

Generating Latinas: Online Images and the Mechanisms of the Google Search Engine

Elizabeth B. Cortez

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Ralina Joseph

LeiLani Nishime

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**Abstract**

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Elizabeth B. Cortez

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor Ralina Joseph

Communication

Latinos have recently become the largest minority group in the United States, and their growing presence is perceived as both a threat and an opportunity. The Latina body acts as a site where discourses about Latinos as a market, menace and object of desire converge, illuminating the tensions and ambivalence surrounding this group. In this article I explore these ambivalences through the Google Images search engine. The online search engine not only reveals what it is that users see when they search for Latinas, but the ways in which Latinas (as a visual signifier) are deployed. The top online images of Latinas fall into three categories depending on the search term used to “find” them: “Latina” generates pornographic photographs, “Hispanic woman” generates stock-image photographs and “Chicana” generates cholo-style, graphic artwork. While these three terms are often used in U.S. culture to refer to one ethno-racial and gender group, the particular images each term generates make visible not only the distinct socio-historical usage of the terms, but the hegemonic cultural deployments of them. Thus, unlike television and film which rely upon the subtle use of racialized and gendered codes, the images generated by the search engine lay bare the often covert codes that characterize Latinas offline.

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## **Introduction**

The online search engine is typically a place where research begins. It is a place where questions can be asked, communities sought and desires vocalized—it is the entrance to the vast expanse of knowledge, information and content that is the Internet. The search engine was the beginning point for my own research on sites of resistance produced by Chicanas. I was interested in the kinds of online activity Chicanas were engaged in, and the digital works they were circulating. However, finding this kind of activity was more difficult than I anticipated, and I found myself devoting most of my time to figuring out what search terms to use, and weeding through the mass of pornography websites that come up when searching for “Latinas.” It was in these moments that I encountered the search engine not as a neutral tool that collects and delivers information, but an apparatus that organizes and presents content, thus producing meaning with each search. This is not to say that sites of resistance do not exist, but that the workings of the Google search engine prioritize those sites deemed more “relevant”—or more popular—thus, marginalizing those sites that deviate from the norm.

Rather than dismissing my initial searches as “failures” because they did not produce the kind of content I was looking for, it is more useful to question why these kinds of images and websites are generated by terms used to identify Latinas. A critical exploration of these images not only makes visible the ideological nature of the search engine, but the dominant codes used to represent Latinas in popular culture.

So what sort of online spaces/sites do Latinas inhabit and what can this tell us about how Latinas are situated within U.S. culture at this moment in time? In this paper I will explore how

Chicanas/Latinas<sup>1</sup> are visually presented online by looking at images generated by the search terms, “Latina,” “Hispanic woman” and “Chicana.” While each of these terms has a different history and cultural usage, they are common identifiers for a particular ethno-racial and gender group. As I’ll explain in greater detail, Google organizes and ranks its content according to “relevancy,” or the number of searches and hits (clicks) associated with a particular search term. Thus, I looked at the top two pages that came up in relation to each search term in an attempt to better understand the ways in which this search engine visually indexes race based on the content presented as most relevant.

The top online images of Latinas fall into three categories depending on the search term used to “find” them: “Latina” generates pornographic photographs, “Hispanic woman” generates photographs from stock image banks and “Chicana” generates cholo-style, graphic artwork. The images of Latinas that are easily found by the Google search engine reproduce hegemonic scripts of Latinas, but they also make these scripts or codes highly visible in a way that traditional media cannot. Thus, I’ll be exploring what it is that users “see” when they search for Latinas/Chicanas by analyzing the images generated by particular racial identifiers (“Latina,” “Hispanic woman,” “Chicana”), and the codes they reveal.

## **Mechanisms and Ideologies of the Search Engine**

While it may be theoretically attractive to think about how the machine/search engine “sees” and presents racial identity (specifically, Latina/Chicana identity), this theorization does

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I use the identification “Latina” to refer to this particular ethno-racial group. However, this identification is also used as one of the terms employed in my search. When used to refer to the search term the identification will be in quotations.

not attend to medium specificities and overstates the search engine's capabilities. This statement assumes that the Google search engine has a certain consciousness or agenda, when in reality its mechanisms exist outside of ideology (or are non-ideological). So it's difficult to state that Google, as a singular and centralized apparatus, is a system that creates meaning, orders reality or indexes race. It is not Google Images that identifies and "finds" images on the Internet, but users that tag images with particular words that the Google Image search engine then presents according to the number of hits that the image has received in connection with that search term. These search results are ranked according to "relevancy" which refers to the number of hits an image (or website) receives in connection with a particular search term, and these ranking mechanisms are dictated by algorithms. Thus, Google acts as a second order decision making process that systematizes search results according to frequency; or for those web producers willing to pay more, according to financial and cultural capital. To put it another way: programmers act as the rule book for a game in which users are the players and the algorithms are the referees. The players (users) act according to the rules, while referees (algorithms) enforce the rules determined by the rule book (programmers).

However, it's useful to think about how users experience the Google search engine, and how its mechanisms produce a particular racio-visual logic (Nakamura, 2008, p. 208). The Google interface does not hail the user as player in a game, but as the one dictating the rules of the game. The Google interface appears as blank space onto which the user's desires can be sought out and discovered. The blinking cursor prompts the user to enter the object of their desire, which they must do textually, and through the action of the click, select those sites or images that suit their desire. Autofill, which tracks users' previous searches while presenting those search terms most commonly used to find a particular object, guides the user's search,

directing them toward the collective/dominant meanings of a particular term, object or person. Thus, in the case of the search terms “Latina,” “Hispanic woman,” and “Chicana” we cannot know exactly who is searching for these terms or who is tagging particular images with these words. Nor can we argue that the algorithms employed by Google privilege some content over others. Instead, what these search terms and their associated images suggest are the ways in which the mechanisms and interface of the Google search engine index hegemonic cultural deployments of those terms and images.<sup>2</sup> In this rendering, it is the frequency of hits or clicks images receives that produce and reproduce hegemonic visualizations of *latinidad*. Google Images does not produce or even reflect the visual culture of Latina, but simply systematically rank it according to images’ metadata.

However, the danger lies in Google’s pretense of transparency—in its positing of the user as a subject who *controls* the search engine, and the search engine as a conduit through which the user can explore their desires and inquiries. The Google interface suggests this, but it also belies the complex mechanisms that dictate one’s search. This veneer of choice and control conceals the actual ways in which the user is as much of a spectacle as the images on screen (Chun, 2006, p. 62). However, the user who cannot find the visual content that synchs with their particular terminology, who encounters a severance between signifier and signified, cannot assume the status of super-agent vis-à-vis the search engine. In these instances, the user searching for alternative images of Chicanas/Latinas not only come up against the mechanisms of the search engine, but the ways in which search engines become tools to register dominant ideologies of race and their construction of the visual realm.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this research was conducted using the U.S. version of the Google search engine. Searching for these terms within other versions of Google’s search engine (which differ by language or nation) will produce different results depending on the usage and connotations of that term within different cultures.

Yet this is not to say that there is not value in considering these online images or the hegemonic meanings they convey. These collective traces are not generated and relegated to the search engine, nor to the Internet. Rather, they are informed by offline representations of Latinas, and the cultural connotations of the different terms used to name this group (“Hispanic”, “Latina”, and “Chicana”). By recognizing how the Google search engine operates and the kinds of content it generates, one can make out the codes used to construct latinidad in other mediums. What the user sees within the Google images search results is a simplified and highly visible rendering of a term’s dominant usage offline.

### **Latinos/as and internet usage**

The Internet is commonly thought of as a more public medium than cable television or film in terms of who can be involved in the production of cultural works, but problems of access remain. According to a 2011 Pew Research Report, 65% of Latinos went online in 2010, compared 77% of whites, and only 45% of Latinos had home broadband access compared to 65% of whites (Livingston, 2011). These disparities in Internet usage are often used to support the persistence of the digital divide, particularly within Latino communities. News stories about Latinos and digital media primarily focus on the digital divide and Latinos’ lack of access and understanding of digital technologies (Washington, 2011; James, 2011). While the digital divide is central to conversations about U.S. Latino/as and Internet technologies, this focus on technological deficiency overlooks the fact that Latinos/as are online as both users and content. As new media scholar Anna Everett points out, “while much has been written about the ‘digital divide’ and the ‘information have-nots,’ too little attention has been paid to the remarkable and

unintended uses to which the digitally disadvantaged have put the technology” (Everett, 2002, p. 130-31). This concept of deficiency is amplified in relation to Latinas, who are assumed to be technologically incompetent due not only to their race, but their gender.

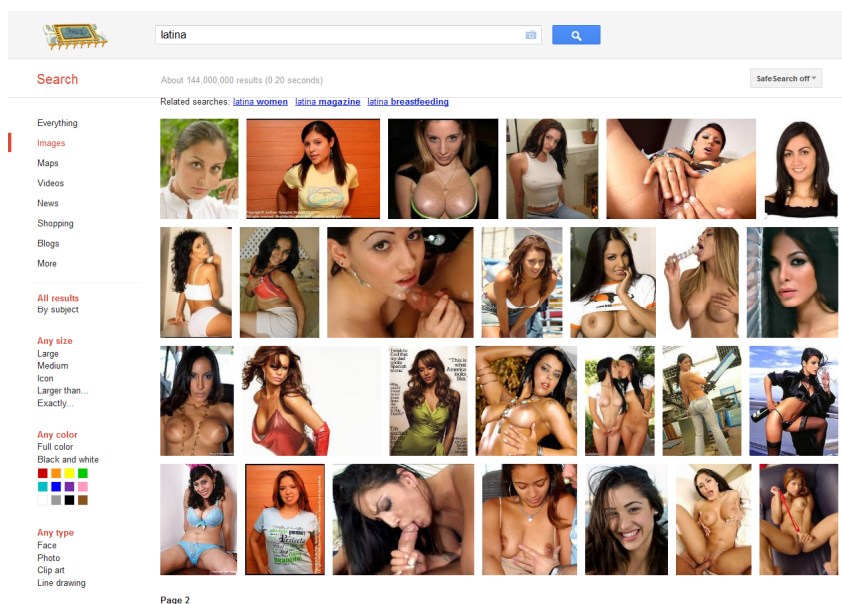
However, in order to re-direct the conversation from one of technology deficiency to one of proficiency, it is necessary to first critically look at how Latinas/Chicanas are seen online. As Romelia Salinas explains, “if the issue of lack of relevant content is to be tackled, the nature of existing content needs to be known and examined for potential inadequacies so that remedies can be proposed” (Salinas, 2006, p. 9). By examining the prominent ways and spaces that Latinas inhabit online, I will discuss how the mechanisms of the search engine and the discourses surrounding Latinas construct a particular “racio-visual logic” (Nakamura, 2008, p. 208) that is dependent upon overt racial and gender codes.

### **Indexing Race, Coding Identity**

While we no longer think of race a purely biological concept, we do think of it as something that can be “seen” on the body (Chow-White, 2008; Elam, 2011; Condit, 2004, Nakamura, 2008). Race does not operate as a biological fact, but as visual information that can be detected corporeally. However, in this connection between sight and race, visual fictions are continually re-created. Race “is now what you cannot see, what cannot be expressed, yet it still persists as a way of trying to understand the invisible through the visible, falsely or not. Race persists as the frenzy of and decline in visual knowledge (Chun, 2006, p.274). As the evidence to determine racial ancestry becomes increasingly microscopic, moving to the level of genes and DNA, efforts to maintain race as a visual category result in the proliferation of images that fix and stabilize it in ways that are comfortable and familiar.

In order to make race not only visible, but intelligible, racial codes are used to maintain racial differences and communicate narratives about a particular group. These codes are necessary to make sense of any visual or linguistic message. As Stuart Hall states, “there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code,” even if these codes are seemingly “natural” (Hall, 1980/2012, p. 140). Hall points out that both connotation and denotation rely upon the use of codes, but “the level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions” (p. 141). While Hall discusses these codes in reference to televisual images, it is useful to think about how these codes operate within the Google Images search results. How is Latinidad coded in the images generated by Latina, Hispanic woman and Chicana? How are these codes constructed, maintained and presented in this medium?

## “Latina”



*Image 1*

The top images generated by the search term “Latina” are pornographic

photographs (see *Image 1*). These images (generated with the “safe search” off) depict women



ethnicity. Many of the search results in the first two pages feature images related the national or regional connotations of the term. Specifically, several of the images are collages of the various Latin countries or countries where there are Latino populations. Similarly, some of the images present a map of the North America or South America with the flags of different Spanish speaking countries. Another reoccurring theme in these images is the display of flags to signal ethnic pride and solidarity. For example, the second image (see *Image 3*) within the search results is a patchwork of the flags of Latin countries with the words “Latinos Stand Up!!” emblazoned over them. Other images are photographs of marches and rallies with people holding both the American and Mexican flag. As I will discuss in greater detail, the images generated by “Latinos” represent the use of this term as an ethnic identification that has been employed to mobilize groups of people from various Latin countries.

The cultural-historical origins of the term “Latinos” make clear not only how this identification is situated within U.S. identity politics, but how these histories and ideologies are signified by the Google images associated with this term. Chon Noriega and Alma L. López outline some of the debates about the emergence and usage of the term Latino; they explain that it was a politically-constructed term necessary in forwarding certain agendas and critiques during Civil Rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Noriega and López, 1996, p. xii). As a pan-ethnic identification, “Latino” is a U.S.-based term that includes various Spanish-speaking groups of Central and Latin American origin. Yet while “Latino” may have initially been constructed as a strategic, political identification to strengthen Civil Rights movements by addressing the shared experiences of people of Latin descent, in 2000 it was included in the U.S. Census Bureau as a term synonymous with Hispanic (Cresce, 2004). This inclusion in the U.S.

Census Bureau is an indication of the kinds of shifts that occurred with the word in the decades between 1970 and 2000.

Although some scholars and groups still claim Latina/o as a potentially mobilizing racial marker,<sup>3</sup> for others, the term has become commercialized, bureaucratic and de-politicized (Martha E. Gimenez cited in Noriega and López, 1989, p. xii). As Myra Mendible explains, critics of “Latino” have “questioned the usefulness and effect of such labeling, for example, its tendency to homogenize peoples whose histories, language usage, and circumstances may differ significantly or to alienate U.S.-born Latinos, who may not speak Spanish or share other identifying criteria” (Mendible, 2007, p. 4). These critics further point out that there are “legitimate reasons to suspect bureaucratic attempts to regulate, profile, and monitor a growing constituency of over 40 million people” (p. 4). However, while “Latino” exists at the nexus of discussions about its political/cultural usefulness and its homogenizing dangers, these discussions do not acknowledge the cultural connotations of “Latina,” or the ways in which this term, while linguistically similar to “Latino,” carries with it a different set of meanings. While Latino is currently a term that might signify middle-class status, privileged European descent, or alternatively, pan-ethnic solidarity, its gender counter-part, Latina, carries with it a different set of connotations, particularly within the visual realm.

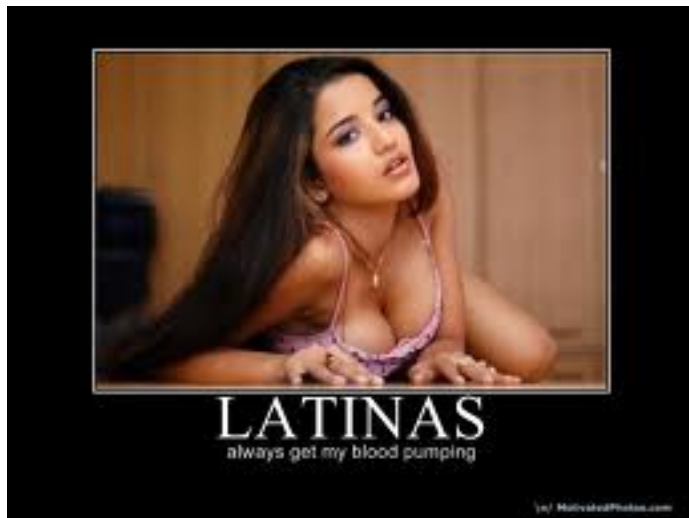
As evidenced by page-after-page of explicitly pornographic images, the identification “Latina” is highly sexualized. Unlike “Latino,” “Latina” is marked by both racial *and* gender

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<sup>3</sup> This term is favored within the emerging field of Latino/a Communication Studies, and is employed by scholars such Angharad Valdivia, Arlene Dávila, Mary Beltrán, Myra Mendible and Charles Ramírez Berg. Valdivia explains that the usage of “Latino/a” is “not meant to suggest that all specificity and difference between the contributory groups to Latinidad are erased, but rather that it makes sense to study the affinities and commonalities as well as the differences and fault lines among and between the different Latina/o populations” (Valdivia, 2008, p. 7).

differences. While it's not clear what cultural or historical forces led to the construction of "Latina" as a signifier of hypersexuality (as opposed to an ethnic identification like "Latino"), within U.S. popular culture the "Latina" has often been characterized by her sexual availability. In her discussion of Latina stars, Mary C. Beltrán explains that the "image of the curvaceous, hypersexualized Latina star is an entrenched trope of Latina cinematic representation" (Beltrán, 2009, p. 10). Although sexualization is an issue that most actors must contend with, Latina actors have experienced the most difficulty "escaping publicity that labels them as exceptionally and innately sexy, or as having excessively sexy and/or voluptuous bodies" (p. 10). Many scholars (Beltrán, 2009; Berg, 2002; Valdivia, 2008; Fregoso, 1995; Rodriguez, 1997) have discussed the sexualization of Latinas in film and television from the 1920s silent film star Lupe Velez to Jennifer Lopez. In these representations the "Latina body figures as a kind of negotiable currency....As a commercial construct, the Latina body is packaged and marketed as an alter/native 'type' available for consumption and sale, its design specs, desirability, and visibility held sway to reigning market forces" (Mendible, 2007, p. 12-13). As a carefully crafted object of consumption, the Latina body represents what bell hooks describes as site of desire that is both pleasurable and threatening (hooks, 1992, p. 310). The Latina, as a racialized and gendered Other, is desirable because of her differences and the exciting (sexual) possibilities these differences offer the viewer (p. 311). Thus, the Google images generated by the search term "Latina" are not new nor are they surprising given the long history of sexualization of Latinas in popular media. However, this is not to say that these images are entirely the same either.

While the narrative of the hypersexual Latina has an extensive history in film and television, within the search engine this sexualization is made explicit and overt. In film and television texts Latina sexuality is coded through the use of certain storylines, clothing, location and language. For example, Beltrán notes how Jennifer Lopez, as a celebrity cast in both non-racialized and Latina roles, performs an “authentic” Latina identity by emphasizing her curvy body, appearing or dressing in “urban” apparel and enacting Latina stereotypes like the “spitfire” in her films. As discussed earlier, in order to communicate a racialized and gendered identity, the use of certain codes ensures that this identity is intelligible to viewers. These codes must also seem natural and subtle so as not to disrupt the viewers’ pleasure, but rather, aid their understanding of the film’s/program’s message.

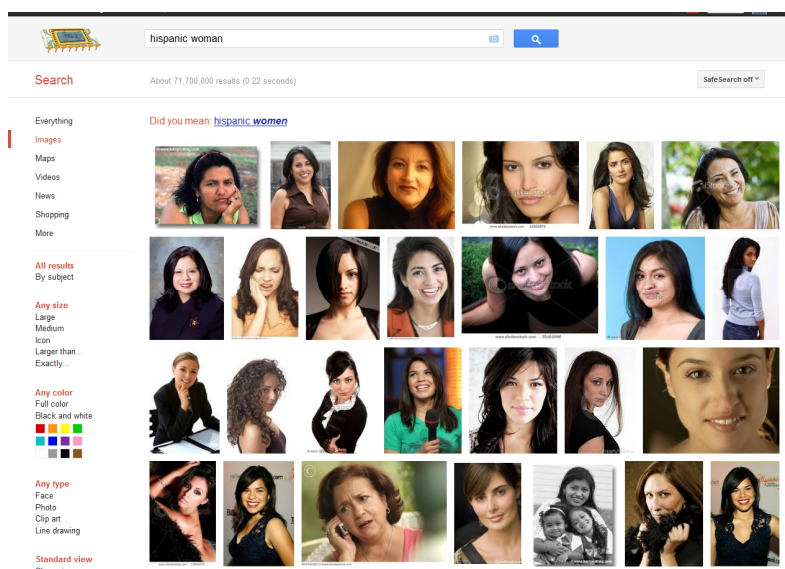


*Image 4*

However, the images of “Latinas” within the Google search engine present an overt hypersexuality that lays bare the cultural constructions of “Latina” as a sexual category. This is not to say that these images do not rely upon the use of codes to make sense of them, but that the coding of sexuality in this apparatus is overt, rather than covert. As the caption on one image states “Latinas: always gets my blood pumping” (see *Image 4*). This statement is displayed underneath a photograph of a reclining woman with exposed cleavage and a sultry expression. Although this image is not as explicitly pornographic as other photographs within the

search results, the text not only directs the viewer's/user's desire, but encapsulates how Latinas are constituted within the search engine, and within popular culture at large. It encapsulates the discursive field that Latinas occupy as an object of desire and a hypersexual threat. That these images can only be seen when Google "safe search" is in the off mode, implies that these images are not only unsafe for potentially "vulnerable users" (read: children), but that they are more threatening and less palatable for the unassuming user. Thus, the viewer/user who "gets their blood pumping" by searching for and looking at these images, is titillated not only by the explicit sexual content, but the thrill of searching for this seemingly dangerous, hypersexual Other.

The images generated by "Latinas" makes the narrative of hypersexual threat hypervisible. The overwhelming amount of pornographic photographs is not only difficult to ignore, but indicates one of the ways in which Latinas (as an overarching identity category) exist online: as pornographic content. Wendy Chun argues that "Internet search engines highlight the spreading of sexuality over almost every identity (now database) category," therefore transforming most racial or ethnic identifications into categories of porn (Chun, 2006, p. 105). However, while "Latina" might not be exceptional in its online existence as a pornographic category, analyzing these images highlights the kinds of discourses that characterize Latinas offline.



*Image 5*

### **“Hispanic”**

While the “Latina” body signifies hypersexuality, the “Hispanic” female body connotes market opportunity. These two identity labels (Latina and Hispanic woman), although commonly used to refer to the same group of people, generate markedly different images. When searching for “Hispanic woman” a few images of Hispanic-identified celebrities and politicians are shown,” but the vast majority of the images are stock photos (see *Image 5*). Most of the photographs feature light-skinned women, posing and smiling at the viewer or glancing toward the viewer seductively. Some of the women are shown in some sort of generic setting like an office or outdoor area, but most of them are standing against a blank, white background. The women are normatively attractive and young, and the photos appear polished and professional taken.



The majority of the photos generated by “Hispanic woman” come from online stock image banks, where a photo of a particular person, concept, object or setting can be purchased. As visual culture theorist David Machin explains, these photo banks were primarily used for advertising and marketing, but are increasingly being used in magazines, newspapers, and other formats (Machin, 2004). The photographs in these image banks do not operate as reflections of reality, but instead, as a

symbolic system constructed by the global and fast-moving political economy of late capitalism (Machin, 2004, p. 317). In order for these images to be useful (read: marketable) for corporations, they must be generic and adapt seamlessly within any context; their purpose is not to record what is “out there” (photography’s alleged traditional function), but act as a symbol, evoking not a specific time, place or identity, but a “universal” sense or a concept like childhood, freedom, success, or friendship.

In a photo selected from the “Hispanic Woman” search results (see *Image 6*) a woman in professional (but feminine) attire poses confidently with her arms crossed, and the hint of a smile on her face to dispel any concern that her pose might be read as threatening. The model has a light complexion, and is normatively attractive, but also safe and approachable looking. She poses without any props or background so as to ideally be situated within a variety of settings. An advertiser or marketer might read this photograph as expressing confidence, professionalism, success and integrity. To symbolize these feelings the photograph is flat and decontextualized, with the woman appearing against a blank, white background, looking relatively happy and incorporating no props (p. 320-324). This lack specificity and context allows the photograph to be used in multiple venues—it could be used in a magazine story about female professionals, in a university’s statement about their commitment to hiring “diverse” faculty, or in an advertisement for a company that offers online, professional degree programs.

*Image 6* in the photographs of “Hispanic woman” the signification is overt, and connotative meanings saturate the photograph (Machin, 2004, p. 236). These images have no caption, which might foreclose their meaning and intended use(s), but instead have several classificatory keywords. In Image 3 the photographed woman’s racial identity is reduced to a “type” signified by descriptive and symbolic keywords—her image represents ‘modern,’ ‘corporate’ and

'profession,' all qualities necessary to be (or at least appear) successful within late capitalism. The image is "categorized in terms of a *range* of possible meanings, which are labeled by search words...These search words specify the kind of people, places and things shown in the image, and...In addition, they provide a connotative meaning potential, categorizing the images in conceptual terms" (p. 237). Race and gender are emptied of any historical or geographic context, instead standing in as a stylized marker of multiculturalism in the workplace. In these photos, the presence of racialized and gendered bodies does not signify a politicized identity, but is reflective of institutional efforts to regulate diversity. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield argue that "diversity management explicitly dehistoricized culture, race, and gender in order to offer management itself as the instrument for organizing difference. Employee differences would be encouraged but employee sovereignty over the use of difference would not" (Gordon and Newfield, 1996, p. 6). Thus, while these stock images seem to display Latinas as productive members of the workforce or normal, everyday women, they are representative of the discourses of late capitalism and its treatment of difference. Race and gender differences can be presented in a positive light, but these differences must not deviate from established norms so as not to get in the way of financial/institutional progress.

Although these stock images are not meant to convey any information about the model's identity or cultural-historical context, the fact that "Hispanic woman" generates an abundance of strikingly similar stock photos conveys the term's historical roots and contemporary usage as a marketing category. "Hispanic" was first added to the U.S. Census in 1970 as a term to identify peoples who are descendants of Spanish-speaking countries (Cresce, 2004). As a referent to a common language, "Hispanic" is not considered a racial category by the U.S. Census, but an ethnic category like "Latino." Derived from the term *Hispania*, which refers to people from

certain parts of Spain, many Chicana/o scholars point out that this identification privileges European ancestry over indigenous ancestry (Noriega and Lopez, 1996, p. xii). As another pan-ethnic identification the term is often used interchangeably with Latino, but unlike Latino the identification did not emerge from political struggle, but bureaucratic efficiency. For Noriega and López 'Hispanic' "reflects various attempts to acquire institutional, economic and political power through homogenization," and is a label assigned to diverse groups, not created by them (Noriega and Lopez, 1996, p. xii). The origins of "Hispanic" as a term of identification carry with it a set of significations. As a term referring to language and ethnicity it is stripped of its overtly racial connotations. In a post-Civil Rights society, "Hispanic" is culturally acceptable in its seeming erasure of race and racial difference. Additionally, "Hispanic" also fits well within dominant narratives of class mobility through hard work, professionalization and adaptation to American values and practices.

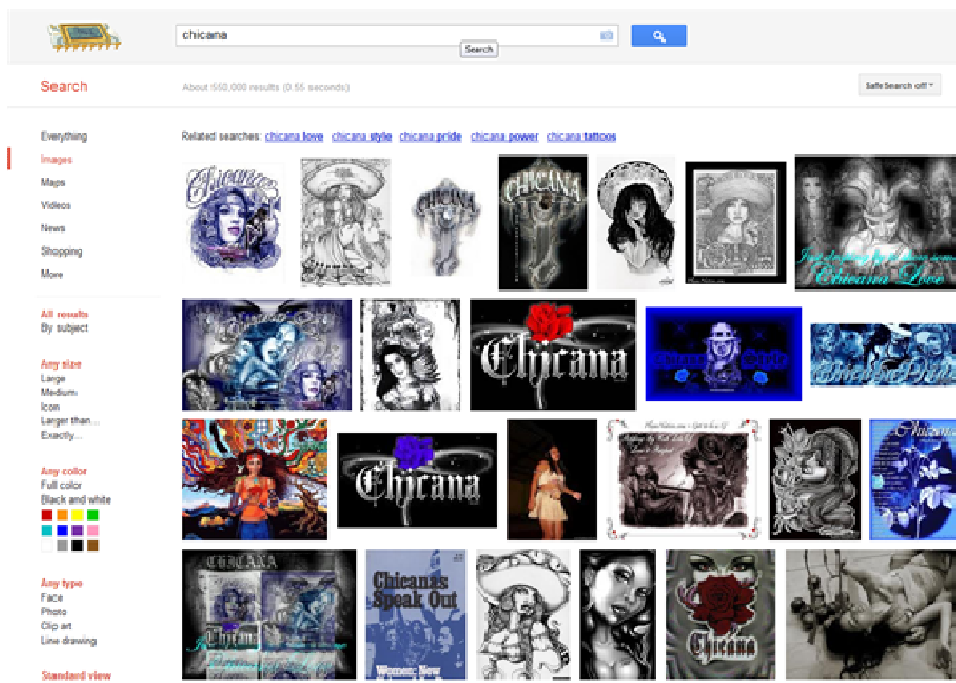
As a de-politicized and "safe" term of identification, "Hispanic" has also become a marketing category. Angharad N. Valdivia explains that "the 'Decade of the Hispanic' in the 1980s was part of the advent of niche marketing and coincided with the expanded use of the term 'Hispanic' especially within government and marketing circles" (Valdivia, 2010, p. 5). As media producers began recognizing the ability to target specific audiences (through cable television), the presence of the "Hispanic" population became more visible. The newly established and quickly growing "Hispanic" population was an opportunity to create new audiences and new markets. As a term that encompasses several nationalities and cultures, "'Hispanic' is ultimately a construct whose representation has presented several dilemmas to advertisers, especially to their quest for images that would produce homogeneity out of multiple heterogeneities" (Dávila, 2001, p. 90). However, advertisers and media producers had to contend with the damaging

stereotypes of “Latinas” in their efforts to produce content that appeals to both white *and* Latino viewers. Part of this strategy was to produce “positive” representations that emphasized Latinos’ commitment to family and tradition (p. 88-89). In these representations the differences that accentuated are those that align with U.S. values and normative culture. As Arlene Dávila explains “the commodification of U.S. Latinas involves their re-authentication by association with the ‘right’ way to an ‘ethnic,’ which requires them to ‘exotic,’ that is, culturally different, but to stay within normative patterns in which traits of upward mobility are always associated with an aspirational Anglo not Latina world” (p. 98).

U.S. Hispanics (as a consumer group) are perceived as an untapped and desirable market particularly for digital technology manufacturers. For these producers, the digital divide is something to overcome by selling digital products and Internet access to groups that *need* them. Sites like “Hispanic Digital Media” explain that in order to “develop a stronger relationship with Hispanics, marketers have been expanding and more fully integrating their digital assets with marketing strategies” (“Hispanic Digital Media,” 2011). Through “these consumer-based tactics, the Internet proliferates race. This proliferation of race as a consumer category also constructs race and ethnicity as a category to be consumed” (Chun, 2006, p. 154). However, while “Latina” is a term that generates numerous images to be consumed by the porn-seeking user, the images generated by “Hispanic Woman” constitute it more singularly as a consumer group projected that Latina viewer-users can look up to. However, despite the efforts of marketers to create images that are reflective of heterogeneous groups that make up “Hispanic,” the collection of images generated by “Hispanic woman” is noticeably homogenous in their use of light-skinned models. As a term that is constructed within and between the black-white racial binary in the U.S. the use of olive-complexioned, straight haired Latinas in these stock images signals how “commercial

representations of U.S. Hispanics have become tantamount to showing whiter-looking, Mediterranean Hispanic types” (Dávila, 2001, p. 111). Thus, the ideal “Hispanic woman,” as evidenced by these images, is the woman whose body does not expose her Afro-Mestizo racial identity.

Much like an online store the user searching for visual representations of a Hispanic woman is met with a multitude of choices. The Google images search engine presents these choices as discrete units to be downloaded or purchased, saved to their hard drives and then utilized by the user. Just like the modularity and acceptability of the word “Hispanic,” the images of “Hispanic woman” are modular, de-politicized and polite. Difference is flattened existing only as an entity to be used by the image-seeker hoping to attract the desirable “Hispanic market.” Just as with the search results generated by “Latinas,” the images of “Hispanic woman” reveal the ways that this term is employed on the Internet and the contemporary discourses that characterize “Hispanic.” This search term represents another pole of this discursive field. While “Latina” underlines Latinas’ positioning as images/bodies to be consumed, “Hispanic” highlights



the potential of Latinas both as images to be consumed and consumers themselves.

## *Image 7*

### **“Chicana”**

The images generated by “Latina” and “Hispanic woman” are representative of the tensions and anxieties felt within popular consciousness regarding Latinas. As Beltrán notes, Latino/a images “in the U.S. entertainment media have been nothing if not ambivalent, reflecting the shifting and equally ambivalent racial and social status of Mexican Americans and other Latina/os in this in the last century” (Beltrán, 2009, p. 2). However, although the different set of images generated by “Latina” and “Hispanic” contributes to the ways in which this tension is made manifest, “Chicana” presents yet another, distinct axis through which to understand Latinas in the U.S. Unlike the other identity terms which generated photographs of women, “Chicana” primarily presents highly stylized digital and hand-drawn illustrations often featuring a woman in a sombrero, symbols like crosses and roses, and Gothic font. While the images associated with “Chicana” are somewhat more diverse than “Latina” and “Hispanic woman,” featuring both graphic artwork and photographs of Chicana activists, the majority of the images are graphics reminiscent of the sort of “cholo art” seen in tattoos and graffiti (see *Image 7*). This type of art often referred to as “cholo” or “low rider” style is an urban aesthetics that developed in East Los Angeles by Mexican-American gangs after the Chicano movement (Finkel, 2011). Although it

was traditionally either spray painted on public buildings as street art or tattooed on bodies, a current exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles features prominent street artists of L.A (Finkel, 2011). These illustrations typically fuse traditional symbols of Catholicism (the cross, saints, roses), Mexican iconography (an eagle, snake, Aztec warrior, calaveras), and objects associated with gang culture like low rider cars, guns and gang symbols.

Similarly, many of the images generated by a Google search for “Chicana” use this style of graphics and feature text like “Chicana,” “Chicana Style,” or “Chicana Pride.” Based on the origin of the graphic images (Myspace, mytinyphone.com, flicker, lowriderarte.com) these appear to images that are created and uploaded by individual users, and thus reflective of how they visualize their identity. These images, with their overly stylized content and “tackiness,” challenge modernist aesthetics and taste culture. They are not clean or sparse, but graphically excessive, illustrating what Jillian Hernandez identifies as “sexual-aesthetic excess”—a concept exemplified by the urbanized and racialized Bratz dolls. Hernandez locates these representations as means through which young Latinas (specifically chongas) index “ethnic pride, personal confidence and non-normative sexuality (Hernandez, 2009, p. 66).

The chola, derived from the overtly politicized identification “Chicana,” is overlooked by feminist scholars “as an agent of oppositional practices, despite her notable contribution to the politics of resistance” due to these seemingly “tacky” cultural productions (Fregoso, 1999, p. 72-91). Yet it is these cultural works that dominate the visual realm of “Chicana” on the Internet, frustrating ideas of what is political and what is tasteful. As Lisa Nakamura explains, this notion of a “taste culture as something that can be created, rather than merely consumed, by its own users, who are consequently freed from the necessity of engaging with ‘tacky commercialism,’ has long been a part of the discourse of the Internet and its potential for interactivity”

(Nakamura, 2008, p. 142). What's favored by white, middle class users are designs and graphics that are sleek, elegant and simple, rather than ones that are over-the-top and embellished.

Similarly, the images often presented by Chicana scholars and activists are not the graphic, low-rider artwork generated by the search engine, but photographs, murals or paintings of Chicana activists, symbols and icons (Pérez, 2007, p. 1-16).

To better understand the cultural imaginings and representations of Chicana, it is necessary to look at the origins of this term. The identification “Chicana” refers to a racialized, gendered and politicized subjectivity. This identity emerged during Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s when a generation of Mexican-Americans challenged discrimination and institutional racism by organizing as a radical ethnic movement (Garcia, 1997, p. 2). Early Chicano politics often embraced a separatist and nationalist ideology as part of their agenda for social justice (p. 2). While women were active members of the Chicano movement, Chicano cultural nationalism—Chicanismo—as an ideological tool adopted within the movement, was often used to exclude Chicanas from positions of leadership. Chicano nationalism, while radical in its challenge to the colonizing and exploitative practices employed by the U.S., maintained traditional gender roles (p. 3). In opposition to the sexism experienced within the movement, many women developed their own forms of activism that not only addressed racism, but sexism and homophobia as well.

Unlike “Latina,” Chicana remains a politicized identification in 2012 as Chicana artists and scholars continue theorize and represent Chicana feminism. The term signifies the historical, cultural and political contexts of Mexican-American women in a way that Hispanic (and to some extent Latina/o) cannot. Further, as a resistant identity and consciousness that emerged within the geographic boundaries of the United States, “Chicana” does not connote the exoticization and

otherness of “Latina.” Nor can it fit easily within global capitalism marketing schemes as it is overtly racialized and politicized. Based on the origins of the identification “Chicana” and contexts in which it is commonly used (theory, activism, art), the images generated by this term should seemingly be political, progressive and contextual, offering a counterpoint to the over-sexualized and commodified images associated with “Latina” and “Hispanic”.

It could certainly be argued that these chola-style graphics are indicative of the ways in which Chicana (as a terminology) resists bourgeoisie taste culture, depoliticized identity politics, or cross-over appeal, instead favoring a portrayal that is overtly raced and classed in its depiction of Chicana/o working-class aesthetics. Or, it could be asserted that Chicana challenges the photographic and its claims to authenticity and reality, instead residing within the imaginative. Laura E. Pérez explains that the visual and artistic realm provides a site through which Chicanas can engage in complex negotiations of identity and culture, not limited by the constraints of language (Pérez, 2007, p. 1-16). Yet while this might account for the abundance of graphic (as opposed to photographic) images, this does not address the paucity of images that might represent the many ways in which Chicana identification is conceived. So how then can we understand these image productions in relation to the identification “Chicana”? How might I account for the disjunction between my self-identification as Chicana and the kinds of images encountered when searching for these terms? Overall, what might these observations and analyses suggest about the racialized image, search engines and data?

The seemingly straightforward codes associated with “Latinas” and “Hispanic woman,” are less identifiable when looking at the search results generated by “Chicana.” Analyses of these images seem to oscillate between Chicano nationalist fantasy, and resistant gender and racial representation. And unlike “Hispanic” and “Latina,” “Chicana” is a term that is not likely to be

used within mainstream media or culture, further complicating how these images are coded and how they might be read. However, regardless of the contradictory messages these images convey, the fact that the majority of these images are from websites based on the uploading and sharing of user-created content (Myspace, Flickr, mytinyphone) implies that these images are an act of self-naming and self-visualizing.

Yet this does not account for the lack of diversity within the search results. Although these images might be user-generated and alternative (whether they are read as resistant or stereotypical), what is *not* generated, and therefore not seen by the user must also be considered. Rather than generating the many ways in which “Chicana” might be represented, what the images suggest is a “Chicana” type, or more specifically, cybertype. Nakamura’s conception of the cybertype addresses the medium-specific ways in which stereotypes are generated online. Cybertypes “are created in a peculiarly collaborative way; they reflect the ways that machine-enabled interactivity gives rise to images of race that both stem from a common cultural logic and seek to redress anxieties about the ways that computer-enabled communication can challenge those old logics” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 5). In a space where identities appear fluid and detached, and everything seems to be a digital copy of a copy, these cybertypes stabilize and essentialize “Chicana”. As a political identification that resists essentializing and homogenizing, the Google images of “Chicana,” while potentially resistant do fit well within this understanding of Chicana. What occurs is the fixing of a type through repetition.

## **Conclusion**

Certainly, there are limitations and oversights to the methodological approach presented in this article. Namely, this type of search might not reflect the material practices of Google searches. Generally, users' searches are more specific—it is unlikely that a user would search for the broad and singular term “Latina” (unless they happen to be searching for the magazine of that name). It is more likely that their desire is more particular, and hence, their search terms are more specific (i.e. Latina feminism, Latina style, Latina dating, etc.). Further, increasingly within Google searches the content generated is often tailored to the individual user based on that individual's search history. For example, if a user is logged into their Google account and has searched for “Latina style” in the past, the top sites will be the website(s) they have previously visited. And finally, in image meta searches, it is not the content of the images that search engine relies upon, but the image's meta data (captions, tags, etc.). So a simple analysis of search term versus image content overlooks the mechanisms of the search engine.

While these concerns are justifiable and might indicate the need for a more systematic and empirical approach, these methodological difficulties form part of my theoretical argument: in order to find or see progressive portrayals of Latinas/Chicanas online one must contend with the traces of others' actual searches. In this way, resistant or progressive images are relegated to the margins of the Internet because the user must work harder, use more exact search terms and weed through the hegemonic content to find anything progressive. Therefore, while the search terms I use may not reflect users' actual searches, what we are seeing are the collective traces of these searches. The images generated in relation to these particular terms provide a window into how not how the search engines “sees” Latinas, but how culture sees them.

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