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“Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll”: On Chonga Girls and Sexual-Aesthetic Excess

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Often described by Latinas/os in South Florida as a low-class, slutty, tough, and crass young woman, the hypervisible figure known as the “chonga” is practically invisible in feminist scholarship. This paper examines the meanings associated with the chonga identity and the emergence of visual representations of chongas in order to understand how these bodies produce and reflect discourses about Latina girls’ sexuality, ethnicity, and class. I argue that the sexual-aesthetic excess of chonga bodies complicates dichotomies of “good” versus “bad” girls and signifies non-normative politics that trouble the disciplining of behavior and dress for girls of color. I offer sexual-aesthetic excess as a concept in order to theorize modes of dress and comportment that are often considered “too much”: too ethnic, too sexy, too young, too cheap, too loud.

My arguments are based on a questionnaire regarding chongas that I administered to South Florida residents and analyses of related visual representations. The questionnaire responses illustrate the meanings associated with the chonga identity and reflect the discursive field in which images of these young women circulate. The chonga images and questionnaire responses inform each other, as there is a recursive relationship between social discourse and visual production.

Keywords: Chonga / girls’ sexuality / Latina / body / representation / sexual-aesthetic excess

I was wearing tight black leggings under a fitted olive green sweater dress with a “v” neckline. My shoes were vintage style bone white peep-toe heels. Half of my hair was streaked with chunky blonde highlights at the time and it was flat-ironed straight. I had thick black eyeliner on and brick-red lipstick. This was how I was dressed on the day a student told me, “Miss, you look like a Bratz doll.” My initial response to the comment was that of everyone else in the room, laughter, and I enjoyed following the girls’ jovial, yet intense debate over whether this was an accurate description. However, I found myself thinking about this characterization of me later that evening, “Was it a joke? Do I really look like one of those tacky dolls? She must have been kidding . . .”

I was teaching an art workshop with girls at the Miami-Dade County Juvenile Detention Center along with the GisMo artist collective that day. As an art teacher, I felt my style reflected my eclectic tastes. I did not associate myself with the “type” of woman who would look like a

Bratz doll the multi-racial, mass-marketed dolls with heavy make-up and miniskirts marketed to young girls. Why was I interpreted as such? Why was this comparison so objectionable to me? As a girl of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent raised in the Latina/o enclaves of West New York, New Jersey, and Miami, Florida, I “knew” what Bratz-type women looked like. They *did not* look like me. I came from a middle-class family, attended a private Catholic elementary school, and was college educated. *They*, on the other hand, were girls who hung out on the street, did not do well in school, and dressed in clothes that were cheap and too revealing.

The self-evaluation sparked by the student's description of me, which she qualified through my make-up, heels, form-fitting clothes, and highlighted hair, prompted me to examine my unacknowledged biases toward the Latina women my mother trained me *not* to emulate. Many of the girls I worked with in the detention center and other institutions such as drug rehabilitation centers could be perceived as exemplifying this “bad” subjectivity, yet I found through the powerful artwork they produced in my classes that these stereotypes did not speak to their intelligence, complexity, and creative negotiation of a culture in which they are marginalized by gender, race, class, and ethnicity. I also learned of my own social proximity to them via appearance. If the girls thought I looked like a Bratz doll, who is to say that men who harassed me as I walked the streets of Miami, or the older women who disdainfully looked at me when I was a pregnant nineteen-year-old, have not viewed me in the same way? Other than perhaps my thick-rimmed glasses, does anything separate me from such women as my body navigates social spaces?

My “Bratz doll” conversation with the girls took place while a discourse on “chongas” was beginning to circulate in the local print, broadcast, and Web media. Chongas have been compared to Bratz dolls because of their style of dress and “heavy” application of make-up.¹ Often described by Latinas/os in South Florida as a low-class, slutty, tough, and crass young woman, the hypervisible figure known as the chonga is practically invisible in feminist or cultural studies scholarship. This paper examines the meanings associated with the chonga identity in South Florida and the emergence of visual representations of chongas on the Internet, print media, and contemporary visual art in order to understand how these chonga bodies produce and reflect discourses about Latina girls' sexuality, ethnicity, and class. I argue that the *sexual-aesthetic excesses* found in these representations complicate dichotomies of “good” versus “bad” girls and also express non-normative politics that trouble the disciplining of behavior and dress for girls of color.

Methods

My arguments in this paper are based on a questionnaire regarding chongas that I administered to South Florida² residents in 2008, as well as an interrogation of visual representations of chongas. The questionnaire responses illustrate the meanings associated with chonga identity and reflect the discursive field in which images of these young women circulate in South Florida. The chonga images and questionnaire responses inform each other, as there is a recursive relationship between social discourse and visual production. This two-pronged methodology provides a context for situating the chonga figure that is just emerging in scholarship.

I take an expansive approach to selecting the images under consideration here, as I examine visual media that mobilize the term "chonga" in addition to works that do not, yet whose subjects "fit" the discursive framework of the figure via sartorial style. I will conduct visual analyses of the widely-viewed YouTube video, *Chongalicious*, artist Luis Gispert's *Cheerleaders* photographs, and the GisMo artist collective's multi-media installation *"Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll."*

There is no explicit connection or relationship among *Chongalicious*, *Cheerleaders*, and *"Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll"* other than their representations of "chonga-esque" young women. These works are three distinct instances of representation with dissimilar audiences and producers. I will examine how the production, circulation, and reception of these images have varying political valences.

Latina Bodies in Visual Culture

Filmmaker and scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) notes the critical role visual representations play in organizing social relations in the United States in her statement, "The stakes are indeed high—the bodies of women, people of color, and sexual minorities signify reproductive futures and new morphologies of the family and American national identity" (13). Latina/o cultural and communications studies scholars also focus on visual representations due to the material ramifications of the biopolitics Shimizu identifies (Foucault 1978; Briggs 2002; Calafell and Delgado 2004). They demonstrate how representations of Latinas structure social relations in the United States by fashioning an exotic, "tropicalized" other in response to ongoing panic over Latina reproduction and immigration (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997; Mendible 2007; Gutiérrez 2008). Most literature, however, analyzes images of Latina celebrities such as Celia Cruz, Jennifer Lopez, and Salma Hayek. This article contributes to scholarship on representations of Latina bodies in visual culture by

interrogating the vernacular figure of the chonga, who is not represented by a well-known actress or music performer. The chonga figure warrants examination as it is an emerging "icon" that is producing and circulating discourses about Latina young women (Molina Guzmán and Valdivia 2004).

Communications scholar Isabel Molina Guzmán (2007) has shown how Latinas are often portrayed as "disorderly bodies" that are emotionally and sexually excessive. In "Disorderly Bodies and Discourses of Latinidad in the Elián González Story," she describes the "visual excess" that marked the news coverage of Marisleysis González, the aunt of Elián González, a young Cuban boy who was at the center of a high-profile immigration and custody case in 2000. Molina Guzmán (2007) notes how the "excesses" the media focused on, such as Marisleysis's public crying, long acrylic finger nails, and form-fitting clothes marked her as a brown, unlawful body that did not fit the framework of a "proper" U.S. subject. The mobilization of Marisleysis's excessive body discursively unraveled the privileged, model minority status of Cuban Americans and helped to frame them as "bad," disorderly subjects who held impassioned demonstrations on the streets of Miami following the decision to return Elián to Cuba.

The hyperbolic, stereotypical representations of Latinas often found in visual culture are measured against an imagined (white/middle class) construct of U.S. citizenship. Latina bodies are read as out of control and used against the communities they "represent." Efforts to counter these constructions in Latina/o communities is an internalization of technologies of discipline that center on policing women's bodies (Foucault 1977). As Latinas, are we hoping, as I did, not to be confused with those "other" women?

As Shimizu (2007) states, "To panic about being identified within perversity can too easily lead us to strive toward self-restricting normalcy or the impossible constraints of sexual purity" (5). I focus on the *sexual-aesthetic excess* that marks the chonga body and propose that rather than critique visual representations of these young women for reproducing negative stereotypes, we read them as indexing ethnic pride, personal confidence, and non-normative sexuality. I offer *sexual-aesthetic excess* as a concept in order to theorize styles of dress and comportment that are often considered "too much"; too ethnic, too sexy, too young, too cheap, too loud.

Sexual-aesthetic excess is akin to Shimizu's (2007) concept of the *productive performance of perversity*. In her study *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, she focuses on representations of Asian/American women in pornography, independent/mass-market films, and theater. Describing her theoretical approach, Shimizu (2007) notes,

Productive perversity involves identifying with "bad" images, or working to establish a different identity along with established sexual images so as to expand racial agendas beyond the need to establish normalcy and standardization. To engage hypersexuality as a politically productive perversity pays attention to the formulations of sexual and racial identity that critique normative scripts for sexually and racially marginalized subjects. (21)

Like Asian/American women, Latinas are subject to hypersexualization in visual media from popular discourses surrounding Jennifer Lopez's ass to more dated representations of voluptuous dancers balancing fruit on their heads (Barrera 2002; Mendible 2007). Through engaging chonga images, I demonstrate the need for a reevaluation of hypersexual representations in order to trouble academic work that aims to "empower" girls of color by disassociating them from harmful stereotypes to the point that their sexual agency becomes effaced and viewed as primarily dictated by males and mainstream culture. My conceptualization of agency here draws from anthropologist Laura Ahearn's (2001) definition of it as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (112). Sexuality cannot be divorced from social context, yet it must be recognized that girls play various roles in framing the meanings associated with their sexual identities and practices.

Chongalicious Definition

Chola
Chusma
Chocha
Chula
Chonga

These Spanish terms, some emerging in the United States among Latinas/os, index female sexuality. Roughly translated, in order, they denote a street girl ("homegirl"), loud/gossipy/lower-class woman, vagina (or "pussy"), "cute chick," and slut/thug girl. Their lexical similarities point to gender and class inscriptions that are articulated and reproduced through everyday speech in Latina/o communities. Such terms interpellate specifically marked bodies in primarily urban locations (Miami, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles). To employ the Althusserian (1971) term, women whose dress and behavior are interpreted as sexual and low/working class, are *hailed*, literally (in everyday social interaction, for example, "Oye/Hey mami!") and discursively, as representative of these marginalized or "bad" subjectivities.

Performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz (1999) has described the chusma identity as antithetical to "standards of bourgeois comportment":

Chusmeria is, to a large degree, linked to a stigmatized class identity. Within Cuban culture, for instance, being called *chusma* might be a technique for the middle class to distance itself from the working class; it may be a barely veiled racial slur suggesting that one is too black; it sometimes connotes gender nonconformity. In the United States, the epithet *chusma* also connotes recent immigration and a general lack of “Americanness,” as well as excessive nationalism—that one is somewhat over the top about her Cubanness. The sexuality of individuals described as *chusmas* is also implicated. The prototypical *chusma*’s sexuality is deemed excessive and flagrant—again, subverting conventions. (182; emphasis in original)

The *chonga*, a more recent term that appears to have stemmed from the Cuban-American community, is in many ways a younger version of the *chusma*, or the *chusma-as-teenager*.

The *chonga* finds a Chicana counterpart in the *chola* (“homegirl”). In her essay, “Re-Imagining Chicana Urban Identities in the Public Sphere, Cool Chuca Style,” Rosa Linda Fregoso (1999) describes the absence of young women interpellated by these terms in feminist scholarship,

Within the Chicana feminist deconstruction of Chicano familial discourse, the figure of the *pachuca*, *chola*, or *homegirl* is inadvertently overlooked as an agent of oppositional practices, despite her notable contribution to the politics of resistance. (78)

I am situating this essay in the critical “*chusma*” and “*chola*” theorizations of Muñoz (1999) and Fregoso (1999), in addition to Shimizu’s (2007) readings of productive perversity, as they look beyond the negative connotations of racialized sexual subjectivities to uncover non-normative politics.

Though no “official” definition of the *chonga* exists, she entered the realm of popular discourse in South Florida through the YouTube video *Chongalicious*, which presents a characterization that resonates in this area. The work was posted on the site www.youtube.com on April 1, 2007, and tallied almost one million views within several months (over four million to date). *Chongalicious* parodied the 2006 song *Fergalicious* by pop music performer Fergie, which likely bolstered its rapid local circulation.

The video was created by Latina teens, Mimi Davila and Laura Di Lorenzo, then drama students attending an arts magnet high school in the Aventura area of North Miami-Dade on a night in which they were hanging out at Davila’s house.³ The girls neither anticipated nor initially worked toward garnering widespread attention. What would have just been a silly faux music video circulating among a group of friends for laughs now has the potential of entering popular culture in the era of YouTube. The viral circulation of videos from inbox to inbox and social networking site to social networking site spurs the creation of “everyday” celebrities.

In *Chongalicious*, Davila and Di Lorenzo don tight outfits and vigorously move their behinds to electronic beats as they enact the sexual-aesthetic excess of the chonga script. The clothing that serves as their "costumes" consist of a basketball jersey worn as a form-fitting mini-dress, a one-piece spandex short jumper, metallic gold flip flops and plastic mesh slippers with sequined flowers, worn with white cotton ankle socks. The girls wear large hoop earrings and dark red lipstick. Their hair is wrapped in buns worn high atop their heads and the bottom portion of their hair runs down to their shoulders in waves.

The opening shot of the video is a close up of the girls' shaking buttocks, they then turn to face the viewer and begin to perform the *Chongalicious* song with animated hand gestures and simulated thick, generic, Latina/o accents. A schoolmate recorded the performance in the interior of Davila's home and outdoors in a housing complex. The work emulates the genre of the music video through the emphasis on the girls' dancing and montage of varied scenes edited to synchronize with the song. An attempt is made to screen the domestic space, with limited success, by framing the performers against plain white walls. The majority of the shots are close-ups and capture scenes of the girls looking into mirrors while styling their hair and make-up, using glue for gel and Sharpie pens for lip liner, flirting with a young man on the street, pushing each other around, and sloppily eating pizza and smearing it over their mouths. These hyperbolic, slapstick parodies serve to convey the chonga's over-indulgent nature and "excessive" or trashy application of beauty products. The performers speak in the "voice" of chongas and address the viewer/camera with a confrontational attitude throughout the work. This is a sample of the lyrics they perform in unison:

*Chongalicious definition arch my eyebrows high
 They always starin' at my booty and my panty line
 You could see me, you could read me
 Cuz my name is on my earrings
 Girls got reasons why they hate me
 Cuz they boyfriends wanna date me
 Chongalicious
 But—I aint promiscuous
 And if you talkin' trash, I'll beat you after class
 I blow besos—muuuuaaah!⁴
 I use my Sharpie lip line
 And ain't no other chonga glue her hair like mine
 Chongalicious*

Although they claim not to be promiscuous, the lyrics nevertheless typify chongas as sexualized, antagonistic toward other girls, violent, and hyper-visible ("You could see me, you could read me"). In a later segment of the video, the performers make references to the chonga's lower-class status

by describing her as “ghetto” and stating that she buys her “bling” at the flea market for \$2.99.⁵

Chongalicious crossed over from YouTube to traditional print, radio, and television outlets in South Florida. It was featured in a news segment by the internationally broadcast Spanish-language network *Univision* and the song the girls performed in the video frequently rotated on Miami’s urban music station Power 96. Despite its seeming status as a media-generated “sensation,” *Chongalicious* circulated virally via the MySpace and Live Journal pages of locals prior to its intensive media blitz. A host of spin-offs and parodies of the video appeared on YouTube such as *Preppylicious*, *Hoochieicious*, *No More Chongalicious!!!*, and Davila and Di Lorenzo’s sequel video *I’m in Love with a Chonga* (the number of hits these videos have attained, in the hundreds of thousands, seem minimal compared with those of *Chongalicious*). The coverage on chongas, particularly in Spanish language media, has persisted since 2007. An episode of the *Univision* talk show *Cristina* that featured the *Chongalicious* performers aired in January 2009. Reactions to the YouTube video itself and the coverage it attracted have ranged from celebration to disgust among South Florida residents.

Production value was added to the do-it-yourself aesthetic of the video in the photographs that appeared in the feature article on *Chongalicious* in Miami’s alternative weekly paper *The New Times*. The front cover features Davila and Di Lorenzo wearing matching outfits and significantly more jewelry, make-up, and hair styling products than in the video (figure 1). The use of a plain background signals that the girls are performing, as they are not embedded in a social context. The bright pink hue of the backdrop further indexes them as gendered and infantile. Their “fake” and “immature” personalities are depicted through exaggerated facial expressions, such as wide-open eyes, and hand gestures that accentuate their long acrylic fingernails. In another photograph, they face the camera as if looking into a mirror and apply make-up while struggling to hold the beauty products that are spilling out of their arms. In *The New Times* story reporter Tamara Lush joins the girls during trips to the mall and media appearances where they draw attention from passers-by and receive requests for autographs from teenage fans who recognize them as parodic characters.

The Meaning(s) of “Chonga”

The emerging hypervisibility of the chonga body in South Florida prompted me to develop a questionnaire regarding chongas and the *Chongalicious* video that I distributed through the Web via e-mail from my location in central New Jersey to friends and family members who live in Miami. Respondents were instructed to submit completed questionnaire forms

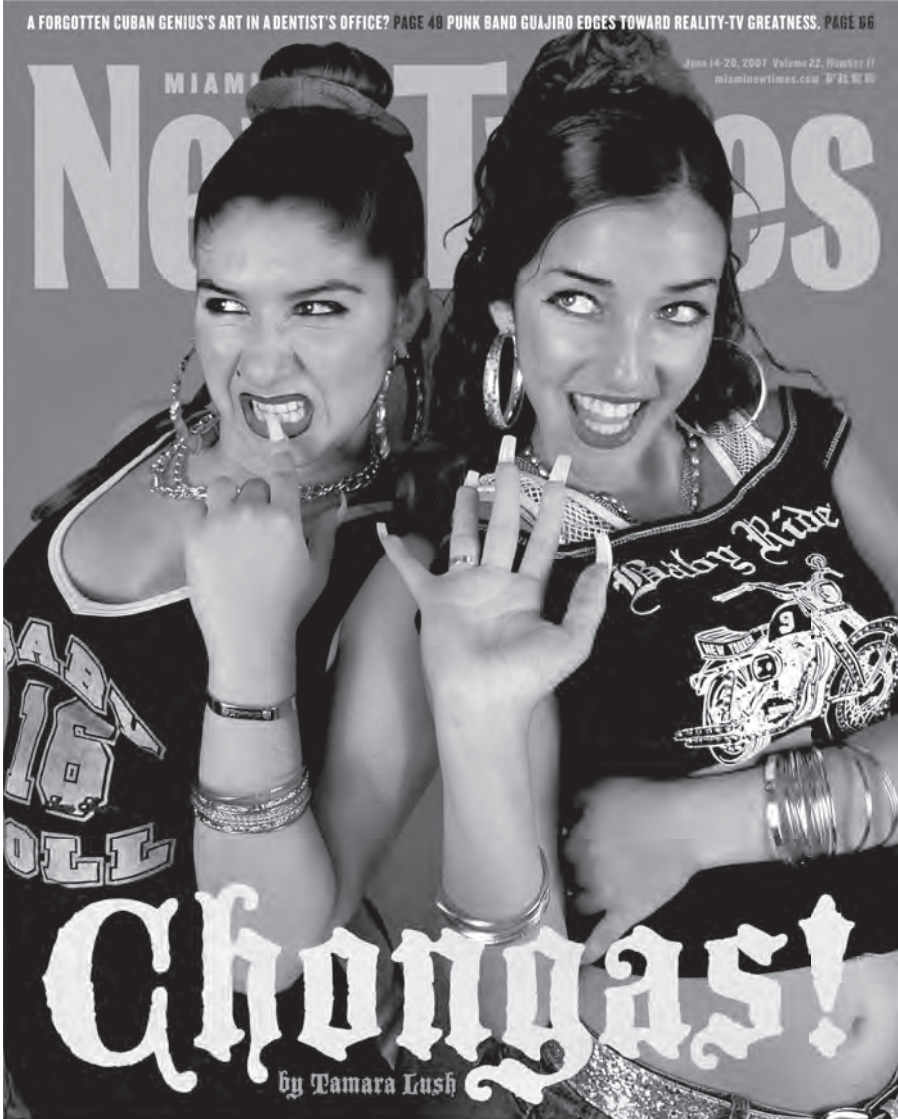


Figure 1

to me via e-mail. It developed into a snowball sample, as my initial pool of subjects aided me in recruiting additional participants via e-mail, Facebook messages, and MySpace posts. For example, my brother, who at the time the study was conducted was an eighteen year-old senior in a Miami-Dade County high school, recruited fellow eighteen-year-old peers to participate through his MySpace account. In this way, the circulation of the survey paralleled that of the *Chongalicious* video.

The questionnaire posed questions concerning the provenance and meaning of the term “chonga” and the reception of the *Chongalicious* video. In addition to those regarding demographics (gender, race, nationality, age, and South Florida neighborhood where subjects reside) it consisted of the following questions: Have you heard the term “chonga” before? Where did you hear the term first? Do you think it is an official Spanish word? Where do you think the word came from? Who uses the term? What is a chonga?⁶ Is describing someone as a chonga positive or negative? Have you ever met anyone who describes themselves as a chonga? Have you seen the *Chongalicious* video on YouTube? How did you find out about it? Did you enjoy it? Do you think the video is a realistic representation of chongas? Do you think the video was popular?

I am approaching the responses to my questionnaire as discursive texts. In some instances, I aggregate responses in order to highlight interesting points of consensus and divergence among the participant group, yet, I do not intend for these figures to be interpreted as statistical data. While it is not possible to present my findings as symptomatic of how most Miami-ians feel about chongas or the *Chongalicious* video, they provide a window into the meanings associated with the chonga with regard to sexuality, gender, class, race, and ethnicity.

I received thirty-one responses to the *Chongalicious* questionnaire. All respondents reside in Miami-Dade County with a concentration in the middle-class neighborhoods of Westchester, South Miami, and Kendall. This may present a middle-class bias in my study that excludes poor and working class subjects who may be labeled as chongas. However, I suggest that the responses of these middle-class South Floridians can point to how the chonga identity is perceived and constructed by the dominant culture of the area. The majority of respondents (26) were female. Twenty-one participants identified themselves as Latina/o or as a specific nationality (Colombian, Dominican, etc.); over half of these specified Cuban descent. Two respondents identified as African American. Twenty-five respondents were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, the eldest respondent in the sample was thirty-four years of age (eighteen years of age being the youngest).

When asked where they first heard the term, twenty respondents stated they encountered it in school, mostly in middle school/junior high. The remainder recalled learning it from friends or public discourse in Miami. The connection articulated between exposure to the word “chonga” and the middle-school setting points to the negotiation of identity that often takes place in adolescence. Molding an identity can sometimes employ a negative process of defining oneself via the recognition of who one is *not* (Pascoe 2007; Bettie 2003). Respondents to the chonga questionnaire described how the function of the term was to identify, exclude, and deride “bad” subjects.

Most participants stated that the term is slang, not "official" Spanish. Connections to other words were proposed in response to the question regarding the provenance of "chonga," among them associations to the Chicana girls known as cholos. Links of the term to Afro-Cuban spiritual practices were also forged. One respondent posited that it could have derived from the syncretic religion, Santería. Another offered more specifically that the root of the word "chonga" might be found in *Chango*, the name of a male Yoruba deity whose Santería icon is the Catholic Saint Barbara. These racial associations suggest the status of the chonga as an "other" Cuban-American identity that is often disavowed by elite Cubans through its connection to marginalized subjects such as Afro-Cubans and African Americans via the chonga's adoption of hip-hop culture (De La Torre 2001).

Ten respondents offered that "everyone" uses the term, followed by six who stated that "chonga" primarily circulates in teenage circles. Other groups noted for use of the term included Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and people "under 40." An additional six participants suggested that "chonga" circulates among homosocial groups of women in the antagonistic mode of drawing attention to and mocking the girl identified as such ("Girls that hate on each other," "Mainly females describing other females," "Everyone who wants to offend someone else, mainly a girl"). Several respondents noted that the word is used by people who do not identify as chongas, or who were chongas prior to being "preppy." Beyond its classed white connotations, "preppy" in Miami denotes an upper-class, non-black Latina/o that lives in an exclusive area of Miami such as Coral Gables.

Twenty-four out of thirty-one respondents stated that describing someone as a chonga is negative, with others proposing that it is context specific. One respondent suggested that the chonga's negative connotation is due to the fact that it "melds all the bad Hispanic stereotypes into one word." For the most part, participants advanced that the detrimental quality of the word stems from its deriding and exclusionary function.

Eighteen respondents stated that they have encountered individuals who describe themselves as chongas. Several indicated that this was representative of a phase in their own life or that of a friend. In addressing the question, "Have you ever met anyone who describes themselves as a chonga?" one subject responded, "Yes, myself, in the mirror along with all of my adolescent friends." An eighteen-year-old subject wrote, "My best friend, lol, she used to be the biggest chonga till she met me and my friends."⁷ The portrayal of the chonga as juvenile may stem from the view that it is an identity that is passed through and sheds with maturity and social/class mobility.

Subjects who claimed they had not encountered individuals who identified as chongas made sweeping and assertive proclamations such as "no

chonga admits to being a chonga" and "no [I have not met someone who describes themselves as a chonga] . . . but sadly they are blinded," one even went as far as declaring, "If I did [encounter a self-described chonga] I'd slap them." The majority of respondents attributed little to be desired in the chonga role. She is framed as an identity antithetical to the efforts made by second and third generation Latina/o youth to assimilate into American culture. Like an embarrassing cousin one is reluctant to introduce to friends, the chonga is not a figure to be associated with, as she loudly speaks her broken English and wears all the "right" commodity items (jewelry, trendy clothes) the wrong way. The deployment of the term, and the attendant laughter it induces, can enable Latina/o teens to distance themselves from her hypersexual, hyperethnic, and under-class inscription.

The question that generated the lengthiest responses was "What is a chonga?" Twenty-nine out of thirty-one participants provided vividly detailed descriptions of a young urban female's style of dress. She was described as wearing ill-fitting clothes that were either too baggy or too tight, applying an excessive amount of gel to her hair, donning large gold hoop earrings engraved with her name in cursive lettering, using heavy eye and lip liner, and gaudy amounts of jewelry. Chongas were largely described as Latinas. Several respondents proposed that there are also white chongas (a pop culture figure like Fergie could fit into this framework due to her mode of dress). Study subjects situated chongas in middle- and lower-class areas of Miami-Dade County such as Hialeah, Sweetwater, Westchester, Cutler Ridge, and Kendall. Her class status was also articulated through descriptions of where and what she consumes. Respondents stated that she eats large amounts of fast food and shops at flea markets, U.S. Tops, and D'or—establishments that sell juniors clothing at bargain prices.

The hypersexuality of the chonga was indexed by references to her "skimpy" or "hoochie" style of dress and assertions that "they aren't homebodies" and "chill with a lot of guys." These descriptions of chonga sexuality recently proliferated through "I Love Chongas," a 2009 song by South Florida hip-hop performer KC Chopz that has rotated on the Power 96 radio station. The male performer professes his "love" for the figure through the chorus:

*That chonga last night was awfully crazy, I wished we taped it
I danced my ass off and had this chonga completely naked
Real tight jeans and hoop earrings
Chinese slippers are my thing
Went out with three, woke up with ten
Left Hialeah straight to Weston
Man I love chongas*

The sexual identity attributed to chongas is intimately connected to descriptions of their clothing, which are freighted with signifiers of class and ethnicity. Her body is read through the lens of sexual-aesthetic excess.

The chonga is portrayed as "reffy," a term used in Miami to denote recent refugees (recall Munoz's description of the hyperethnic chusma). She was framed by some respondents as being "loud," "crass," and able to master neither English nor Spanish, thus speaking "Spanglish." Other subjects described chongas as "non-intellectual" and apathetic about gaining skills and bettering themselves through education. The characteristics attributed to chongas are tinged with failure. She fails at acculturating, not being able to speak English "correctly" or without a Latina accent. Her flaunting visibility is perceived as foolish, as "they are not aware of how ridiculous they look in public." She also falls short of convincingly projecting a hip-hop-inspired attitude of toughness, as one respondent stated, she is a "girl that's fake and acts like she's from the ghetto" or a "wannabe ghetto Hispanic chick" who "tries to talk like they're from New York but never quite achieves the tone." Davila and Di Lorezno articulate the chonga's aspirations for thugdom in the *Chongalicious* lyric, "g-to the h-to the-e-t-t-o girl you ghetto."

The recurring characteristics of the chonga as un-intellectual, hyper-sexual, and lower class stems from stereotypical views regarding urban girls of color that have been circulating in the dominant culture and elite circles of Latinas/os for decades (Taylor, Veloria, and Verba 2007). *The New Times* story on the *Chongalicious* video has reinforced this view. Reporter Tamara Lush makes efforts to articulate to the reader how *unlike* chongas Davila and Di Lorenzo *really* are. Lush notes,

In character, they are brash, sexy, bold creatures. They seem self-assured rather than the moody, curious girls they really are . . . They have noticed that guys like them better as chongas, a fact that makes them more than a little depressed. Both girls get plenty of looks from guys as they walk down the street in their chonga wear—but not, for example, when they are sitting in their AP English class, wearing sweatshirts, jeans, and glasses. (30–31)

Lush continually makes references to the fact that the girls reside in Aventura in her report, an area of Miami-Dade County replete with "luxury" high-rise condominium developments and a large mall with exclusive stores and boutiques. When describing how the girls came up with the idea for the video she recounts the story of how they conversed about the "chonga-like" outfits worn by girls in the school cafeteria and secures this admission from Davila, "We were kinda making fun of them."⁸ In Lush's framework, the roles of chonga and intelligent young woman are mutually exclusive. Davila and Di Lorenzo are applauded for their clever parody and are protected from the negative ramifications of embodying

the sexual-aesthetic excess of the chonga role through allusions to their intelligence, modest form of dress, and upper-class lifestyle.

Twenty-four respondents reported they viewed *Chongalicious* on YouTube. Ten noted that they heard about it from friends. The remainder learned of it through the radio (with some specifying the Power 96 radio station), TV, and the Web, particularly MySpace comments and Live Journal entries. When asked if they enjoyed their viewing twenty subjects stated that they had, overwhelmingly because it made them laugh. Those who did not enjoy the video found it "annoying," "stupid," and a "waste of time." Fourteen subjects suggested that the video was a realistic depiction of chongas, the remaining participants stated that it was "exaggerated." Most participants (22) proposed that the video was popular. The most recurrent reasons provided for its positive reception were its accuracy of representation and reflection of Miami culture. One subject explained that the girls were glorified "as the true embodiment of the Female Miami Image."

The New Times reporter's attempts to normalize the creators of *Chongalicious* did not hinder the circulation of negative responses to the story. In a thread on the *New Times Chongalicious* article on the blog site *Miaminights* (www.miaminights.com), a user by the name of "Laura" posted a comment on June 15, 2007 that read,

I grew up with females like this and it's gross . . . how can people admire this shit? This makes me want to move away from here so bad. They're your stereotypical ghetto Hispanics who cause uproar for attention. They call themselves "Chongas," I call them ignorant.

The blogger's intense reaction points to the chonga's intimate connection to Miami as place, as she describes how the sensation generated by *Chongalicious* makes her want to relocate. If the chonga is to be so disavowed, why did many other South Floridians celebrate and enjoy their performance? In "Exploring Dora: Re-embodied Latinidad on the Web," a study on the discourse surrounding the image of the Latina Nickelodeon cartoon character Dora the Explorer, communications scholars Susan J. Harewood and Angharad N. Valdivia (2005) state,

We argue that, despite the rhetoric of "disembodiedness" that often accompanies the Web, its representations, and its participants, the body follows the narrative, repeatedly reinserting itself as a way of enforcing and policing boundaries about ethnicity and mainstream culture. Dora reminds us of the impossibility of leaving the body behind in any kind of form of popular culture because people are always bringing the body back into discussion and embodying the representational, which itself embodies dominant tropes of ethnicity. (86)

Drawing from this understanding, I posit that the *Chongalicious* video generated pleasure in viewers through the *recognition* enabled by Davila and Di Lorenzo's performance. Viewers were reminded of the embodied young women they encounter in their everyday lives and by extension, Miami as

place. The chonga exemplifies Miami the way that "booty" music by acts like 2 Live Crew typified the city in the 1990s. Like chongas, the controversial group did not project normative bourgeois roles. The hedonistic nature of their music spoke to the materialistic identity of the city as a tropical playground for the rich and famous that has been celebrated by popular performers such as Will Smith and P. Diddy. However, where 2 Live Crew is perceived as providing a cultural space for men and women to openly engage in sexual discourse, the chonga's sexuality is framed as immature and humorous. She succeeds only in arousing laughter.

Chongas in "High" Culture

The projection of chongas as Miami icons has also seeped into the contemporary art world. The works that launched the career of Cuban-American artist Luis Gispert were a series of photographs entitled *Cheerleaders* (2000–2002). The works feature a cast of multiracial young women donning cheerleader uniforms with hair, make-up, and accessories that reference chonga style such as large gold earrings, acrylic nails, stylized pony-tails, and athletic shoes. The young women enact scenes ranging from the fantastical to the mundane such as posing in luxury vehicles or floating in air as if in a trance. The poses of the subjects often cite canonical art historical narratives such as Mary mourning the body of Jesus. The *Cheerleaders* series was most recently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami in a critically acclaimed retrospective of Gispert's work that ran from April through June 2009.

In *Untitled (Chain Mouth, a.k.a. Muse Ho, figure 2)*, a work from the series, Gispert references contemporary artist Bruce Nauman's well-known photograph *Self-Portrait as Fountain* (1967–1970). Nauman's *Self-Portrait as Fountain* is a play on art historical conventions of statuesque male nudes. Often described as a reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917, Nauman playfully conflates his body with an object by capturing himself unclothed and spewing a stream of water from his mouth. Unlike Nauman, Gispert uses the body of a young woman to execute the parodic gesture in *Untitled (Chain Mouth, a.k.a. Muse Ho)* instead of his own.

The description of the subject as a "ho" in the title and the manner in which her make-up, hair, and costume are styled situates her in the discourse of sexual-aesthetic excess attributed to chongas. It is worth noting that Gispert grew up in Cuban-American enclaves in Miami, where he likely encountered "chonga" discourse. Where Nauman emits a thin jet of water from his mouth in *Self-Portrait as Fountain*, the female figure in *Untitled* expels a long, thick, phallic gold chain. The sexual athleticism on display is reinforced by the cheerleader uniform, which symbolizes a "type" of girl that is usually framed as being, like the chonga, sexually available, immature, surrounded by men, and hostile toward other girls.



Figure 2

Most of the young woman's body is decked in gold. The ornamentation makes her seem otherworldly and goddess-like, but the tattoos that ring her arm and belly button situate her in contemporary culture. The tattoos, coupled with the frosty blue eye shadow she wears, which is considered out of step with current conventions of taste and style, further signifies her as a "trashy" subject. The uniform that clothes the figure makes the quasi-mythical scene anachronistic. The lack of a contextualizing background in the photograph leaves the eye to wander ceaselessly around her body. Enticed and guided by the ornaments, the viewer, like her, is visually arrested by the body.

The green chroma-key background that frames the performances of Gispert's cheerleaders divorces them from a social milieu and indexes them as "types" on view. *The New Times* employed a similar approach in their photographs of the *Chongalicious* performers in character, which are captured against an empty background. These images represent chongas as spectacles and stock characters.

The *Cheerleader* series, completed soon after Gispert's graduation from Yale's Master of Fine Arts program, was ripe for commodification by the art world. In *The Miami Herald* article "Homecoming: Luis Gispert Returns to His Miami Roots as a Major Art World Player" published in 2007, reporter Tom Austin introduces Gispert to the reader by recounting the unpredictable success of the *Cheerleader* series. Austin explains

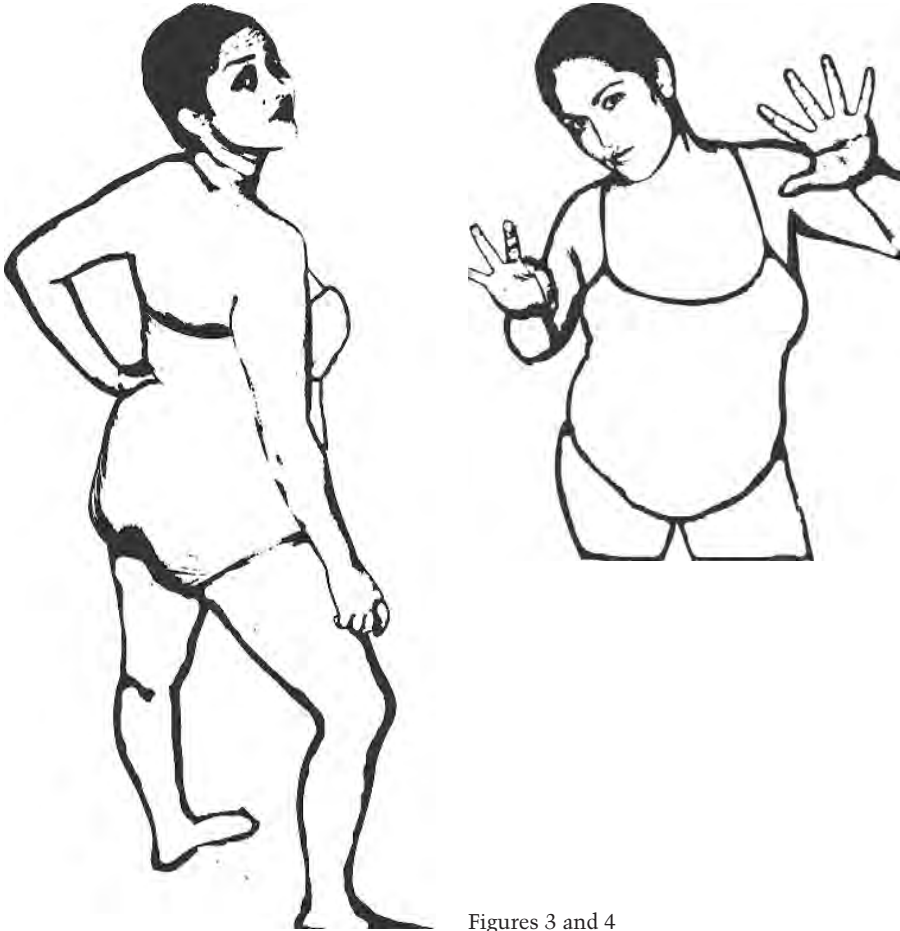
how "Gispert's image of an airborne cheerleader was featured in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, then bought by the Whitney and used in a Biennial advertising campaign." The chonga images successfully "branded" Gispert as an up-and-coming artist from the city that typifies *Scarface* action and hip-hop bling. He has since exhibited work at the Royal Academy of Art in London, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, and Guggenheim—Bilbao, among other prestigious venues. The appeal of the chonga-esque girl as a symbol of Miami facilitated the success of the artist, which the city lauds in turn through the "local success story" discourse expressed in the article in order to highlight its cultural cachet.

Perhaps representations of chongas are adopted when they are consumed in the context of "ghetto-fabulous" portrayals of Miami that are successfully mobilized in mainstream culture through video games such as *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. The pleasure garnered from the chonga's idolized visual representation, however, does not seem to be echoed in South Floridians' descriptions of her corporeal presence in their day-to-day encounters in the city, for which she is derided.

It is not my aim to frame the images in *Chongalicious* and *Cheerleaders* as "bad" representations; rather, they function here in contrast to the depiction of chonga-esque young women in the work of the GisMo collective. I am withholding such critique due to the unreliability and unknowability of representation as described by Shimizu (2007), who holds that visual media are limited in their capacity to fully capture subjects and social experiences as the creative process involves complex negotiations of meaning making among those involved. Among other methodologies, Shimizu (2007) illustrates this unknowability and unreliability through interviews with Asian/American actresses who play stereotypical roles in works such as *Miss Saigon*. Shimizu (2007) describes how the actresses exhibit agency through making subtle changes in the narrative via their real-time performances (gestures, cadences) and illustrates how feminist Asian/American artists explore "taboo" or "non-normative perverse" roles such as "whores" and "druggies" (20). Shimizu's (2007) work suggests that the models in Gispert's works may have had some influence in how they were portrayed, and would further recognize that perhaps the *Cheerleader* and *Chongalicious* images could be, or have been, affirming to girls who are hailed by the chonga script.

Imaging Sexual-Aesthetic Excess and Subjectivity

The artists of GisMo (Jessica Gispert and Crystal Molinary), who identified with chongas in their youth, were born and raised in the ethnic South Florida enclave of Hialeah-Miami Lakes, a largely working-class Cuban exile community. In *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* (2007), GisMo



Figures 3 and 4

recalled their adolescent lives. The title of the piece stemmed from the interaction that occurred during GisMo's workshop with girls at the Miami-Dade County Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) in which a student suggested that I looked like a Bratz doll. Bratz dolls have a representational affinity to chongas, as Lush noted in the *Chongalicious New Times* story, "Bratz Dolls—the sexy-eyed, thick-lipped toys that have names like strippers (Jade, Roxxy, Valentina)—are chongalike in appearance" (20). Despite the view circulating in the media and among many feminist mothers that Bratz are bad role models (which I posit stems in part from concern over white girls adopting lower-class and racialized expressions of sexuality), the multiracial dolls are a fitting point of reference for GisMo's project, as they sartorially embody the aesthetics employed by many teen girls of color in areas like Miami, New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles.



Figure 5



Figure 6

a date (figure 6). She wears a clingy patterned skirt, fitted tank top (with accentuated cleavage and belly bulge), and strappy black heels. Other characters are more modestly dressed in dark, “Gothic” inspired styles. In some works the girls portrayed the figures with wit and attitude, as in the pieces where the phrases “Don’t dislike me get like me” and “I know I’m fine what about you?” are colorfully emblazoned on the artist’s bodies and coupled with imaginative hairstyles (figures 7 and 8).

GisMo created a series of photographs based on the girls’ designs and narratives. The photographs, which were later arranged into an album by the JDC girls, were displayed in the exhibition as if they were situated in the bedroom of a Miami teen (figures 9 and 10). Visitors could sit at a bureau and view the girls’ original drawings, review the pictures in the album, and listen to popular music on headphones. The artists state,

Growing up, our bureaus were our altars, the place where we kept the relics of those we held close to our hearts. This almost insignificant space served as a sanctuary for daydreaming, reminiscing, and recollecting our thoughts. Where our bureaus were our altars—our slambooks were our bibles. In them we kept record of our friends, styles, and the minutia of everyday adolescent life. The girls at the detention center don’t get to have a bureau full of picture frames or photo albums housing their adolescent memories. In *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* we have collaborated with the girls to create a collective album of fictional Miami characters.¹⁰

GisMo’s project was part of an exhibition I curated for the Bas/Fisher Invitational alternative art space in Miami titled *MOD 11: Discourses with Incarcerated Girls*.⁹

Gispert and Molinary provided the JDC girls with paper-doll style images of themselves that the students transformed into fictional characters with accompanying narratives (figures 3, 4, 5). The girls used markers and colored pencils to design hairstyles, clothing, and accessories on the figures and envisioned everyday scenarios for their characters such as going to the movies or hanging out with friends. In “Candy Girl,” the figure of Jessica Gispert is transformed into a

sexy character preparing to go on



Figures 7 and 8

The girls framed their work in the context of friendship. In compiling and embellishing the album, they celebrated images of the artists looking bored at school, going to family parties, and modeling. In one section of the album, the girls gave the artists the names "Sam" and "Toni" and depicted them wearing trendy, alternative-rock inspired outfits (figure 11). The images capture the characters going to their lockers and photographing themselves with a digital camera. The JDC girls hand-wrote and used stickers to add phrases such as "BFF" (best friends forever) and "girlfriends" to the "Sam-n-Toni" scrapbook page.

Some would argue that the positive woman-to-woman relationships the girls depicted in *Miss* are undermined by the conformity of the scantily dressed characters they crafted to hypersexual, mainstream, male-identified standards of attractiveness by looking like chongas or "hoochies."¹¹ However, my aim is to mine the political potential of these sexual-aesthetic excesses. As sociologist Julie Bettie (2003) observes in her



Figure 9



Figures 10 and 11

ethnographic study of Mexican American girls in a California high school who employed the “chola” style in middle school before adopting a less stylized, yet still ethnically and sexually marked mode of dress:

Las chicas’ [a term the girls used as self-referents] gender performance and girl culture worked, whether by intent or not, as a strategy to reject the prep version of schooling but, despite appearances, were not necessarily designed to culminate in a heterosexual relationship. Some of the girls whose feminine performance appeared the most sexualized were actually the least interested in heterosexual relations, marriage, or children. Despite what appeared to be an obsession with heterosexual romance, a “men are dogs” theme was prevalent among them. They knew men could not be counted on to support them and any children they might have, and they desired economic independence.

And so their girl culture was less often about boys at all than about sharing in rituals of traditional femininity as a kind of friendship bonding among girls. (64)

Unlike the typological women in *Chongalicious* and the *Cheerleader* series, who seem to perform in a vacuum, the “chongas” in GisMo’s work are subjects who have relationships and are connected to place. The specificity of social context, reinforced by the manner in which the work was exhibited to encourage the interaction of viewers, makes the images difficult to categorize and fix. This form of refusal, however, does not entail conforming to a normative position relative to a persistently white, sexually modest, and middle-class standard of “healthy” girlhood in the United States. GisMo’s project can serve to complicate stock representations of girls of color through the articulation of their specific, contingent, and varying subjectivities.

I am concerned with how the arguments in scholarship on girls of color such as the *Urban Girls* anthologies place emphasis on how they *resist*

stereotypes. My position does not hold that these girls are indeed just like the harmful negative typologies that circulate about them. Yet I am loathe to stress their subversion and resistance as if they should be ashamed of being loud, sexual, aggressive, and lower/working class, if that is how they view themselves. I have used works like the *Urban Girls* anthologies as resources and recognize that they address issues that the predominant girls' studies discourses on white, middle-class subjects do not. However, girls' scholars need to engage the question of who becomes excluded in frameworks regarding healthy girlhood and stereotype resistance.

I have observed that most popular/academic books on "troubled" girls usually have images of sexualized, sullen, or angry white young women on their covers.¹² Contrastingly, yet equally problematic, the covers of the *Urban Girls* anthologies present images of girls that have literally been "white-washed." The cover of the first anthology edited by Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way in 1998 features a young African American girl dressed in white and smiling as she is bathed in sunlight. In *Urban Girls Revisited* (2007), a group of girls of color wearing white shirts pose together and smile. The design of the cover has altered the photograph so that it is tinged with a grainy light lavender color. These book cover images reinforce notions of "good" and "bad" girls. White girls are framed as needing a "rescue" that will return them to normalized bourgeois subjectivity as they are starting to engage in sexual and aggressive behavior due to the "toxic" gendered representations found in popular culture. Girls of color, who have been historically characterized as hypersexual in the dominant culture, are framed as being in need of an image makeover in order to be perceived as "good" subjects who are unlike stereotypes. Would a book on girls' empowerment be marketable if it had a picture of a chonga-esque girl on its cover? Or would her image work best in selling books on "troubled" girls? What is the message we send to girls who do not conform to normative bourgeois conventions of dress and behavior? Shimizu's (2007) project calls on feminist and critical race scholars to complicate approaches to stereotype analysis as many critiques of sexual representations of women can "unconsciously get caught up in an agenda of moralism and propriety" (18).

I claim that the non-normative sexual-aesthetic excesses of chonga bodies signify a politics that undermines sexual policing and conveys indifference toward portraying an assimilated white bourgeois subjectivity. The chonga is not shamed into invisibility by her low-class status or ethnic identity. Akin to a camp Butlerian (1990) parody, the chonga's de-naturalized visibility is a citation of gender, class, and racial/ethnic signifiers, from her faux-gold jewelry, gelled-straight hair, and synthetic nails to the imitation designer clothes she buys at the flea market. Yet scholars have not found ways to explore the potential of her politics the way that Chicana work has engaged the chola. I look forward to a feminist

discourse that can draw from *Chongalicious* aesthetics in the agenda for girls' positive exploration of their bodies and pleasures (Foucault 1978).¹³

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Notes

1. The interactions between the girls in detention, the GisMo artists, and myself did not center on the term or identity of "chonga." I am using their identification of me as someone who looks like a "Bratz" doll, a figure who is parallel to a chonga in style and also compared to chongas by the Miami weekly paper *The New Times*, as a point of departure for examining the process of categorizing women through these identities. The debate the girls had regarding the description of me centered primarily on the "accuracy" of the comparison, they did not make comments that suggested this was a "negative" labeling. In fact, quite a few of them considered it a compliment. It is also worth noting that the chonga discourse that emerged in the culture began via the Internet, a technology to which the girls in the detention center have limited, if any, access.
2. My interchangeable use of the terms "South Florida," "Miami-Dade County," "Miami," "Miami-Dade," and "city" denote the wider Miami metropolitan area, as distinguished from the "City of Miami," an incorporated municipality within the larger Miami-Dade County jurisdiction (which is composed of multiple municipalities).
3. The *Miami New Times* reported that Davila is of Cuban-Bulgarian heritage and Laura Di Lorenzo of Venezuelan-Italian descent.
4. "Besos" is Spanish for kisses.

5. "Bling" is a hip-hop term for jewelry.
6. I did not want to present my subjects with the assumption that a chonga is a person in this question.
7. "Lol" is an acronym for "laugh out loud" used in Internet chat applications.
8. See <http://www.miaminights.com/miami-new-times-dissects-the-chonga-trend-4242.phtml>, accessed on April 28, 2008.
9. The exhibition was on view from October through November 2007 and featured work that women artists created with JDC girls through the Museum of Contemporary Art's Women on the Rise! outreach program that I created in 2004. The museum worked with the JDC girls through a partnership with the Girls Advocacy Project, Miami.
10. E-mail correspondence with author September 17, 2007.
11. "Hoochie" is a slang term connoting low-class "slut" or "whore."
12. Examples include Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown's *Packaging Girlhood* (2006), Rachel Simmon's *Odd Girl Out* (2003), James Garbarino's *See Jane Hit* (2006), and *Aggression, Antisocial Behavior, and Violence among Girls* (2004), edited by Martha Putallaz and Karen L. Beirman.
13. I employ Foucault's terminology "bodies and pleasures" as opposed to "sexuality" here in order to reject the notion that girls' "free" expression of sexuality will necessarily have emancipatory effects and that sexual identities represent a "truth" about them. Bodies and pleasures is a plural conception that resists the fashioning of fixed subjectivities defined via sexual identities and practices, as making these "knowable" can lead to the formation of normalizing/disciplining constructs.

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