10. ¿Tienes Culo? How to Look at Vida Guerra

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I am a marked woman but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Auntie,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.


Vida Guerra (fig. 10.1) is a Cuban model from northern New Jersey. She made her name in hiphop videos and in “gentlemen’s magazines” but quickly became an intermedial supermodel, with her own calendars, making-of-the-calendar DVDs, official website, fan websites, television show, and controversy over a “leaked” nude photo. Unlike most of the other women who appear in these settings, she has managed to gather admirers from multiple sites for the consumption of heteromasculine erotica despite the underappreciated racial divides between them. She has moved from white-owned “laddie” magazines like FHM and Maxim to the analogous black and Latino publications, like King and Open Your Eyes (OYE); she has appeared in black hiphop videos, in a Comedy Central parody of a black hiphop video (on “The Chappelle Show”), and on Spanish television’s top celebrity show, El gordo y la flaca; and she has starred in a straight-to-video sex farce from National Lampoon—a fact that earned a film largely by and for young white men a cover feature in Black Men magazine.5

Figure 10.1. Vida Guerra, FHM 8, no. 1 (January–February 2007), 109.

The editors of OYE explain the key to Guerra’s popularity by reminding their readers that

when Sir Mix-A-lot introduced the phrase “I like big butts and I cannot lie” into the psyche of the homy American male, [the] idea of classic, stick-figured beauty was shucked aside for rumps with bumps... Jennifer Lopez, whose ass carries more earthquake insurance than all of Southern California,
has carried the burden of our desire for butts everywhere. You may now move over J-Lo, and make way for Vida.\textsuperscript{5}

Vida, in short, tiene culo, to borrow the Spanish slang that adorns one of her virally distributed Internet images.\textsuperscript{6}

Of course, this information about Guerra’s body explains her popularity by raising additional questions. If the shape of her body makes her popular, what makes that shape popular? Specifically, what accounts for the shift in body fashions that raises the stock of female culos—“rumps with bumps”—at the expense of “stick figures”? And what further shift requires J-Lo to “make way for Vida”?

These are questions specifically about the conditions that make Vida Guerra a public figure and that constitute her body as beautiful. There are many such conditions, from the hard facts of human political arrangements to the more elusive facts of ideology and psychocultural fixation. These conditions converge to produce a distinctive set of rules for using norms like beauty and ugliness to evaluate and shape human bodies—call this a regime of “somatic aesthetics.” The somatic aesthetic that concerns us here focuses on the female culo, or posterior, and constitutes it as a cultural object that warrants specific forms of evaluation and display. We will refer to the aesthetic privileging of the culo as “culo-centricism,” in the spirit that moves some theorists to refer to the metaphysical privileging of sight as “ocularcentrism.”\textsuperscript{7}

Culo-centricism can have various normative valences, so we will also have occasion to use terms like “culophilia” and “culophobia.”

Culo-centricism is, among other things, a way of looking at and valuing women’s bodies. It is, more precisely, a collection of ways of looking, a collection that has taken shape over time, on an evolving “meeting ground of investments.” These investments concern such things as the utility and politics of female beauty, feminine virtue, and social identity, and they frame the ways we look at, think about, and use racialized female bodies in social life, public policy, and visual culture. We will explore some different ways of looking at Vida Guerra, on the theory that understanding her will help us understand the burdens of looking, the promise of beauty, and the prospects of ethical subjectivity for people who quieren culo.

Before we move on, a word about terminology is in order. We will consistently use expressions like “U.S.” and estadounidense (literally “United-Stater”) where terms like “America” and “American” might seem adequate. We do this because we draw on traditions that question and resist the tendency to conflate the geographic areas known as “the Americas,” and the symbol of freedom and newness known as “America,” with the political and administrative fact of the United States. In a way, this essay chronicles the convergence of several different Americas in the meeting ground of one woman’s body. We mean for our language to reflect this aspect of the work.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{First Look: Titillating, but Not Beautiful}

One way of looking at Vida Guerra searches in vain for any sign of beauty. The point is not simply that she can be found unattractive. The spectator we have in mind can grant Guerra’s attractiveness, perhaps feel personally drawn in by it, and still deny that it has anything to do with beauty. This is the approach of the aesthetic purist—someone for whom aesthetic theory must be disinterested and cleansed of any attachment to animal inclinations like desire. For someone like this, “bodily beauty” is a moniker. Real beauty, on this view, requires the free play of our cognitive faculties (with that hoary Kantian formula suitably updated by contemporary cognitive psychology).\textsuperscript{9}

For proponents of this cognitive approach to beauty, Ms. Guerra might seem to offer a kind of counterfeit beauty. She simply titillates, they might say, by presenting observers with stimuli that provoke judgments of physical and sexual attractiveness. If recent biological studies of physical attractiveness are correct, this sort of provocation will have less to do with the free play of cognition than with being, as a Newsweek review of these studies puts it, “viscerally attuned to small variations in the size and symmetry of facial bones and the placement of weight on the body.”\textsuperscript{10}

Looking at Vida Guerra in this way obscures more than it illuminates. For one thing, distinguishing beauty from attractiveness in this way overlooks the strong and vital links between purified aesthetics and somatic aesthetics (links suggested, if nothing more, by the way we speak of “beauty” in both contexts). For example, it is impossible to understand how judgments of bodily beauty function without subjecting cultural representations of the body to some of the techniques of traditional—purified—aesthetic criticism. And it is difficult to understand the history of Western figurative art without understanding the broader histories of the practices by which we assign meanings to human physiognomy. In these and other ways, the study of art beauty and the study of bodily beauty in certain ways require each other.

In addition, aesthetic purism sometimes reflects and obscures deeper forms of uneasiness about the body. A complex, ambivalent relationship to corporeality runs through much of Western cultural history. This is a
twice-told tale, one version of which begins with Plato and complains
through the ages that the body's untidy functions and rebellious impulses
weigh down the higher, rational functions. One extension of the story links
the problem of the body to certain problem people, thereby populating our
films, literature, and visual art with femmes fatales, passive white female
nudes, and hot-blooded native "girls," among other characters. These char-
acters then escape from our artworks and insinuate themselves into our
social interactions and public policy. These considerations provide all the
more reason to analyze body-beauty and art-beauty in light of each other.

We can start toward a more adequate way of looking at Ms. Guerra by
taking a cue from Alexander Nehamas. He says that "beauty" is "the name
we give to attractiveness when what we already know about an individual
... seems too complex for us to be able to describe ... and valuable enough
to promise that what we haven't yet learned is worth even more." To say this
is to begin rather than to end an argument. But it also shows how to regis-
ter the enormous public fascination with Vida Guerra's culo while using the
vocabulary of beauty.

Second Look: An "Ornament That Signals
[Genetic] Quality"?

It may be that the beauty of Ms. Guerra's body seems to hold some
promise for us only against the backdrop of evolutionary imperatives. If we
were among the new biological scientists of beauty, we would say things like
this: Humans, like other animals, use their bodies to attract mates. The bod-
ies of human females tend to store fat in the breasts and buttocks more assid-
uously than the bodies of human males. So for reasons related, in the mists
of prehistory, to the way these fat stores signal the genetic quality of poten-
tial mates, these areas of the female body became crucial to male judgments
of female attractiveness. Ms. Guerra fascinates because her body sounds the
ancient alarms and activates preconscious, animal instincts that have been
engineered, so to speak, to respond to signs of "honest mate value."10

Looking at Ms. Guerra through the lens of evolutionary theory also
obscures at least as much as it reveals. For one thing, it evades the ques-
tion of just who is doing the looking. Ms. Guerra's principal admirers may be het-
erosexual men, engineered to do the bidding of their selfish genes. But what
about her queer female fans?

While the question of sexuality will recur somewhat later, it is an
instance of a broader shortcoming of the "evolutionary signal" perspective.

Proponents of this perspective tend to elide the social, cultural, and histori-
cal circumstances under which the criteria of female attractiveness get their
content.11 Human communities have invented breasts and buttocks as "sec-
ondary sexual characteristics" when we have bothered with these attributes
at all. And we have done this over time, with different visions of attractiveness
in different places. For example, Western cultures have eroticized the breast
only since the early modern period, and most vigorously since 1940. The
Japanese have by and large come even more recently to the idea of eroticiz-
ing the female breast, thanks in large part to U.S. postwar influences. (Until
then, images of women in Japanese erotica tended to bypass the breasts and
buttocks altogether, and focused instead on the nape of the neck or directly
on the genitalia.)12

It is not unforgivably misleading to say, with some aesthetic surgeons,
that "the gluteal region has ... its place in the concept of beauty in all com-
unities."13 But the nature of the place varies considerably across space and
time—as do the normative shapes of the bodies that play the role well. Even
if we are as a species drawn to such basic things as facial symmetry, a great
deal of local variation remains to be explained.

One local variation is particularly important for looking at Ms. Guerra.
Hegemonic "Western" ideas about the shape and relative importance of
the female buttocks diverge rather clearly from continental and diasporic
African norms. The aesthetic surgeons tell us, "Well-rounded buttocks are
highly prized ... in South America and Africa," while dominant Western
norms have preferred "a flat buttocok."14 This hegemonic Western preference
grows out of the modern uptake of classical sculptures like the Callipygian
Venus (fig. 10.2) as "the model for the normal."15 And this preference dove-
tails with the same somatic aesthetic that subordinates the buttocks to the
breasts in places like the U.S. and UK. Call this "the Playboy aesthetic," after
the U.S.-based men's magazine, and think of Venus Callipygos as modeling
the portion of this aesthetic that contemplates the culo. This aesthetic fails
to account for the popularity of Vida Guerra, which means that we need to
look at the cultural history of "secondary sexual characteristics" more closely
than does the evolutionary picture.

Third Look: Hottentot Vida

If Vida Guerra's emergence is a cultural and historical phenomenon,
and if the Callipygian Venus points us to the wrong parts of the culture,
then perhaps we should compare her to another Venus figure. Western
culocentrism began in the early nineteenth century with the drama of the so-called Hottentot Venus. With its uptake and denigration of an alternate, “steatopygian” bodily aesthetic, this tragic episode of psychocultural fetishization made clear what was at stake for Western standards of culo-normativity (fig. 10.3).  

**The Hottentot Venus Episode**

Sara Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa, like many Khoisan women, had what European viewers would consider to be large buttocks and extended labia. These traits are common in southern Africa, the way blue eyes are ordinary in Scandinavia. And a Khoisan practice of bodily modification led to labial hypertrophy: But for nineteenth-century Europeans, determined to conflate body, race, and destiny, this “excess” flesh proved puzzling. Accordingly, entrepreneurially minded white men brought
Baartman to London in 1810, convinced that they could profit from scientific and popular curiosity about the shape of her body. After years of popular and degrading appearances as “the Venus of the Hottentots”—typically in what we now call “freak shows”—Baartman died penniless and depressed in France in 1815.

Baartman’s death simply opened the next act of the drama. Other African women assumed her stage name and her place in various popular artworks and bizarre public exhibitions. Meanwhile, Baartman received even greater scrutiny from the burgeoning “sciences” of human difference. Eminent naturalists dissected her body, publicly presented their results, and left her disembodied genitals in the care of the Musée de l’Homme, where they remained on display for more than a century. (In the third act to this drama, the postapartheid leaders of South Africa demanded the repatriation of their countrywoman’s remains.)

The Hottentot Venus story puts culocentrism into a broad social context, only some elements of which we can discuss here. There were oppressive institutions like imperialism and slave trading, male supremacy, white supremacy, and (what we can retrospectively call) heterocentrism. There was a widespread epistemological commitment to studying society by studying the body, a commitment embodied in anthropometry, comparative anatomy, and medical studies of pathology. And the broad phenomena we know as capitalism, liberalism, and Victorian culture were emerging or changing in ways that would have profound consequences for ideas about human freedom, identity, and sexuality.

All of these forces, and many more, collided in the Hottentot Venus drama, making a certain kind of human body into a spectacularly effective metonym for a distinctive phase of European modernity. When Baartman arrived in Europe, the dominant Western societies were fascinated by the idea of freedom, but also by the realities of empire, the natural hierarchies of class, race, and gender, and the various benefits of the trade in enslaved Africans. The sciences of the body promised to help reconcile these tensions, by finding in the contours of the human form the natural mechanisms of social and ontological stratification. Old myths about inferior peoples provided the intuition that drove these “sciences” in their readings of the body: that a deficit of rationality and excess of lasciviousness was what distinguished the savage types from the civilized. In this context, when Baartman arrived in Europe—a black, female, colonial subject and worker whose protruding buttocks marked her as irredeemably and paradigmatically inferior—it took little work to turn her into a commodity and an ethnographic artifact. More than this, through her central role in popular entertainments that were both consumer spectacles and imperialist exhibitions, she became a cultural icon, transcending any of the individual women who represented her.17

The Hottentot Venus was such an effective emblem for certain modern conditions that we might speak of her as a kind of fetish object. Modern Europe inscribed important social meanings onto her, it pretended that she was the source of the meanings, and it used this pretense to resolve certain psychosocial contradictions. The pretense then proved so useful that the icon at its center was invested with intense emotion and began to reappear in an almost ritualistic fashion.18

Specifically, the Hottentot Venus episode was fetishistic insofar as it helped Europeans reconcile their insistence on liberty and virtue with their determination to exploit, oppress, and abuse others. The key mechanism was the transposition of the relevant rationalizations into the viscerally affecting domains of the aesthetic and the erotic. The Hottentot’s ugliness—an objective, natural fact, Europeans thought, not a projection or cultural artifact—made the inferiority of abject peoples a matter of immediate perception. And her lasciviousness—as objectively evident to her European contemporaries as her ugliness—provided an excusable and public outlet for the sexual fascinations of otherwise “temperate” men. The relevant precnets of European culture became so passionately invested in the Hottentot’s buttocks that she began to show up everywhere—perhaps in the emergence of the buttle in women’s fashion, but certainly in popular art and state-of-the-art science. This ritualistic recurrence went so far that prostitutes in Europe and Cuba became the subject of scientific studies reading their bodies and morals in light of the Hottentot template.19

The Hottentot Analogy

Seeing Ms. Guerra as a modern-day “Hottentot” does explain some aspects of her rise to prominence. The appeal to history fills in the gap between general accounts of “secondary sexual characteristics” and the specificity of culocentrism. It explains the peculiar tinge of exoticism that attends Guerra’s displays, and it explains why Guerra goes places—Maxim, FHM—that darker women with similar builds do not. Guerra has, as one writer says of Jennifer Lopez, a “black butt,” which, as an emblem of difference and otherwise, freighted with historic ideas about African hypersexuality, remains puzzling and exciting at once. But she also has light skin, which keeps her “black butt” from being too different and becoming grotesque.
But there are limits to the Hottentot analogy. Sara Baartman’s tragic fate was to become a fetish object for a certain phase of European modernity. Quite specific cultural forces were in play, and without appeal to these her experience becomes inexplicable. A very different society, with very different material conditions and somewhat different psychocultural needs, has fetishized Ms. Guerra. Twenty-first-century culocentrism, although not fully disconnected from its nineteenth-century origins, does powerfully gesture toward a need to theorize the complexities of the material conditions and psychocultural needs that have fetishized Ms. Guerra. We can begin to identify the dimensions of this task with two remarks. First, Guerra is Cuban, and within the U.S. she is racialized as “Latina,” not Khoisan. So the specific myths that informed the European uses of Baartman’s body—myths, for example, about “Hottentots” as the “missing link”—are unlikely to figure as directly in the uses of Guerra’s body in the U.S. Some more specific cultural narrative is likely to be in play now—although this cultural narrative is not disconnected from marking her body as occupying a racially luminal space that is suggestive of a “missing link.” Second, where Baartman was isolated from the cultures that found her straightforwardly beautiful, Guerra remains rooted in multiple aesthetic communities. She has many black and brown fans, whose admiration remains uncomplicated by cover stories about grotesqueness and otherness, but who are still expressing their desire in the form of a confession that signals a transgression: in the words of the OYE editorial (and Sir Mix-A-Lot) quoted above, they “cannot lie” about J-Lo, and now Guerra, having “carried the burden of [their] desire.”

Fourth Look: J-Lo 2.0

The limits of the Hottentot analogy suggest another way of looking at Vida Guerra. Perhaps she has simply benefited from the decade-long revival of culocentrism in mainstream U.S. culture that we associate with that famous Puertorriqueña Jennifer Lopez. A revival was made necessary as a response to hegemonic standards of female beauty. But in recent years the culo has become a vital part of the hegemonic conception of feminine beauty in the U.S. Women’s fitness and beauty magazines now offer advice on how to improve the “glutes”—where “improvement” no longer means “buns of steel” but “round and shapely.”20 And aesthetic surgeons report “a distinct return to the more rounded female shape . . . particularly in the buttocks”—and a corresponding uptick in “buttlift” surgeries.21

As with any broad cultural shift, there are many forces at work in the rejection, or complication, of the Callipygian aesthetic.22 But one indisputable element was the emergence of Jennifer Lopez as an A-list star and beauty icon. As one women’s fitness authority puts it, while lumping Lopez with another star who emerged in her wake, “The butt is back. (Thanks, Beyoncé and J.Lo!)”23 Because Lopez is a public figure, her image becomes publicly intelligible against the backdrop of the postcolonial social conditions that led to and emerged from the mainstreaming of hidden cultural transcripts for somatic aesthetics. (It would of course take detailed empirical work to demonstrate that these factors are in play. In advance of that work, we aim simply to refine the intuitions that call for empirical study, and perhaps to formulate a guiding hypothesis.)

Rewriting the Public Transcript

A hidden transcript emerges when, as historian Robin Kelley puts it, “oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing . . . a dissent political culture . . . [in] the submerged social and cultural worlds of oppressed people.”24 It is the alternative to a public transcript, or the body of social norms that govern “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.”25 By establishing the ugliness and lasciviousness of women with protruding buttocks, and enjoining that women with this trait be treated and treat themselves accordingly, Westerners were articulating a public transcript for white supremacist and colonialist modes of feminine objectification. But here as elsewhere, the public transcript “is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations.”26

There are several reasons to think that hidden culocentric transcripts, both on the African continent and in the diaspora, have long contested the official Western message of black ugliness. First, bodies like Baartman’s were prized in southern Africa, and, as K. A. Appiah points out, colonial regimes tended to leave wide swaths of the colonized life-world untouched (while making it perennially vulnerable to violation).27 Second, the “submerged cultural worlds” of African vernacular dance in the “New World” have long featured culophilic practices like the eighteenth-century “shaker” or “toe” dances, where “toe” seems to be a creolization of West African words for hips or buttocks. And third, general assertions of black and brown beauty have long been central to antiracist and anticolonial activists and artists.

Whatever the fate of hidden aesthetic transcripts in the immediate aftermath of the Hottentot Venus episode, they were clearly in evidence in the twentieth century. They appear in the descendants of the shaker dances,
alternate category that does not challenge white supremacy and may instead actively distance its gestures and postures from blackness. Such enactments of mulataje are not without their own particular types of transcendence, or even moments of “liberation,” but they fall short of Anzaldúa’s third space. They might reach a kind of interstitial or transitional space, but this space can also be a haven for opportunistic shape-shifting, for strategically variable identifications rather than dis-identification.

Lopez is more bridge than borderland when it comes to the darker precincts of the U.S. racial landscape because she has passed into whiteness and out of blackness, even as she has solidified the pan-Latin credentials she began to earn in Selena. She has, in a sense, had three different public careers. Her early, “black” career unfolded in close proximity to black media spaces, like BET, and black media figures, like the Wayans brothers and P. Diddy. She effectively concluded this phase and started another by “whitening” herself, with roles in cinematic assimilation fantasies like Maid in Manhattan (2002) and ties to Anglo leading men like George Clooney and Ben Affleck. And she has all along cultivated a third public life as a Latina, beginning in earnest with Selena and culminating in her professional work and romantic relationship with singer Mark Anthony. By effectively becoming a “white Hispanic” on film, she has not only forsaken the borderland, with its promise of transcendence, for the bridge, but she has also made the bridge between white and black a one-way passage.

Here Lopez and Guerra start to diverge. Where Lopez passes out of blackness and limits herself to bridging whiteness and Latinidad, Guerra continues to pass between white, black, and Latino communities. More specifically: Lopez’s intertextual public identity, forged on film and in tabloid journalism, connects her to white men in romances of bourgeois assimilation, thereby creating a bridge out of abjection; and her “ideal ‘Latin’ beauty,” with skin “neither too dark nor too light” and a prominent culo, creates a site for pan-Latin identification.77 Guerra, by contrast, connects subaltern masculinities to each other and to the “mainstream” masculinity affirmed by Maxin and Playboy. (There are, to be sure, other differences between these women, in class, migration experiences, and skill set, and perhaps in preparation, social capital, and so on. But we are concerned here with public figures, with the cultural processes that embody themselves in these women and that go by their names. The rest is the subject matter of a different kind of study.)

Fifth Look: Guerra, Sandunguera

Vida Guerra may be less like Jennifer Lopez than like the Cuban dancer and actress Tongolele. Tongolele was a contemporary of Josephine Baker who modeled, acted, and danced in Cuban and Mexican cinema, and whose claim to fame was that she, as contemporary performance artist Alina Troyano (a.k.a. Carmelita Tropicana) put it, could put a tray of daiquiris on her behind and walk across a room without spilling a drop.8 During the 1930s and 1940s Tongolele assumed postures similar to the ones that Guerra assumes now, and that both share with the rest of Cuba’s sandungueras and nuberas (magazine pinup girls and club performers known for their witching charm and allure). Where Lopez aspires to the glamour of an old Hollywood star (on the cover of Vogue) or of Latina royalty (in her work and relationship with singer Mark Anthony), Guerra carries forward the tradition of the sandunguera, which inherits the templates of both Hottentot lasciviousness and mestiza shape-shifting. And both women signal their cultural locations and, so to speak, their vocations with the positions of their bodies, and with the role of the culo in the composition of their images.

Filming the Low Life

It is obvious that the images of Lopez and Guerra differ in print and on screen. Lopez’s early assimilation fantasies, for example, demonstrate the kind of fetishistic ambivalence one expects in the wake of the Hottentot episode. Films like Out of Sight (1998) and Enough (2002) make sure to remind the viewer why this woman is the female lead, with gratuitous shots of her posterior. But these shots are isolated, relegated to diegetically inert scenes that could vanish from the film without any consequence for the embodied life of the character. Her culo becomes a device that adds a little extra frisson to roles that any white Hollywood actress could play.

Compare this ambivalence to the tone of Guerra’s SPEED-TV reality show, Livin’ the Low Life. As host, she visits and interviews black, Latino (Caribbean, Chicano, and Mexican), and some working-class white men, all involved in the competitive art of automobile modification and display known as “low-riding.”89 Guerra is the live-action version of the models that adorn the covers of magazines for automobile enthusiasts, and, as the visual style of the show makes clear, a stand-in for the cheesecake silhouettes and painted images that constitute so much of this world’s iconography of automobile adornment. She is the visual “hook” for the show, and her culo is the always-visible marker of the efnoracial identity that fits her for this role.
She interacts with the mostly black and brown men, in their garages and elsewhere, using forms of speech, gestures, postures, and clothes that would utterly defeat any attempt at whitening herself. But these ethnic markers disqualify her from doing more—the voice-overs that explain and connect the show’s segments fall to another, more “polished” female voice, one with no accent to tie it to New Jersey’s working-class Latino neighborhoods.

Guerra’s culo may be as central to the existence of her show as it is to her role on it. The men in these garages dramatize the kind of homosocial bonding that the show promotes, by gathering around Guerra to show her their cars. It is hard to imagine the white NASCAR fans that sustain the SPEED channel joining in, supporting a show about working-class black and brown lowriders, without some demonstration of common ground. Enter Guerra, whose career has been made possible by the simultaneous emergence of music videos, “laddie” magazines, Internet marketing and storefronts, “pornified” pop culture, “hiphop porn,” and post-Lopez mainstream culophilia. Whether through BET, Maxim, OYE, or her own website, she has found her way into the semi-segregated communities that these men inhabit. And now she facilitates the homoerotic encounter between and across these heteromasculinities.

Interestingly, Guerra guides the cable viewer through a version of the low-rider phenomenon that is, like her, thoroughly commodified. The show visits garages that customize cars for enthusiasts who seem willing to pay well for their passion. What is in some ways most interesting about the low-riding phenomenon emerges from its “post-work” forms, in which clubs of car owners organize mutual help activities—exchanging parts and services—as well as social activities and leisure get-togethers. In these cases, an object of private consumption which should, by its nature, isolate consumers becomes the centerpiece for a form of sociality and an occasion for proximity that is, in a sense, “incomprehensible,” based on “non-wage labor, intensity, and solidarity.” We take this as support for the suspicion that Guerra, despite her own commodification, might also occasion a complex form of solidarity.

**Poses, Postures, Gestures**

The distance from Lopez to Guerra registers also in the ways they pose, or are posed, for magazine images. As Janell Hobson notes, back when Lopez still did cheesecake and provocative glamour photos, her images referenced the Callipygian aesthetic, explicitly citing classical sculpture in her poses. Guerra, meanwhile, often references excavated hidden transcripts, using these to inflect the conventional near-porn suggestions of sexual availability, enthusiasm, and expertise.

The Callipygian aesthetic recommends a representational code that we might call “presenting,” after the name, in the biological sciences, for the way female animals in some species display their hindquarters when they are ready to mate. This code governs the famous wartime pinup of Betty Grable and communicates feminine availability by depicting the subject with her back completely turned to the spectator. The “steatopygian” aesthetic, by contrast, sometimes recommends what we can call “profilling.” This code requires that the subject appear in profile, or in other poses that make the fact—the “aimless fact,” de Beauvoir would have us say—of the naked posterior less important than its size; it often governs the “backshot” feature that (as of this writing) closes every issue of *King* magazine. An image from *Show* magazine (fig. 10.4) reveals the steatopygian code at work, as one Temecula Freeman evokes and transforms Grable’s evocation of the Callipygian Venus. In heteromasculine contexts, both poses communicate sexual availability. (They may present a sexual challenge or critical intervention in certain feminist or womanist contexts.) But while presenting is about general attractiveness as reflected in the buttocks, profiling is about the culo, first and foremost.

Guerra’s culocentric poses not only mark her distance from Lopez, but also reflect the historical and cultural location of the social forces unfolding under her name. Both women strike their poses in the wake of the Hottentot episode, for example. But while Lopez’s poses explicitly reject that inheritance, Guerra’s recall it. The episode created a sign in Western culture that conflated protruding buttocks, sexual deviance, racial difference, and sexual availability. The theoretical underpinnings for this conflation have fallen away, but the sign lives on in the postures and gestures that have become associated with it. In this way, it invites us to imagine what lies behind the image, the unseen more at which it only gestures.

In fact, we read these gestures and postures as an insistence, by both the viewer and the viewed, on remembering and recounting unequal power relations. As such, these hieroglyphics of the mulatta or mestiza body are signs that point beyond the sign system itself to that which cannot be figured, captured, or resolved by it. These postures and gestures hail other meanings, something más allá than what the image/object, the artifact/art(ist)fact, seems to be. It is here that the Cubana, Latina, or mulatta resides, at the crossroads between existing purely as a commodity and insisting that the image and its postures recount a history of unequal power relations, of bodies under dissection, commodification, and exploitation.

We find here, at this crossroads, a renewed possibility ofanzaldúa’s dialectical transcendence. Guerra recalls a tradition of Cuban women
performing hyper-heterosexual *Latinidad* in order to make a living, and like them she is tragically obligated to take on and take in the artifacts of blackness, of *Latinidad*, of whoredom, and perform them to the specifications of the visual market’s demands. But it is also true that this performance and its consumption reveal what both the spectator and the performer have in common, and why both have come to the same geographical and ideological space, at the same exact time, to reenact the problematics of an unresolved legacy of colonialism and white supremacy.

**Conclusion: From Looking to Bearing Witness**

Latinas, mestizas, and mulatas (being both imaginary and “real” subjects) are doubled sociocultural icons that in effect transport us to the sociopolitical ordering that is the West. This sociopolitical order or historical ground represented for African and indigenous peoples (as well as their “Latina” descendants) a scene of actual mutilation, disembowelment, and exile. The postures taken on by women like Vida Guerra serve as markers of a “New World”

diasporic plight and mark a theft of the body—a willful and violent severing from its will and desires. These mark the simultaneous absence and presence of just those bodies and make visible what is systematically declared invisible, thereby permitting an archive, of sorts, and a process of historical reconstruction via highly alternative, trivialized, and typically dismissed means.

Ultimately the representations of women like Vida Guerra can be read as attempts to “evoke [a] person/persona in the place of a ‘shady’ ideal.” Evoking a person in this case means recognizing and historicizing the burdens that women of African descent face as they resist the states and markets that seek to make their bodies nothing short of an attraction. In this way, we begin to see the lives of women of African descent in the Americas beyond the shady ideals of service and hypersexuality.

Having pointed beyond the shady ideal of Guerra’s beautiful body, and having invoked the *más allá* that we see there, we should say more. We should, specifically, extend the task of disentangling complex persons from shadowy abstractions by distinguishing the spectators we have been theorizing from the viewers we have been. We have, in a way, been exploring resistant spectatorship in U.S. markets for heteromasculine erotica. We have described a multiply hegemonic gaze, a way of looking at *culos negros* that positions spectators as white, masculinized, heterosexual, and in the position of colonial mastery. We have pointed to the social locations from which other spectators might emerge, spectators conversant with hidden transcripts that find protruding buttocks beautiful *simpliciter*, not grotesque-yet-exotic, or fascinating-yet-disturbing, or any other compound of colonial ambivalence. And we have suggested that these once-hidden transcripts have converged with the mainstream—that they have crossed over and now inspire another generation of white-Anglo and subaltern voyeurs, eager to “eat the other.”

With all of that said, though, the spectator is “a textual point of address,” while the viewer is “an empirical unit,” a flesh-and-blood person. The semiotic machinery of a visual text does not so much position viewers as invite us, as viewers, to position ourselves, to identify with currents of meaning that run along familiar and well-charted paths. If we are unwary, if the machinery has effectively hidden itself and mythologized its subject matter, then the invitation will not register as such, and will seem obligatory. But even for viewers who are inured to the text’s mythological spin, resistant spectatorship is hard work. It is, in particular, the kind of hard work that defines an ethic of self-care, or of self-examination. And it is the ethical imperative—an ethic, we’ll say, of witness—that lies at the heart of critical engagements with the experience of beauty.
The ethic of witness that we have in mind involves, as Kelly Oliver puts it, "an ongoing process of critical analysis," a process "that contextualizes and recontextualizes what and how we see." It is what we do when we pair an eyewitness report of an event with an attempt to bear witness to what we cannot see—to the context that framed the action, motivated the participants, and gave meaning to the entire transaction. Broadcast journalism routinely fails to bear witness in this sense, by refusing to “challenge [the] stereotypes, preconceptions, or expectations” that shape our familiar narratives about issues like war, crime, and poverty. To bear witness is to “move beyond what we recognize in visual images to [examine] . . . the subjectivity and agency, along with the social and political context . . . of the ‘objects’ of our gaze, and our own desires and fears.” This process never ends; it is “an opening rather than a closure,” a “perpetual questioning” that remains open to “alternative interpretations” and aware of “the impossibility of ever completely . . . understanding ourselves.”48

Kobena Mercer shows the aesthetic function of the ethic of witness in his reading and rereading of Mapplethorpe’s black male nudes. After criticizing the photographer for using his black male subjects to play out the same colonial ambivalence that we found in the Hottentot Venus episode, Mercer makes an about-face. The ambivalence was not in the photographic texts, he says, but in the “complex structure of feeling” uniting authors, texts, and readers in a web of dynamic relations. Mapplethorpe’s work, Mercer now thinks, highlights and insists on the cultural ambivalence that frames our dealings with race, gender, and sexuality. More than this, the work makes spectators consider their own orientation to that culture. Having failed to do this himself—having failed to consider the role his own investments and resentments played in his earlier reading—he succumbed to moralism where he aspired to criticism. Moralism fails, he now thinks, because Mapplethorpe’s aesthetic strategy makes it impossible to answer the moralistic question, “Is he reinforcing stereotypes or undermining them?” The viewer is instead forced to confront his or her own responses and social identities.49

Like Mercer with Mapplethorpe, we have had to reconsider our initial responses to Vida Guerra to undertake this project. The seductions of theory led us to suppress our own investments, which in turn struggled to express themselves moralistically. We wrestle with pride at Guerra’s vindication of Afro-Cubano aesthetic transcripts, or at her ability to complicate familiar narrations about Latina and Cuban identity, with alarm at the centrality of feminine objectification in these advances, if they are that, and at the residues of nationalism in our reactions; with distress at the desires she provokes in us; and more. Following a suggestion from Eve Oishi, the next step in this inquiry would involve “outing” ourselves.50 We should step back from theory and revisit our experiences of Vida Guerra, in order to insist on the experiential and ethical importance of the middle ground between viewer and spectator, the space that criticism must open, where the work of witnessing must unfold. We will have to leave that work for another time.

NOTES


1. Intermedial images or symbols have their meanings constituted across the boundaries between traditional media formats. See Kaarina Nikunen and Susanna Pasanen, “Porn Star as Brand: Pornification and the Intermedia Career of Rakel Liekki,” Velvet Light Trap, no. 59 (Spring 2007): 31.


4. “Tienes culo?” photo uploaded by user CUBANLOCO, December 12, 2006, http://flickr.com/photos/53564922@N00/3210230543/. References to the culo carry different meanings in different versions of Spanish slang. In some places, talk about the culo is a particularly raunchy way of discussing female sexual organs. That is of course not our meaning here. We are grateful to Mariana Ortega for encouraging us to make this clear.


6. The conflation of America and the United States of America has been a matter of considerable critique within Latina/o studies for at least the last two decades. This critique can be traced back to the writings of the nineteenth-century Cuban independence leader and poet José Martí, who proposed the concept of “Nuestra América” (Our America) as part of his critique of colonization and imperialism. See José Martí, Our America: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence, ed. Philip Foner, trans. Elinor Randall, Juan De Onís, and Roslyn Held Foner (New York: Monthly Review, 1977); and Jeffrey Belnap and Raúl Fernández, ed., José Martí’s “Our America”: From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).