Three Faces of Eva: Perpetuation of The Hot-Latina Stereotype in Desperate Housewives

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One of most popular network television programs to come along in years is Desperate Housewives. The show presents the intimate lives of 5 women living in a middle-to-upper-middle-class neighborhood somewhere in America. One of them, Gabrielle Solis (played by Eva Longoria) is Latina. The role appears to be a break through role in terms of media representations of Latinas. Visibility as a lead character in a highly successful television program is a rarity for Latinas. However, a critical reading of the program shows that the opportunity to advance the image of Latinas is lost as dialogue, the presentation of Gabrielle, and the off-screen life of Longoria, fulfill G. D. Keller's (1994) tripartite typology of Latina stereotypes. This study presents illustrative dialogue drawn from a textual analysis of the first season (23 episodes) of ABC's 2004–2005 prime time hit that demonstrates the persistence of the stereotype, albeit in less overt form than in the past. In addition, building on I. M. Guzmán and A. N. Valdivia's (2004) study, Eva Longoria's off-screen behavior is discussed as the similarity between that and her on-screen presence serves to reinforce Keller's Latina types.

KEYWORDS accumulation theory, ethnic disparity, latina, stereotypes, television, tropicalization

One of most popular network television programs to come along in years, Desperate Housewives (DH), enjoys a viewership of more than 21 million women and men (Arthur, 2006, p. E5). In its 9:00 p.m. Sunday nighttime slot, DH presents the intimate lives of five attractive women living in a

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middle-to-upper-middle-class neighborhood somewhere in America. One of these women, Gabrielle Solis (played by Eva Longoria) is Latina. At first blush, hers appears to be a breakthrough role in terms of media representations of Latinas. Visibility as a lead character in a highly successful television program is a rarity for Latino women and for men. Unfortunately, however, a critical reading of the program shows that the opportunity to advance the image of Latinas is lost as dialogue, the presentation of Gabrielle, and the off-screen life of Longoria, fulfill Keller’s (1994) tripartite typology of Latina stereotypes (Cantina Girl, Suffering Senorita, and Vamp). Accumulation Theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998) suggests the media are likely to have powerful effects if the information is presented persistently, consistently, and corroborated among forms. As a media effect, stereotypes rely on repetition to perpetuate and sustain them. The hot Latina stereotype is one with great longevity.

In a “cultural climate where Latinas are hot and hot Latinas are on fire,” DH’s Eva Longoria sizzles (Papps, 2005, p. 21). As Wisteria Lane’s hoop-earringed hottie Gabrielle Soles, Longoria’s role as well as her public personae consistently present the entire spectrum of the hot Latina stereotype. Longoria’s prime time pinup status and promotional positioning in magazines reinforce the already prominent, oversexed, under-dressed decisive and divisive character she embodies on DH. In an interview promoting her photo shoot for Unleashed magazine, readers are told, “When she’s not seducing the gardener on Desperate Housewives, fiery Eva Longoria is seducing newsstand readers!” and “Instead of being tempted to try new projects because she is often pigeonholed as the sexy Latina, Eva plays up the stereotype” (Askmen.com, 2005). The steamy similarity in character and promotion of Longoria/Solis is seamless.

In this article, I examine the articulation of the “hot Latina” stereotype of the character Gabrielle Solis and the conflation of that character with actor Eva Longoria. Media sustained stereotypes of Latinas served as a guide for interpretation (Valdivia, 1998, 2000) of the 23 episodes that constituted Season 1 (2004–2005). These episodes were decoded to examine the presentation of the Latina body and behavior of both the character Gabrielle Solis and news media coverage of the actor Eva Longoria. This study draws upon and extends Guzmán and Valdivia’s (2004) analysis of media presentation and press coverage of three Latina icons (Selma Hayek, Frida Kahlo, and Jennifer Lopez). My intent is to add to this perspective in two ways: (a) to examine the Gabrielle Solis character as a representation of dominate stereotypes of Latinas, and (b) to consider whether Longoria’s off-screen, print, and commercial personae reinforce that stereotype.

REPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS

As sources of learning, the mass media in general, and television in particular, are powerful sites of cultural (re)production where dominant (Anglo,
male) beliefs about race, ethnicity, sex, and gender (among other “isms”) are reinforced and recirculated. An ideology of White/Anglo racial superiority is maintained in part using stereotypes designed to construct an “other” that is regarded as lesser than the declared and constructed ideal. Stereotypes, as hegemonic tools, reduce individuals to a single, monolithic, one-dimensional type that appears and is presented as natural and normal (read true and accurate) as they fit into ideological patterns of representations that serve, among other functions, to establish “in-group categorizations of out-groups” (Ramirez-Berg, 1990, p. 294). Stereotyping “puts people in boxes and creates images that result in false presumptions accepted as inconvertible truths” (Oboler, 1998, p. 27). Stereotypes persist because “they fulfill important identity needs for the dominant culture” thereby maintaining the status quo and preserving hegemony (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p. 112). Rather than using physical force, this social control strategy (hegemony) is psychological, requiring the consent of those ruled. Consent is evident in the normalization of stereotypical, one-dimensional representations that under other circumstances would seem, at the least, inappropriate if not all together harmful and misleading.

The consistency of stereotypical portrayals is also key to their longevity as presentation of the same or similar stereotypes is likely to add credibility to the portrayals as they take on an aura of naturalness and truth. Hence this naturalization, or as Hall (1996) referred to it, articulation, is reified through the lack of contradictory images and information and is apparent in the story-telling/myth building capabilities of the mass media. The stories the media tell are based on deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and values that cultivate and build support for a system of symbolic representation that benefits the financial, cultural, economic, and social interests of the ruling elite through the reinforcement of racialized heteronormative beliefs and values. Through the use of specific signs and symbols, articulated in particular words and images, racial/ethnic and sexual stereotypes draw strength from a shared cultural reservoir of thought-to-be-truths about particular groups of people based on a history of cultural, social, and psychological infusion of one-dimensional and distorted presentations of qualities (or lack thereof) that serve the interests of those in power who wish to retain their status and resources.

A related concept and partial explanation for the effectiveness of a hegemonic system of social control is Accumulation Theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998). This theory predicts that if the mass media, including advertising, present information in ways that are consistent, persistent, and corroborated, this instruction is likely to have long-term, powerful effects. Stereotyping, as a media effect, gains power and credibility the longer and more regularly the same information is presented, in the same way, to the same audiences. These (re)presentations remain largely unchallenged so that carefully cultivated cultural constructions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender become normalized in the American popular imagination.
In the case of Latino/a portrayals, the wide variety of individual qualities, experiences, histories, and characteristics are truncated by stereotyping into a single Pan-Latina/o identity based on a unilateral conception of “Hispanic-ness” (Dávila, 2002, p. 56). Consistently repeated representations have power as “these are the ideas we have been hearing for a long time and that we’ve ended up believing out of truth, custom, or repetition” (p. 56). Markers of sex and sexuality in Latinas posit them as “exotic, sexual, and available, and as more in touch with their bodies and motivated by physical and sexual pleasure than white women” (Beltrán, 2002, p. 82). While curviness and a prominent derriere might be acceptable in the construction of Jennifer Lopez-as-Latina celebrity, this is not an attribute of mainstream (Anglo) ideal female beauty in American media. However, because an ample derriere is coded as an eroticized aspect of Latina-ness, she can be curvy and be considered attractive. This construction thereby complies with mainstream expectations of Latina beauty.

LATINA STEREOTYPES IN U.S. POPULAR CULTURE

During the 1920s through 1940s, Latina stars such as Carmen Miranda broke through racial/ethnic barriers to celebrity and success in U.S. popular entertainment. Yet, the physical and performative requirements for success simultaneously established not only the Latina “look” in film, but also the look as a symbol of lower social class. Carmen Miranda (“the lady in the tutti-frutti hat”), Dolores del Río, and Lupe Velez (the “Mexican Spitfire”), projected not only exotic, inviting, and flamboyant sexuality, but also a particular social class look derived from a perceived ethnicity. In 1945, Carmen Miranda, for example, was America’s highest paid woman (O’Neil, 2005). Her fame, however, carried a high price as fruit-feted hats, an accent thick as picante, and ever-zanier roles undermined whatever strides she had taken for Latinas in Hollywood (O’Neil, 2005). The dramaturgical display (Goffman, 1956) of each of these actors affected their celebrity, image, and subsequent success and illustrate the hierarchical nature and ambiguity of roles for Latinas in American popular entertainment (Cortés, 1997; López, 1991; Noriega, 1992; Ramírez-Berg, 1990; Rios-Bustamante, 1992; Rodríguez-Erastrada, 1992).

Stereotypical behavioral characteristics assigned to Latinas include “addictively romantic, sensual, sexual, and even exotically dangerous” (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p. 125), self-sacrificing, dependent, powerless, sexually naïve, childlike, pampered, and irresponsible (Arredondo, 1991; Gil, 1996; King, 1974; Lott & Saxon, 2002). Others include “they all make good domestics,” mispronounce words, speak Spanish, are Catholic, are impulsive dancers, and are known for “cooking up a spicy storm” (Cofer, 2005, p. 247)—not only in a culinary sense. Comprised of “bright colors, rhythmic music, and olive or brown skin,” Latina tropicalism erases differences between specific
Latino groups and conflates characteristics of people from African, Caribbean, and Latin American cultures into a single, pan-Latino identity (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211). When stereotypical physical characteristics (red lips, big bottoms, large hips, voluptuous bosoms, and small waists), fashion extremes (high heels, huge hoop earrings, seductive clothing), sexual predation, and promiscuity (hot, exotic, experienced) are combined with behavioral generalities, the Latina is constructed as “mixed signifiers of sexual desire and fertility as well as bodily waste and racial contamination” (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 212). Keller (1994, p. 40) organized these stereotypes under three categories which “epitomize the range of representations of women in Hispanic” and Anglo television and film.

1. *Cantina Girl.* “Great sexual allure,” teasing, dancing, and “behaving in an alluring fashion” hallmark characteristics of this stereotype. She is most often represented as a sexual object, a “naughty lady of easy virtue” (p. 40).

2. *Faithful, self-sacrificing senorita.* This woman usually starts out good, but goes bad by the middle of the film or television program. This character realizes she has gone wrong and is willing to protect her Anglo love interest by placing her body between the bullet/sword/posse/violence intended for him.

3. *Vamp.* Whereas Cantina Girl is most often presented physically as an available sexual object, the Vamp uses her intellectual and devious sexual wiles to get what she wants. She often brings men to violence and enjoys doing so. She is a psychological menace to males who are ill equipped to handle her.

Keller (1994) noted that the three major stereotypes functions mainly in relationship to an Anglo love interest. Sex, passion, manipulation, and physical beauty are common to each of the characters who are coded with particular types of clothing, postures, motivations, speech, and behavior. This portrait epitomizes stock Latina attributes that set the stage for the character of Gabrielle to appear (to Anglo audiences) as natural. Although all of the women on *DH* are, in some way, sexual, Gabrielle’s libido is on fast-forward in a way different from the highly sexual Edie, for example. Susan (Teri Hatcher) is meek; Lynette (Felicity Huffman), mother of four; avoids sex so as not to get pregnant again; and Bree (Marcia Cross), described as “Martha Stewart on steroids,” is repressed. Edie (Nicollette Sheridan) is single and uses sex to get what she wants in a somewhat mindless and obvious manner, whereas Gabrielle is tactical, risky, and sensual (shown in her bra and panties or tiny teddies) and iconicized in the larger-than-life portrait that hangs above the Solis’s fireplace.

The character Gabrielle and the actor Eva Longoria present a mediated, pan-ethnic identity in the process of “tropicalization” (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997). Both the role and the public appearances are consistent
with one another. Through these representations both as character and celebrity, Gabrielle/Eva becomes a key tropicalizer embodying panethnic traits of Latinidad that draw from and affirm dominant stereotypes of Latina-ness.

The following research questions led this study: (a) Does the Gabrielle Solis character fulfill Keller’s (1994) definitions of dominant stereotypes of Latinas? and (b) Does actor Eva Longoria’s off screen and in print personae reinforce that stereotype?

METHOD

Textual analysis is useful for getting at race/ethnicity based ideological assumptions expressed through the framing power of language and images (McKee, 2003; Kraidy & Goeddertz, 2003; Lester, 1994; Lule, 1993, 1995). A critical reading of visual and verbal rhetoric reveal much about the political and cultural climate within which media content appears. Keller’s (1994) typology provides clear categories for examining the presence or absence of reductive qualities when informed by other studies of Latina stereotypes (Cortés, 1997; López, 1991; Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Noriega, 1992; Ramierz-Berg, 1991; Rios-Bustamante, 1992; Rodríguez-Erastrada, 1992; Valdivia, 1998, 2000).

Therefore, a close reading was conducted on the first season (2004–2005) of DH, consisting of 23 episodes. Transcripts were obtained from the website http://desperatehousewives.ahaava.com/episodes.htm. The coder confirmed accuracy by comparing them to viewing videotaped episodes of the show. Keller’s stereotypes (Cantina Girl, Suffering Senorita, and Vamp) are not mutually exclusive. Thus, in the following section, illustrative episodes and relevant dialogue are presented thematically in order to demonstrate how these characterizations conflate into a unified stereotypical Latina portrayal in the character Gabrielle and reinforced in “real life” media exposure of actor Eva Longoria.

Spicy Paella

Most of the characters on DHenter tabla rasa. In nearly every episode, drop by delicious drop, the characters’ personalities blossom, their pasts slowly revealed, and, however tarnished, their true natures shine through. In the show’s pilot (Cherry & McDougall, 2004) episode, Whiteness is established as the central signifier of culture on Wisteria Lane. In this episode the viewer first meets Gabrielle Solis as the camera pans to her from a handsome Hispanic man we later come to know as her husband Carlos. In a skin-tight, slinky black dress, stunning jewelry, and spiky high-heeled shoes Gabrielle carefully navigates the front steps, all while carrying a steaming dish. Gabrielle and Carlos are on their way to a wake for a friend (Mary Alice)
who committed suicide and becomes the disembodied, omniscient narrator/voice over for the show. The omniscient narrator (Mary Alice) introduces Gabrielle to the audience: “Gabrielle Solis, who lives down the block, brought a spicy paella.”

In this introductory scene, we learn a lot about Gabrielle. She is immediately constructed as Latina in her dress, mannerisms, and by the food she contributes to the wake. We learn she married Carlos not out of deep love, but for economic reasons. That fact is no secret to Carlos who is well aware of, and takes seriously, this arrangement and his power to control it. Mary Alice tells the viewer, “Since her modeling days in New York, Gabrielle had developed a taste for rich food and rich men.” We quickly learn that Gabrielle quit her high fashion modeling career (a form of bodily selling) with the understanding that Carlos would keep her bejeweled, pampered, and wanting for nothing. In return, she sleeps with him, makes herself available, and, because of her good looks, is an asset in his business dealings in the (implied) Anglo world. The audience is told, “Gabrielle liked her paella piping hot. However, her relationship with her husband was considerably cooler.”

Gabrielle is Carlos’ property. More than a trophy wife, more than arm candy, Gabrielle makes herself available for his use (at least initially). This arrangement is evidenced by his willingness to “pimp” her for his own gain and her willingness to go along with it. As a Cantina Girl, she knows what she’s got and as a Vamp, she works it to her advantage. For example, before a party with one of his important clients, Gabrielle shouts that Carlos cannot order her around or force her to go:

Carlos: “It’s business. Tanaka expects everyone to bring their wives.”
Gabrielle: “Every time I’m around that man, he tries to grab my ass.”
Carlos: “I made over $200,000 with him last week. If he wants to grab your ass, you let him.”

Gabrielle has mixed feelings about their agreement and how things are turning out in her life. Later in the same episode, Gabrielle tells Carlos she hates the way he talks to her, to which he replies “and I really hate that I spent $50,000 on a diamond necklace that you couldn’t live without. But I’ve learned to deal with it.” When Carlos apologetically gives Gabrielle a convertible with a big red ribbon on it, she says, “Carlos, what have you done?” He replies, “I saw it when I drove by the dealership. I thought Gabrielle would look so beautiful in this.” “Carlos!” she exclaims, playfully shoving him. Mary Alice’s narration tells us “Gabrielle could see what this gesture had cost Carlos so she responded the only way she knew how” [italics added]. The scene ends with Gabrielle, in Cantina fashion, kissing Carlos, jumping up, and wrapping her legs around him.

In the second episode (Cherry & Shaw, 2004), anger quickly abates when Gabrielle-as-prize-and-property, is plied into complacency. No matter
how angry she gets, her fiery temper is quickly assuaged by bling, and the
more expensive the bling the better.

Gabrielle: “Nope. No, no, no. You’re not gonna buy your way out of
this one.
Carlos: “It’s a good gift.”
Gabrielle: “Is that white gold?”
Carlos: “Yeah. Put it on. And then make love to me.”
Gabrielle: “I’m not in the mood. But, we could stay up and talk.”
Carlos: “When a man buys a woman expensive jewelry, there are
many things he may want in return. For future reference,
conversation ain’t one of them.”

“To-be-looked-at-ness” is an important aspect of the construction of
Gabrielle (Mulvey, 2001, p. 397). Her body is a central marker of Latinidad
conflated with sexuality, therefore, her clothing is always bright and tight fit-
ting, for example, to show off her toned and lithe body in a way that has
“strong visual and erotic impact” and connotes availability and exudes will-
ingness (p. 397). In Episode 17 (‘Children Will Listen’), Gabrielle’s priorities
are reasserted: “There were many things Gabrielle Solis knew for certain. She
knew red was her color. She knew diamonds went with everything and she
knew men were all the same.”

The Cantina Girl in Gabrielle thrives on and feels validated by attention to
her appearance. In nearly every episode she is shown working out or on her
way to or back from doing so. While Gabrielle wants her affair with John to be
a secret, she does not mind attention and admiration from others. For
example, in Episode 4, she asks John, her 17-year-old “gardening toy boy
lover,” (Papps, 2005, p. 21), “Why are your friends staring at me? Did you tell
them about us?” John exclaims, “No! They’re staring because they think you’re
hot.” Gabrielle replies, smiling, “Oh! Okay!” (Cherry, Spezialy, & Melman,
2004). In Episode 5 (Cunningham, 2004), Gabrielle’s vanity is apparent when
she assures her friend Susan that she knows when people aren’t looking
at her: “Honey, trust me. When they’re not staring at me, I notice.”

Although the Solis’s may be the wealthiest couple on Wisteria Lane, they
often do not seem equal to their money. Gabrielle spends with abandon until
she realizes there is none left. Carlos’ sole focus is business and money and
how to get more of each, even to the point of crime. The tension between
Carlos and Gabrielle around power and autonomy are exaggerated examples
of macho/machismo—macha/marianisma, or what Del Castillo (1998, p. 499)
called Mexican gender ideology in which “the family is hierarchical in struc-
ture . . . men have authority over women and the husband has authority over
his wife” (p. 499). Gabrielle struggles to be a modern Latina, whereas Carlos
holds a more traditional view about female—male power relationships.
Carlos not only believes he “purchased” Gabrielle as a business arrangement,
but also that he is entitled to renegotiate their arrangement after the fact.
How much of herself did Gabrielle “sell” to Carlos? In Episode 8 (Murphy & Shaw, 2004), that subject comes up in front of dinner guests:

Carlos: “Can our lives have any meaning if all we ever do is buy stuff?”
Gabrielle: “That depends on what we buy.”
Carlos: “I want a child.”
Gabrielle: “In case you’ve forgotten, before we got married, we made a deal. No kids!”
Carlos: “Yeah, well, deals were meant to be renegotiated.”
Gabrielle: “Well, we’re not negotiating my uterus.”

Gabrielle surprises Carlos with her demonstration of independence and clarity. She has the last say, which does not go over well in the possessive/submissive dance of their relationship. At the same time, this challenge sparks sexual energy between the two of them, a method of manipulation both Cantina Girl and the Vamp are well schooled in using.

Passion and Promiscuity

Bodily ownership and sex conflate in a conversation between Carlos and Gabrielle in the first episode (Cherry & McDougall, 2004). Gabrielle has been instructed that if she talks to a particular person at Mary Alice’s wake, she’s to casually mention how much he paid for her necklace. Gabrielle retorts, “Why don’t I just pin the receipt to my chest?” Undaunted, Carlos tells her to work it in, and she tells him it’s not the kind of thing that can be “worked in” to a conversation. Carlos’ comeback?

Carlos: “Why not? At the Donahue party, everyone was talking mutual funds and you found a way to mention you slept with half of the Yankee outfielders.”
Gabrielle: “I’m telling you, it came up in the context of the conversation.”

Promiscuity, passion, sex, and risk taking are characteristics of Gabrielle as her psychic (Vamp) personality emerges (Keller, 1994). For example, Gabrielle finds her encounters with John exciting, not only for the sex, but also because she is fooling Carlos and is stimulated by fear of his wrath. She spites Carlos and his money when she lures John into the kitchen (while Carlos is outside examining the lawn; Papps, 2005, p. 21). John watches Gabrielle take off her blouse and lean back seductively on the kitchen table. She tells him the table is hand-carved, imported from Italy, and cost Carlos $23,000. John laughs and asks her, “So you wanna do it on the table this time?” Gabrielle replies, “Absolutely.”

In order to keep her affair with John going, yet secret, Gabrielle vacillates as she sacrifices for Anglo love interest John (as Carlos suspects it is not the garden John is tending). In the middle of the Tanaka party, for
example, Gabrielle-the-Vamp makes sure her husband is well supplied with alcohol, and rushes home to mow the lawn. Wearing an elegant evening gown and spiky high heels, the Suffering Senorita pulls the lawn mower out of the garage and, under cover of darkness, frantically mows, rushes back to the party, no worse for wear (except for the telltale leaf she removes from her hair moments before returning, flirtatiously, to her husband’s side).

Sexual passion conflates with violence in exchanges between Gabrielle and Carlos in later episodes. Between growing jealousy, anxiety about going to prison, and the death of his mother, Carlos becomes increasingly agitated and physically aggressive toward Gabrielle. In Episode 12 (Black & Grossman, 2004), Carlos returns from his first prison stint. Gabrielle is informed that, because of his electronic monitoring device, Carlos cannot work and their accounts are frozen. She will have to bring in the money. This is not what Gabrielle signed on for. Embarrassed and frustrated she tells him “Carlos, this is not like New York where I made thousands of dollars a day modeling haute couture. I’m doing boat shows. I spend eight hours a day doing this!” The saucy, spoiled Cantina Girl throws a fit and then assumes her Vampish, vengeful, manipulative nature when Carlos tells her, “Things change!”

Gabrielle: “Yeah, I know. The Feds towed away my Maserati. My husband is a felon, and I spend my days getting groped by fat tractor salesmen at trade shows. I am well aware things change!...I like my lifestyle, and I don’t want you to kill it.”

Carlos: “Well, look around, Gabrielle, it’s already dead. And there’s nothing you can control.”

Gabrielle: “Maybe. But having a baby, that, I can control. You, I can control.”

Carlos: “Hey, you can’t talk to me like that. [She goes outside] I’m still the man of this house.”

Gabrielle: “Oh, really?”

With that said, Carlos starts to step off the front porch toward her and his ankle bracelet begins flashing and beeping. From her safe distance Gabrielle sarcastically shouts, ”You’re the man of the house? You can’t even leave it!” Taunting him, she holds up a piece of meat, dangles it over her open mouth, and drops it slowly into her mouth. Her Vampish, predatory rebellion conflicts with Carlos’ already threatened Machismo.

Carlos is convinced Gabrielle will leave him when he returns to prison. She promises she will not (although the look in her eye tells the viewer she has other ideas). At this point, Carlos begins tampering with Gabrielle’s birth control pills, convinced a child will keep them together. He has badgered her about this, egged on by his mother, Juanita, who he calls Mamá and occasionally speaks Spanish with, much to Gabrielle’s irritation. The tension between Mamá Solis and Gabrielle is consistent throughout the season. The matriarch feels dethroned by her son’s gorgeous wife. Juanita, who
now lives with the Solis’s, drives Gabrielle crazy, watching her every move and “watching her Mexican soap opera[s],” reminding viewers this is Latino family after all. In a scene from Episode 5 (“Come In, Stranger”), we have this exchange:

Gabrielle: “You know, Juanita, this is so like you. I invite you on a nice shopping trip, and you find ways to upset me.”

Mama Solis: “Oh, you didn’t invite me. I invited myself. You keep looking at your watch. Is there someplace you have to be?”

Gabrielle: “No! You know, and for the record, I am not one of those women who has a hole in her heart that can only be filled by a baby. I like my life a lot. It’s very fulfilling.”

Mama Solis “Excuse my daughter-in-law. She’s very (to a fellow customer): fulfilled.”

In no time at all (in fact, in the next episode) the fertile Gabrielle is pregnant, ordinarily a manipulative ploy of the Vamp. She blames the now deceased Juanita for messing with her birth control pills. But, more importantly, who is the father? John? Carlos? A definitive behavior of the promiscuous Cantina and Vamp stereotypes. In Episode 13 (Etten & Sanford, 2004), John finds out the baby might be his and proposes to Gabrielle. She declines, leaving him, in true Vamp fashion.

Gabrielle: “I don’t know. You know, every once in a while, even I want to do the right thing.”

John: “Mrs. Solis, I love you so much! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Gabrielle: “Honestly, no. John, you’re a toy. A sweet, dumb toy, so you might as well go to college, because you and me, no future!”

In Episode 18 (Murphy & Shaw, 2004), the tables are turned as Gabrielle’s manipulation of Carlos backfires. He does not trust her and she does not trust him. Carlos insists she sign a post-nuptial agreement stating that, should she divorce him while he is in prison, she will get nothing. She however, tells him knows about his secret bank account in the Cayman Islands and taunts him with “so if I were you, Carlos, I wouldn’t mention the words divorce, trust, post-nup ever again. You don’t want to piss me off.” As she walks away, Carlos grabs a vase and throws it against the wall, shattering it. Her response? “I know, baby. It hurts to lose.”

The tit-for-tat exchange of threats continue as Carlos again tries to get Gabrielle to sign the post-nup, this time through threat of physical violence. She realizes he has moved the funds out of the Cayman Islands account, but
still refuses to sign the document. He gets angrier, she turns to run, Carlos chases her, grabs Gabrielle, picks her up, slams her down in a chair at the table, forcibly grabs her hand, puts the pen in it (again controlling her body) and makes her sign. No longer does Gabrielle’s mental manipulation of Carlos work—he is on to her. This Suffering Senorita’s promise or use of sex to manipulate no longer works.

Gabrielle: “Let me go. Ah! Stop! You’re hurting me. Carlos!”
Carlos: “Sign it. SIGN IT!”

Gabriel

Later that night, in bed, they exchange other threats:

Gabrielle: “If you ever hurt me again, I will kill you.”
Carlos: “If you ever leave me for another man, I’ll kill you.”
Gabrielle: “Boy, with all this passion, isn’t it a shame that we’re not having sex?”

During the first season of *DH*, the Gabrielle Solis character transmogrifies from Cantina Girl to Suffering Senorita to Vamp. In the process, she does not lose any of the characteristics of the individual types; rather, as her character develops, the trio comes together as she becomes a fully realized hot Latina stereotype. In her public life, the actor Eva Longoria picks up where Gabrielle leaves off. In her off screen appearances, Longoria, the “Latina temptress” (Papps, 2005, p. 21), does little to dispel a view of her behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs as identical to Gabrielle’s. For example, in a magazine interview (in which she was later proclaimed the number 1 out of 100 sexiest women), Longoria said, “There’s something very sexy about being submissive. Because your guard is down, you have to totally surrender to something like that” (Maximonline.com, 2003, ¶3). She plays the fantasy card when she admits she dresses a lot like her on-screen role: “I wear G-strings every day, all the time. I actually don’t even own a full-bottom pair of underwear. I also love lingerie, and I love high heels, but I prefer total nakedness overall. That, to me, is so much sexier” (Maximonline.com, 2003, ¶3).

Because I’m Worth It

In late 1990s publicity, celebrity A-list Jennifer Lopez stated she is an “actress who is Latin—not a Latin actress as in one who just does Latina roles” (Beltrán, 2002, p. 77). While this might have been part of a public relations strategy to position Lopez as an actor, moving away from previous publicity about her buttocks, Longoria presents a public and media persona consistent with her hot Latina *DH* role. In an interview, Longoria responded to the question “What’s the best thing about being a woman?” in a way consistent with Keller’s (1994) stereotypical “triplets” in her *DH* role:
Everything, everything. The sexiness that we get to exude. The femininity of having soft skin. The desire of always wanting to be pretty and put on make-up and wear heels. I love being a woman. I love shopping. I love wearing dresses and heels and jewelry. I love being sexy and feeling sexy. But the best thing about being a woman is the power we have over men. (oyemag.com, 2005)

In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Longoria was described as “the hottest, juiciest of the Wisteria Lane housewives” who, “when she isn’t shopping or mowing the front lawn in a pink party gown, she’s doing the nasty with her seventeen-year-old hunk of a gardener.” In response to the question, “What was the best sex you had all year?” in Gabrielle-esque vamp form she replies,

> Probably with my vibrator. I own two. I have the rabbit one, and I give that as a gift all the time to other girls for a birthday or the like. It’s the best gift to give: an orgasm. And if I can’t do it for ya, I’ll give you the tools to succeed! I have one rabbit and a Pocket Rocket. (Hedegaard, 2005)

Longoria’s sexy girl-ness transcends her role in *DH* in the advertising arena. Wearing a black skin-tight, criss-cross backed evening gown she longingly and liquidly lounges on a white bedspread, slithering forward and rolling from stomach to back extolling the virtues of L’Oreal’s VIVE shampoo. This commercial is the first among many she will do as the first and only Latina spokes model for the world’s largest cosmetic company (Foster, 2005, p. 30) as she lends her name and body to the beauty product monolith’s array of goods (L’Oreal, 2005). Longoria went with the company because, “L’Oreal is one of the few companies that really reflect my values. Their company philosophy and their legendary phrase ‘Because I’m Worth It,’ go hand-in-hand with who I am as a person. This is it, the best, the culmination of an amazing year” (Femalefirst.com, 2005).

Thirty-year-old Longoria “joins a bevy of beauties” who have contracted with L’Oreal, including Andi MacDowell, Beyoncé Knowles, and Jennifer Aniston (Fashionspot.com, 2005). Although Longoria may have followed Aniston’s footsteps to the door of the house of L’Oreal, it was to Aniston’s bedroom she volunteered her services. Intended as humor in light of publicity surrounding the Jennifer Aniston/Brad Pitt split (allegedly over Aniston’s unwillingness, and Pitt’s desire, to have children) Longoria joined other American women in donning a pink “I’ll have Brad’s babies” t-shirt. Friends and fans were shocked by Longoria’s lapse in judgment. She later apologized for the display of poor taste and insult to Aniston. What is interesting, however, is Longoria was keeping in character by playing the happy-when-pregnant hot Latina Cantina Girl stereotype.

Longoria’s public appearances do much to bolster her onscreen role. Voted by *Variety* as one of the “Ten New Faces of Fall” (quoted in torontofashion.com, 2004), she extends her seductive reach to daytime and evening
(mostly female) viewing audiences with an appeal (and giggle) that will inevitably include men. Good marketing? Sure. However, as predicted by Accumulation Theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998), the combination of on-screen, off-screen, and in-print activities work to reinforce the hot Latina stereotype. In an interview, in defense of her role and as a response to criticism of perpetuating Latina stereotypes, Longoria stated:

I don’t think they’re detrimental. It’s great to be represented in any way. Ricardo Montalban said something about that in the documentary The Brown Screen. He said, “What’s wrong with being a Latin Lover? Why is that a bad stereotype? I consider that a compliment.” Same thing with Latinas always being cast as the sexy girl. It’s a good thing! (oyemag.com/eva.html, 2005).

DISCUSSION

Gabrielle is characterized as a strong and willful Cantina/Senorita/Vamp who knows what she wants and goes for it. However, the hero and role model potential of this character is quickly undermined by this stereotypical presentation imbued with many of the qualities that have, for decades, perpetuated dehumanizing and limiting beliefs about Latina morality and potentiality. In Eva Longoria’s portrayal of Gabrielle Solis, the Latina stereotype genderizes and racializes physical appearance as well as character development. She is sexy, sultry, promiscuous, sexually experienced (to keep her lover John from seeing another girl, Gabrielle tells him “I can do things to you that she can’t even pronounce”), quick tempered, materialistic, devious, desiring, not inclined to work, has an Anglo love interest for whom she will risk almost anything to keep, becomes pregnant quickly, uses her wiles to manipulate men, wears flashy, brightly colored and tight-fitting clothing she hopes people will notice, because “she’s worth it.” Harris (2005) described Longoria in a way that demonstrates the synthesization of Keller’s (1994) Cantina Girl, Suffering Senorita, and Vamp as in Gabrielle.

On the surface, it seems ideal to pair one of Hollywood’s most narcissistic actresses with L’Oreal, a company whose slogan is “Because I’m worth it.” But, as Longoria’s diva reputation worsens—she recently complained that photographers don’t fuss over her because she looks good in any light—hawking a product that underscores her vanity is hardly a savvy move. That said, Longoria’s $2-million spokes model gig proves that beauty isn’t the only thing that defines her life. Having a copious amount of money is meaningful to her, too. (p. D3)

Based on this analysis, the role of Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria) contributes to and perpetuates long-standing stereotypes of Latinas in
American movies and television programs as identified by Keller (1994). Longoria’s off-screen activities and antics further reinforce and conflate the character with the person. It is often difficult to determine whether the media are referring to Longoria’s character or to her as celebrity when they describe her as a “firecracker” (Fernandez, 2004, ¶32), a “hot tempered siren” (Wittstock, 2005, ¶12), and one of the “titular horny homemakers” (FHM.com, 2004, ¶1). Referring to Longoria’s “coverage” in its October 2004 issue, FHM magazine states, “Given the theme of Eva’s new show, it seemed only appropriate that the 29-year-old’s FHM photo shoot involved doing domestic work in her delicates. ‘It wasn’t a new experience—that’s standard operating procedure in my household,’ she says. ‘Who doesn’t do housework in their underwear?’” (FHM.com, 2004). Referring to her then-upcoming film role opposite Michael Douglas, she said, “I’m excited to not have to wear (just) bras and panties” (Keck, 2005, ¶8). Pre-premiere publicity for Longoria’s Sentinel role tells audiences, “Longoria looks forward to wearing clothes onscreen,” and “she’s thrilled she won’t have to be flashing her flesh as she constantly does in hit TV show Desperate Housewives” (¶8). Flesh flashing is a key component of Longoria’s on-screen and in-press promotion.

This study of the character Gabrielle Solis in Desperate Housewives and self-presentation and media constructions of actor Eva Longoria demonstrates that not only does Gabrielle represent Kellner’s typology, but also that Longoria speaks and behaves in ways consistent with that role. Gabrielle is Cantina Girl—she teases, flirts, is available as a sexual object, wears very high heels, short skirts, large earrings, and red lips. She is Senora—she is married, starts out the “good wife,” and yet goes bad when she takes on an Anglo love interest who sparks physical violence between Carlos and John. And she is Vamp. Gabrielle uses her body, her sexuality, and her intelligence in ways that manipulates men to her advantage. She might slip up a few times, but she largely succeeds in getting what she wants whatever the price.

The representational politics of Gabrielle/Eva position the Latina character in a way that functions to provide justification for a narrow perception resulting in a continuation of the hot Latina stereotype. This “mainstreaming” of stereotypical images exists in a climate that supports hegemonic ideals of Anglo (White) heterosexual, male privilege (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). As it largely remains unchallenged by alternative portrayals, the Hot Latina stereotype takes on the appearance of naturalness. Accumulation Theory posits that if the same or similar image or information is presented consistently, persistently, and is corroborated in different media forms, it is likely to be have long term, powerful effects. Stereotyping is one of these effects. The character Gabrielle Solis and the actor Eva Longoria conflate in the public eye, as both on-screen and off-screen women are consistent with one another. If Anglos, by way of media-supplied information, come not to expect much of Latinas and, because of the function
of internalized oppression, Latinas do not expect much for themselves, the cycle of oppression continues uninterrupted.

The consequences of perpetuating stereotypes go beyond obvious manifestations such as name-calling or facile characterizations, rather they drive Latina educational challenges and disparities (Hughes, 2004), contribute to disparate levels of domestic violence (Hyde, 2005; King, 1974), depression, internalized oppression (Román, 2000; Valdivia, 1998, 2000), as well as “distressing legal and societal treatment” (Bender, 2003, p. 1). Hence, understanding media-engendered stereotypical images are, at least in part, responsible for the denial of opportunity for Latinas in their struggle for identity.

NOTES

1. In this article, the terms Hispanic, Latino, and Latina are used interchangeably as is consistent with marketing, media, and government terminology (Davila, 2002).

2. She made this announcement before Maid in Manhattan (2002) was released.

REFERENCES


