the dangers of anorexia, bulimia, and low self-esteem. One girl questioned the supposed superiority of the white media ideal: “Who knows? Maybe the blondes want to be like us.”

It seems that since “media females are not considered to belong to the same category . . . as real-life females, their beauty might be discounted and fail to influence judgments of nonmedia females” (Kenrick and Gutierrez 1980, 132). These Ecuadorian adolescents tend not to judge themselves according to standards of beauty set by media images of ideal women and girls; instead, they attempt to always be well-groomed and well-behaved, occasionally emulating the style and positive traits of respected peers or beauty queens. As described above, standards of beauty used in everyday life are more flexible than those used in defining abstract ideals. This helps account for the fact that the members of the two populations are content with their appearance: 65 percent of each cohort agreed with the statement, “I am satisfied with my body and appearance.” When compared to the 90 percent of the white girls in Parker et al.’s (1995) study who expressed negative opinions about their bodies, this figure suggests higher body image among this Latina group.

Although the young women recognize a Latina model of beauty in addition to a Caucasian one, they are still helping to maintain and validate impossible prototypes of beauty by espousing a rigid abstract ideal. However, they soften the harshness of strict beauty regimes by also valuing being *arreglada* and applying more flexible criteria to “real people” than those by which they judge models, beauty queens, and other celebrities.

DISCUSSION: THE DYNAMICS OF RACE AND BEAUTY IN POSTCOLONIAL ECUADOR

Objective differences in self-esteem and body esteem between the two cohorts (displayed in the higher scores of the Santa Fé group on the two scales) belie their general consensus on beauty and may be explained in terms of socioeconomic status. Because of their poverty and nonwhite appearance, the members of the Amazonas sample may be made to feel worthless and marginal in the context of Guayaquil and Ecuador. They live in poor neighborhoods that are not integrated into the cultural and social life of the city. Poverty can have a tremendous effect on a child’s self-concept, especially when combined with a general degradation of her physical traits and/or skin color. One Santa Fé student who self-identified as *mulata* (mixed race, Black/white) rephrased the old saying, making it, “No hay mujer fea, sino mujer sin plata”—“there are no ugly women, only women without money.” Skin color, appearance, and class are strongly linked in Ecuador. The combination of these factors may account for the Amazonas participants’ generally lower self-concept in comparison to the Colegio Santa Fé group. Due to the realities of class

and color, Amazonas participants differ more from their ideals of beauty (both the Latina and white types) than do the Santa Fé participants; the Miller (1969) study showed this divergence between self and ideal to be linked to low body image. It is important to note that despite the differences in self-concept found between the two cohorts, the girls' descriptions of abstract ideal beauty were strikingly similar.

Three points become clear in reviewing the above data: First, these young *ecuatorianas* hold white ideals of beauty; second, they perceive two competing or complementary types of ideal beauty (the white or *gringa* and the *latina*); and third, they display behaviors and attitudes similar to those shown by African American adolescent girls. The first and third statements seem to be at odds with each other. How can these young women approximate patterns identified with Black teenagers in the United States yet hold ideals that conflict with their realities? The African American standards of appearance that Duke (2000) and Parker et al. (1995) described are not internalizations of mainstream ideals but part of an alternate conception of beauty. It could be argued that the preference for Caucasian features among Black American women has not been sufficiently explored, perhaps for fear of validating the self-hatred theories of the past. Nevertheless, for all their flexibility, the Ecuadorian girls seem to have accepted cultural norms valuing whiteness. Both high school cohorts share these racist standards, although their members occupy different points on the racial scale of white to mestizo. In the mestizaje conception of race, Black does not figure into the racial continuum; rather, it is completely excluded and ignored. Nearly all participants are located at some point on an imaginary scale ranging from white to mestizo, although a few likely have Black ancestry.

Three theories may explain the contradiction between ideals and behavior without being mutually exclusive. First, the colonial experience of Latin American nations is different from the history of slavery in the United States in terms of these systems' implications for race relations and physical appearance. Let us leave aside for a moment the complicated subjects of visual racial categorization and the "one-drop rule." In colonial Latin America, miscegenation was a means of upward social mobility: For example, the child of an indigenous woman and a Spanish man would likely occupy a higher social status than his or her mother, especially if recognized and granted the father's name and resources. In contrast, most U.S.-born children of slaves and masters remained slaves, except in rare instances of emancipation or adoption by the white father. A color-gradation social scale more intricate and complex than that of the United States developed in Ecuador, which still influences social judgment of appearance and status today. This historical process led to the proliferation of scores of unofficial racial categories in Ecuador and Latin America, whereas the Black-white split remained fairly constant in the United States until the relatively recent recognition of other minority groups.

The second explanation is connected with the political mobilization of non-whites. The United States underwent great social change as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. This was followed by a rhetorical revolution aimed at altering African American self-consciousness, represented by the slogan, "Black

is beautiful.” Because of the cultural predominance of the seemingly inclusive mestizaje ideology in Ecuador, significant political organization around race or civil rights has not occurred until quite recently; the state officially celebrates diversity even while implicitly encouraging blanqueamiento (whitening). The idea that Black or brown may be beautiful is still a laughable one to most Ecuadorians regardless of skin tone, and omnipresent racism may result in self-hatred among nonwhites (although my study suggests that among these groups, this is not the case).

Third, the general acceptance of mestizaje ideology indicates a widespread valuing of whiteness as a means of individual and national progress. As Wade (1997) showed, the innocent myth of mixed origins and appreciation of diversity masks the more insidious message of blanqueamiento, the emulation and pursuit of cultural and racial whiteness. This cultural logic of Ecuadorian society must be questioned before an individual can perceive mestizness, Blackness, or Indian-ness as an acceptable appearance or positive identity. This is not to say that no Black or mestiza women are recognized as attractive by the young people in my sample or by others in Guayaquil. However, it can be inferred from both cohorts’ comments that the best a nonwhite woman can hope for is to be considered *simpática* (nice looking); she can almost never be *bonita* (pretty, beautiful). Interestingly, despite the divergent histories of mestizo Ecuadorians and American Blacks, the styles of peer interaction among adolescent girls from these two ethnic groups mirror each other.

These young ecuatorianas’ white ideals of beauty and their relative body satisfaction coexist as an apparent paradox. If the yardstick of attractiveness is whiteness and its accompanying attributes, how does the mestiza adolescent maintain a positive self-concept? Evidently, self-interest prohibits these women from using unrealistic beauty standards to measure their own worth; they dismiss media’s idealized images as inapplicable to their lives and refuse to judge themselves according to these norms (Milkie 1999; Myers and Biocca 1992). This study found that peers are the most significant influence on ideas about appearance and feelings of attractiveness. Women are judged on appearance, but the standards applied to real-life women and girls are more flexible than those used to gauge the attractiveness of idealized women in the media. Personality, style, and being *arreglada* strongly influence whether a person is judged as attractive. As in the case of African American adolescents, personal style and a well-groomed appearance rather than perfection or impossible thinness are the goals of feminine self-presentation. Like American Black girls, the participants in this study tend toward complimentary and supportive peer interaction when it comes to appearance, as opposed to the competition observed among white women (Duke 2000; Parker et al. 1995). Harsher judgment of nonwhite women or girls outside the peer group does occur, however, and may be heightened at times of interpersonal conflict, when racist schema can be mobilized against a particular individual.

In the past three years, Jennifer López has appeared on *People* magazine’s “50 Most Beautiful People” list (twice), and *Sports Illustrated*’s swimsuit issue featured Latina cover models for two years running. The reigning Miss Universe is

Dominican, and her predecessors were from Panama and Puerto Rico. Latin beauty and the Latina body are lucrative commodities and not just in the United States. This places adolescent women of Latin descent in a unique position as they define their concepts of beauty and ethnic identity. Does the emergence of a generic Latina type of beauty indicate the possibility of changing ideals and enhanced self-concept? This ideal type may be achievable for some upper-class mestiza women, who can embody "ideal 'Latin' beauty" by being "neither too dark nor too light" and can also afford to *arreglarse* (fix themselves up) according to current trends (Negrón-Muntaner 1997, 183). However, it remains almost as distant from poor girls' realities and possibilities as are white models such as Christina Aguilera. Thus, the Latina ideal has greater potential to influence the self-assessments of well-to-do Ecuadorian girls than their low-income counterparts, for whom the Latina and white prototypes of beauty are equally foreign. It remains to be seen whether this Latina ideal will affect self-concept among the Santa Fé participants, and if so, whether the effect will have a positive or negative direction. It seems that the young women in this study are able to value both prototypes of beauty without preferring one to the other and without negatively comparing themselves to idealized women in the media. This is most likely due to their patterns of supportive peer interaction and the emphasis on being *arreglada* rather than perfect in everyday life.

The danger in the growth in popularity of Latina beauties is the possibility of representing *lo propio como lo exótico*, that is, presenting Latin American women to themselves as exotic. This type of representation may lead to disidentification with Latinness (and the Latina's own body) as a physically stereotyped other or to the patterns of negative comparison and obsession with appearance found among Anglo-American girls. If the Latina ideal is consistently portrayed as deviant or inferior to the white prototype of beauty, young women of Latin descent may be inclined to reject it in favor of the traditional Caucasian-oriented ideal rather than identifying with it as a source of pride or viewing it as an acceptable (slightly more inclusive) alternative. For now, it seems that the way in which these young women consume media images maintains a healthy distance and the ability to critically examine implicit messages. If this pattern continues, they may be able to keep from developing the low self-esteem and eating disorders common among white North American adolescent girls. A possible direction for future research is to examine the perceptions of ideal beauty and the generic Latina type among Hispanic girls in the United States and to explore how these ideal types are related to individual body image and self-concept in Latinas of different class backgrounds.

NOTES

1. The magazines included the domestically produced *Hogar*, publications intended for Latin American and U.S. Latino audiences (e.g., *Vanidades*), and transnational magazines translated into Spanish (*Cosmopolitan*, *Buenhogar*, etc.). The photos chosen for discussion usually depicted models alone with minimal text, and the widest possible range of phenotypic and body-shape variations was represented.

2. Higher scores indicate higher or more positive body esteem.

APPENDIX A
ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE

Circle the number that best fits your agreement with each of the following statements.

1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *disagree*, 4 = *strongly disagree*

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

APPENDIX B
FRANZOI-SHIELDS BODY ESTEEM SCALE

Circle the number that best represents your feelings toward the following things.

1 = *strong negative feelings*, 2 = *somewhat negative feelings*, 3 = *neither positive nor negative feelings*, 4 = *somewhat positive feelings*, 5 = *strong positive feelings*

How do you feel about the following things?

Your body odor	Your appetite
Your nose	The strength and ability of your body
Your reflexes	Your lips
Your muscle strength	Your waist
Your energy level	Your thighs
Your ears	Your biceps
Your chin	The shape of your body
Your coordination	Your buttocks
Your agility	The width of your shoulders
Your arms	Your bust
The appearance of your eyes	Your cheeks/cheekbones
Your hips	Your legs
Your figure	Your face
Your weight ^a	Your skin color ^a

a. These items were added by the researcher.

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