

Beauty Ideology in Latin America

Ideologia da beleza na América Latina

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[abstract] While empirical studies provide details about the local practices and interpretations of beauty, it makes sense to discuss Latin American beauty ideology or ideologies in general because of the shared history of colonialism and the way that beauty images travel easily across national borders in this region today. These images do not dictate, but do inform, the way that women (and men) fashion their bodies in Latin American societies. The purpose of this essay is to develop a theory of Latin American beauty ideologies that is grounded in but moves beyond the empirical research on this topic. Rather than providing an exhaustive typology, I suggest some concepts worth considering, with the aim of stimulating academic debate and discussion. I identify two main aspects of beauty ideology: 1) the embrace of artificiality; and 2) racial mobility.

[II]

[keywords]

beauty; embodiment; cosmetic surgery; race; Latin America.

[resumo] Na medida em que estudos empíricos apresentam detalhes sobre práticas locais e interpretações sobre a beleza, é necessário discutir a ideologia de beleza ou ideologias em geral na América Latina, pois elas são compartilhadas com a história do colonialismo e o caminho que as referências de beleza viajam facilmente entre as fronteiras nacionais atualmente. Essas imagens não ditam, mas informam o caminho no qual a mulher (e o homem) constrói seu corpo nas sociedades latino-americanas. O propósito deste artigo é desenvolver uma teoria das ideologias da beleza latino-americana que se apoia e se move através de uma pesquisa empírica. Além de apresentar uma exaustiva tipologia, alguns conceitos devem ser considerados com o objetivo de estimular o debate acadêmico e a discussão. São identificados dois aspectos da ideologia da beleza: 1) a aceitação da artificialidade; e 2) a mobilidade racial.

[palavras-chave] beleza; personificação; cirurgia cosmética; raça; América Latina.

Why does beauty matter? Ideas about beauty shape how people – particularly women – feel about their bodies, how they present themselves in social settings, and how they perceive the bodies of others. Ideas and images circulate globally, and are also generated, received, and interpreted locally. We may embrace some images and reject or adapt others. Even young consumers are able to critically analyze the images of beauty they encounter rather than simply accepting and imitating them.

To study beauty sociologically, scholars pay attention to both idealized images and people's everyday embodied practices, including those related to faces, bodies, hair, dress, and personal style. As a feminist scholar, I also ask what beauty ideology means for women's everyday lives. Is beauty a form of power? Is there room for agency or resistance within culturally-mandated beauty regimes? How do Latin American women themselves view beauty (and fashion) and their participation in it?

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I focus here on feminine beauty, not because men are not preoccupied with their appearance, but because of the strong link between beauty and womanhood. This link is not unique to Latin America, but it does manifest in ways that are particular to local and regional cultures that still bear the stamp of Iberian conquest and colonialism and its aftermath, half a millennium *después*. While empirical studies provide details about the local practices and interpretations of beauty, it makes sense to discuss Latin American beauty ideology in general because of this shared history of colonialism. Today beauty images travel easily across national borders, a process facilitated by those shared languages imposed by the colonizers.

By beauty ideology I mean a system of interconnected and mutually reinforcing ideas and ideals, a system that is often propagated by society's elites but subscribed to by many others. When circular logic and tautologies are used to describe some social phenomenon or practice, ideology is probably at work. In contemporary Latin America, people equate beauty with wealth and whiteness (or near-whiteness): this is part of beauty ideology. Although beauty ideology is hegemonic and mostly benefits members of the upper and middle classes, we can identify counter-ideologies or alternative definitions of beauty, for example, in devout Protestants' shunning of bodily adornment, or the increasing popularity of natural hairstyles for women of African descent. And while these forms of self-presentation break with dominant beauty ideologies, with profound implications for individuals' sense of self and their interaction with others, these alternatives do little to disturb those dominant ideologies.

Before discussing two dimensions of Latin American beauty ideology, I want to clarify some key concepts. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term *physical capital* emerges from his work delineating the differences in how people of different social classes carry, present, and train their bodies (BOURDIEU, 1986; BOURDIEU, 1978). Social theorist Chris Shilling and others have extended Bourdieu's ideas to show how people can use the body itself as capital. They can reap social and economic rewards by transforming that physical capital into (economic) capital, usually in the form of money, obtained through jobs or partners that value their appearance (SHILLING, 2003). This transformation can be cyclical and seemingly infinite, as people use economic capital to increase their physical capital, which can then be converted into more economic capital. Physical capital can also shape how people are treated in everyday interactions, as those deemed more attractive may be respected or deferred to more, especially since physical capital is linked to class status. In societies marked by rigid class boundaries, a situation common throughout Latin America, the acquisition and reproduction of physical capital is a way to get ahead or stay ahead. Physical capital must be visible, on display, in order to be transformed into capital. This aspect of display recalls Thorsten Veblen's concept of *conspicuous consumption*, in which elites make sure that everyone around them can see the evidence of their wealth. Veblen also perceived the importance of the body in conspicuous consumption, using the example of wealthy women's ostentatious fashion and the symbolic role of servants in telegraphing a household's high status (VEBLEN, 2016 [1899]).

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Beauty ideology is built on the particular forms of race relations and social constructions of race in Latin America. Within and among countries, regional and demographic variations exist. Yet, since colonial times, whiteness and Europeaness have been privileged markers of elite status. The idea that whiteness can be achieved is also rooted in those early encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans in Latin America. This achieved whiteness can be found at the core of the early nationalisms in the region, emerging toward the end of the 19th Century, as the official glorification of *mestizaje/mestiçagem* provided scant cover for the real political and racial project of *blanqueamiento/branqueamento*, or whitening. This incremental whitening may be phenotypic, through choosing whiter partners or encouraging European immigration so that each generation contributes to the project of 'bettering the race' [*mejorar la raza*], or it may be cultural, through a change in one's embodied practices and cultural affiliations. In the Andes, for example, the idea of leaving indigenous identity behind by becoming a modern, urban person – including a change in dress and self-presentation – still thrives. Ecuadorian president Guillermo Rodríguez Lara said as recently as the 1970s, 'we all become white when we accept the goals of the national culture' (SEMELSKI, 2007). Beauty ideology must be viewed in the context of this discourse of racial mobility and the political projects related to whitening (e.g., encouraging European migration), but also in the connection between race and class, which is summed up with the phrase 'money whitens' [*o dinheiro embranquece*]¹. Racial mobility is possible but risky, as a person can never control completely how they are

perceived by others. Physical capital, regardless of how much time one spends developing it, can fall short. The important point here is that racial identification and socioeconomic status are strongly correlated.

Ideals of beauty and beauty practices may differ by location, but there does seem to be, if not a Latin American aesthetic or look, a Latin American ideology of beauty. In this essay, I focus on two main aspects of this beauty ideology: 1) the embrace of artificiality; and 2) the equation of beautifying the body with whitening it. These two tenets of beauty ideology share the goal of transforming the body, and a recognition that the body is as much an unfinished cultural project as a natural biological organism. These tenets feed directly into bodily practices, justified by the implied rhetorical question: if you could do something to appear prettier, richer, or whiter, why wouldn't you?

Embracing the artificial

In this essay, I do not use the term 'artificial' in a pejorative sense; I am not making moral judgements. Neither do I mean to imply that an alternative, 'natural' body is possible. Scholars of the body and embodiment caution us against assuming that a 'natural,' pre-social body exists. From birth, if not before, our bodies are shaped by interventions that are based on social and cultural imperatives. All of our bodies are thus modified and manipulated in ways that could be classified as artificial. Here I am more concerned with whether women attempt to hide the work that they put into their appearance, to make their beauty seem natural, or whether they want that work to be seen and acknowledged. To embrace the artificial is to reject the natural body as an ideal and to proudly display the ways that you have enhanced and embellished your appearance.

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Recent research on feminine beauty in Latin America often points to the time, effort, and expense invested into transforming the body (CASANOVA, 2004; EDMONDS, 2010; JAFAR; CASANOVA, 2013; MORENO FIGUEROA; RIVERS-MOORE, 2013; NICHOLS, 2016; OCHOA, 2014). One of the most common colloquial phrases I have heard in my own research on beauty and bodies in Spanish-speaking Latin America is '*No hay mujer fea, sino mal arreglada*' – there are no ugly women, just poorly groomed ones². This phrase also exists in Portuguese. Translations of the descriptor of *arreglada* and the verb it stems from, *arreglarse*, are necessarily incomplete, as the term does not just comprise grooming and hygiene. The non-reflexive form of the verb *arreglar* is typically used to refer to fixing objects: it is something you do to broken bicycles or car engines. The reflexive form is related: you fix yourself by fixing yourself up. The requirement to be *arreglada* is an assertion that women's bodies in their natural, unadorned state are flawed or broken, unacceptable for public display, until they are fixed through beautifying practices. Being *arreglada* is the minimum standard for women to participate in society, and it is easier to achieve than being beautiful (*bella* or *bonita*). Depending on the context, the actual embodied practices involved in becoming *arreglada* may involve professional hairdressing and manicures/pedicures, dressing in clothing that is

seen as fashionable, using makeup, and constricting fatness through the use of undergarments such as girdles.

The imperative for women to discipline and manipulate their bodies through beautifying practices is not unique to Latin America. Women around the globe participate in these activities. However, in many Latin American societies, being *arreglada* or beautiful requires effort that is meant to be seen. The socially acceptable feminine body is not a natural blessing or state of flawlessness: it is the result of the conscious and conspicuous cultivation of physical capital through beauty practices. The so-called natural body is not the ideal; the ideal is a groomed and beautified – a blatantly artificial – body. In her study comparing the transformations of cisgender women's bodies in beauty pageants to the transformations undertaken by transgender women (many of whom are sex workers) in Venezuela, Marcia Ochoa highlights this embrace of artificiality (OCHOA, 2014). Both groups of women – and other women who are neither trans nor beauty queens – are described as subscribing to an ideal of 'spectacular femininity' that is crafted rather than simply displayed (OCHOA, 2014). In this context, artifice is embraced rather than denied or devalued, as it is in some contexts with different beauty ideologies, such as the U.S., which prizes beauty that appears to be 'natural'.

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What are the concrete practices of consumption that artificially enhance women's bodies and transform economic capital into physical capital, often with the hopes of garnering even more economic capital? When listing examples of these practices, we see that socioeconomic status and disposable income constrain women's abilities to participate in them. Makeup is an obvious place to begin. Makeup use is associated with being urban, professional, or middle-class. Yet the flexible payment plans facilitated by the direct selling of cosmetics has had the opposite effect, democratizing makeup by allowing women of lower classes to obtain it (CASANOVA, 2011). In many Latin American countries, these direct sales beauty businesses are profitable and influential. Despite this increased access to cosmetics, women's practices may be constrained or deemed illegitimate. In my research on domestic employment, for example, I have found that it is common for employers of domestic workers to forbid them to use makeup, which reinforces class-specific notions of feminine beauty and excludes these workers' bodies from artificial beautification (CASANOVA, 2013). Domestic workers' bodies, already assumed to be ugly, are denied the right to be beautiful, which maintains the distinctions separating lower-class bodies from middle-class or elite bodies.

Every neighborhood and town has small, locally-owned beauty businesses that help women in their quest to be *arreglada*: nail salons or itinerant nail artists, hair salons, and small boutiques. And let's not forget the *fajas*: girdles and 'support' undergarments. Leonisa, a Colombian company whose business model combines retail stores with direct and online selling, is a rapidly-growing beauty business that now operates in at least 12 countries. The mainstay of Leonisa's catalog are the dozens and dozens of 'shapers,' girdles, corsets, butt-lifting panties, and bras. All of these garments are designed to discipline feminine bodies in

the quest for beauty. Cosmetic surgery, which is cost-prohibitive for many Latin American women, is another route to beauty. While some cosmetic surgery procedures are declining in the U.S. (notably breast augmentation), surgery rates are growing throughout Latin America, where the 'plastic look' is often seen in the media (EDMONDS, 2010; HERRERA CAICEDO, 2012). An oft-cited example of the idealization of cosmetic surgery as a route to economic capital is the *telenovela*, originally Colombian, called *Sin Tetas No Hay Paraíso*, or in the more demure rendering of the title, *Sin Senos No Hay Paraíso* [Without Tits/Breasts there is No Paradise], whose protagonist longs for breast implants so that she can be attractive to wealthy narco-traffickers. The ideal is an artificially enhanced beauty, which is seen as a reasonable goal in the social world of the show.

There is not enough space in this brief essay to list many other trendy beautification practices and products that periodically come and go in Latin America (with echoes in the Latin American diaspora in the U.S. and elsewhere): garments that make you sweat to slim down, so-called Japanese hair-straightening techniques, butt-lifting jeans, *baba de caracol* [snail slime] face creams, diet drinks and recipes, perfume, precarious high heels, and so on. These products and services are all ways for women to participate in Latin American beauty ideology.

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While I am describing a general Latin American beauty ideology, there are obviously important regional and local variations in how this ideology plays out, and for example, the degree of artificiality that is encouraged or tolerated. The stakes for presenting a beautiful body are raised in what I call 'beauty capitals' – places that are stereotyped as having concentrated populations of beautiful women, where cosmetic surgery and success in international beauty pageants are seen as part of the national identity. Based on evidence in research and analysis of popular culture, it would make sense to place Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil in this category of beauty capitals. Cosmetic surgery is commonly part of the beauty discourse in each of these countries, and Colombia and Venezuela have long track records of success in high-profile pageants such as Miss Universe (EDMONDS, 2010; NICHOLS, 2016; STANFIELD, 2013; NEWTON-FRANCIS; VIDAL-ORTIZ, 2013; SUTTON, 2010).

How much money women have certainly limits their ability to participate fully in the embrace of artificiality. A common re-write of the *No hay mujer fea* saying is: 'No hay mujer fea, sino mujer sin plata' [there are no ugly women, just women without money]. By replacing the seemingly attainable goal of being *arreglada* with the goal of having money to beautify the body, this phrase lays bare the transformation of economic capital into physical capital and back again. The aspiration to middle-class or elite status, and the high levels of economic inequality throughout most of Latin America, thus provide the background to the embrace of artificiality. By showing the effort and expense involved in becoming *arreglada* or beautiful, you embody conspicuous consumption. Those who see you know that

you could afford those fashionable clothes, that surgery, those perfectly manicured nails (never damaged by physical labor).

Is the embrace of artificiality, or the embrace of beauty ideology itself, a foregone conclusion? Is participation in beauty regimes completely mandatory? Of course not. We do see examples of resistance to beauty ideology, and the creation of alternative ideals. Two easily identifiable examples include the modest dress adopted by some Protestant/Evangelical women, and the natural hair movement in black communities (CARPENEDO, 2018; HORDGE-FREEMAN, 2015; PINHO, 2009). The women involved in these social groups and communities may reject the ideals of beauty portrayed in the media and reinforced through social interaction, instead adopting counter-ideals that allow them a sense of religious, racial, or political identity. It is precisely a rejection of artificiality and an embrace of 'natural' or understated beauty that characterizes these alternative beauty ideologies. Yet they are less widespread than the dominant beauty ideology, and these alternative images of beauty rarely reach mass media audiences.

Beautifying as racial mobility

[17] In the introduction to this essay I mentioned the nationalist goal of whitening that had roots in the colonial era, became widespread as Latin American countries won their independence, and continued into the 20th and 21st centuries. These ideas continue to influence people's behavior: you can not only aim to have children who are whiter or lighter than you, but also make changes in your own appearance that could make people perceive you as white(r). In contrast to the U.S. racial order, in which a sharp line divides Americans with African ancestry from Americans who are considered white, there are greater possibilities for moving between categories in the racial orders of Latin American societies. And movement usually means moving up into the higher status categories of white or *mestizo/a*, a process of racial mobility. This logic of status and wealth being tied to whiteness, which dictates that if you have money you should look white and that in order to get money you should look white, is pervasive.

In this context, physical transformation through skin-lightening techniques, hair styling, or cosmetic surgery seem like a reasonable response to social pressures and ideologies of race and beauty. The ideal of whitening or lightening, as well as 'correcting' facial features associated with nonwhite ancestry, remains strong throughout Latin America³. It is important to note that facial features, hair texture, dress, and body shape are all part of how people are categorized racially, not just skin color⁴. Depending on their resources, there are a number of practices women can engage in to try to build up their physical capital through racial mobility.

The least invasive steps toward racial mobility involve changes to dress and hair. Stereotypes exist about the types of hair that black people or indigenous people have, and people can alter their hair so that it departs from

those stereotypes through styling, straightening, or using weaves or wigs. In countries where indigenous people —especially women— are associated with *traje típico* (traditional dress), people can change their dress. In addition to changes in hair or dress, women can wear makeup that changes the tone of their skin or the appearance of their features, for example, contouring their nose to make it look thinner and more stereotypically European. They can lighten their dark eyes with colored contacts. While skin-lightening products are not as visible in this part of the world, many moisturizers or face creams include sunscreen or lightening agents. Then there are surgical methods for embodying *blanqueamiento*: altering the shapes of noses, lips, cheeks, and eyes in order to avoid stigmatizing racialization. In Latin America, the language used to describe such surgeries blatantly places whiter features at the top of an aesthetic hierarchy (EDMONDS, 2010; HERRERA CAICEDO, 2012; JARRÍN, 2017). For example, it is not unusual for plastic surgeons to lament the shape of the 'negroid' or 'indigenous' nose.

While the link between beautifying and whitening the body is strong in Latin America, whitening creams are not widely advertised, and the strongest products are rarely used. How can we explain this puzzle? The scholarly literature on race and beauty addresses the global popularity of skin-lightening products throughout the world, especially in South and Southeast Asia (PARAMESWARAN; CARDOZA, 2009; JONES, 2011; NAKANO GLENN, 2008; SARASWATI, 2012). In the research on beauty in Latin America, however, skin-lightening products (usually creams or lotions) are almost never mentioned. I wrote an entire book on the business of cosmetics in Ecuador and never encountered the types of strong and potentially dangerous whitening creams that are popular in other parts of the world. Although some cosmetics ads mention lightening the skin as a goal, the offensive images associated with advertisements for whitening creams in Asia and Africa are not often seen in the Latin American context. And Latin America is not seen as a potentially profitable market for these products. In articles and reports about the growing market potential in skin-lightening products, demand in Africa and Asia is said to be increasing, fueling cosmetics companies' expansion into those areas with these products⁵. Latin America, despite its idealization of white or light beauty, is almost never mentioned in these discussions. Why not? Although we need more research on this question, I suggest that it is because racial mobility through other types of physical transformation is seen as achievable. If you have the right features, hair, and clothes, your skin does not have to be pale, as racial appearance is the sum of these physical characteristics. While dark skin is stigmatized, brown skin is not always stigmatized. If other racialized signifiers (dress, features, hair, even manner of speech) can be manipulated, then these products are not needed.

As with the embrace of artificiality, the racial mobility aspect of beauty ideology is expressed in mass media, including advertisements for cosmetic surgery (which is a key beautifying practice in evidence in beauty pageants and media depictions of beauty). But it is also expressed in everyday interactions among people, who weigh in on each other's looks, romantic part-

ners, and bodily practices (HORDGE-FREEMAN, 2015). Despite slight increases in the number of darker-skinned or nonwhite people depicted on television and in movies, the ideal of feminine beauty that dominates is still white or white-mestiza, when it isn't blonde and light-eyed.

Men and Trans Women: Further Research is Needed

Although this essay has focused on feminine beauty as performed by cisgender women (as does most of the literature on this topic), beauty does not only concern them. We know that transgender women also engage in beautifying practices and often subscribe to aspects of the beauty ideology I describe here. The stakes for trans women, an already stigmatized population, are higher than for cis women and their performances of beauty are more likely to be criticized. Although the literature that exists certainly delves into trans women's engagement with the artificiality aspect of beauty ideology (KULICK, 1998; OCHOA, 2014), it would be interesting to see how the idea of beautifying as racial or class mobility manifests in these social groups. In addition, the existing studies on trans women's embodiment tend to focus on sex workers, so we should also be careful about generalizing from this group to trans women not engaged in this occupation. We need more research on how trans women in Latin America think about and practice beauty.

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Although the word 'beauty' is almost never used to describe men, men also engage in beautifying their bodies. There is very little research on how men, especially heterosexual men, think about beauty or attractiveness in relation to their own bodies. In general, studies of Latin America rarely address men's embodiment at all. In one case study set in Lima, Peru, young men who were committed to fashionable dress rejected the embrace of artificiality and worked to achieve a look of meticulous dishevelment [*'desarreglo meticuloso'*] (VILLA, 2015). This example stands in opposition to the way that women often expect their effort to beautify or *arreglar* their 'natural' bodies will be recognized and reward. These men's rejection of artifice while embracing particular masculine ideals of embodiment and engaging in beautifying practices does not challenge the Latin American beauty ideology I have discussed here, but rather confirms its strong association with women and femininity. In this case, elite men were not trying to move between racial or class categories, but to display physical capital (through conspicuous consumption of luxury/designer fashion) and maintain high status. The intersectional dynamics of men's beauty behaviors are a potentially rich topic for social research.

Conclusion: Transforming Bodies Through Enacting Beauty Ideology

Social hierarchies position some bodies as superior to others. Women's bodies are seen as naturally deficient and in need of artificial correction and enhancement before they can be presented in public. Bodies of lower-class women or women with darker skin and less-European features are stigmatized others, and this stigma is often internalized. This stigma both justifies and maintains their low status. The inherent unfinished-ness of women's bodies, and the loathing of poor or brown bodies, drive many to attempt to transform their bodies in order to increase their physical capital. The techniques and practices used to beautify bodies may differ for people of different

socioeconomic status, but they all involve some effort to transform the body into something, if not beautiful, then at least socially acceptable. These practices may involve simple styling of the hair, buying particular types of clothing, or more drastic interventions, such as surgical alteration of the body. Some practices give women the opportunity to participate in conspicuous consumption, blending the display of physical and economic capital.

Transformation is an essential element of both aspects of Latin American beauty ideology described here: the embrace of artificiality and beautifying as racial (or class) mobility. Women's body-transforming practices are by now well-documented in the academic literature. But the aspects I focus on here are by no means exhaustive, and are also adapted or rejected in particular local contexts. Future research should not only show how beauty ideologies are enacted or resisted by individual people and communities, but should also aim to delineate other aspects unique to contemporary Latin American beauty ideology. For example, the links between fashion production, consumption of fashion, and beautiful bodies in Latin America are also ripe for further research.

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NOTES

¹ What would the alternative look like? In the United States, moving into the white racial category is not often seen as a goal, and even if it were, rigid racial boundaries make it difficult.

² Discussions of the meanings of *arreglada* focus on Spanish-speaking countries such as Ecuador and Mexico (CASANOVA, 2004; HOFMANN, 2013). Though an equivalent term, *arumada*, exists in Brazil, I have not encountered scholarly analysis of it. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer and the special issue editor for highlighting this point.

³ See Hordge-Freeman (2015) and Jarrín (2017) on the pathologizing of nonwhite facial features in Brazil.

⁴ See Pinho's (2009) discussion of the importance of features and hair texture in Brazil.

⁵ For example, see market reports at <http://www.strategyr.com/MarketResearch/Skin_Lighteners_Market_Trends.asp or <https://www.pnnewswire.com/news-releases/skin-lightening-products-market-growing-fascination-for-fair-skin-to-spur-the-growth-of-global-market---future-market-insights-665159303.html>> or Rehman (2017).

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