

Hijas Americanas: Beauty, Body Image, and Growing Up Latina

This is an excerpt from *Hijas Americanas: Beauty, Body Image, and Growing Up Latina*, a memoir written by Rosie Molinary and published in 2007.

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The question that comes up for me when I think about the power beauty has over our lives and experiences is this: What happens to girls whose self-image is shaped by other people's beauty standards, and whose own features aren't reflected back to them in the everyday images the media promotes? For today's young Latinas, there are some Latina role models, but most of those role models represent yet another unattainable beauty standard. Many Latinas live with a feeling of not being accepted because of how they look. For those of us who have dark skin, raven hair, and a short stature, there isn't much external validation. The average woman of any ethnicity is different from what's celebrated on television, in magazines, and in life. But often, in Latina culture, these differences are exacerbated by the fact that the families' input offers such a distinct point of view – one that's often at odds with the larger culture.

Thus, as Latinas we can be caught in between two standards of beauty – not feeling beautiful in either culture, or feeling beautiful in one but not the other. No matter where we stand, we're on the precipice of judgment, with one set of values that informs our lives shaped by American pop culture and another set shaped by our families' culture and traditions.

Oftentimes there's another perspective as well – our own: a perspective that takes into account the impact of the first two and how they push and pull at our self-image and feelings of who we are. This last perspective is the place where we can find peace in ourselves, which is what ultimately leads us to our real beauty.

I have memories from childhood that indicate just how much American pop culture influenced my worldview. In one memory, I'm sitting in front of the TV, lamenting the size of my nose compared to the girls' noses on-screen. I can remember my mother telling me that I could pinch my nostrils and pull my nose outward to change its shape. And I followed that advice. Pinch, pull, pinch, pull. But my nose never budged.

As early as third grade, my best friend, Jenny, and I used to lament our weight in comparison to other girls'. I remember walking to her house one day as we schemed about the perfect plan to rid ourselves of those extra pounds.

“We could just pinch our fat off and put it on somebody else without her knowing it,” we laughed. As an adult with some extra pounds to spare, I look empathetically back at my third-grade self, wondering how it was possible that I thought I was fat. We were just eight, and wiry. When Jenny and I remember it now, we are both dumbfounded by the fact that popular culture was sending us the message that we needed to be smaller.

I also remember watching *The Dukes of Hazzard* on Friday nights, and how much we loved that show, and how Daisy Duke would strut her stuff in those oh-so-short shorts. There are plenty of times when I might have learned that being skinny was how you should look, and that showing off your body is how to get attention.

One summer when I was a preteen, one of my cousins from Puerto Rico came to visit for a couple weeks. We spent our days playing a game we called Model. We did our hair, tried on various outfits, and posed awkwardly next to plants or on the edge of a bed with one hand under our chin while snapping photos of each other with my Kodak 110 camera. I still have those pictures. We both had thick black hair that was unmanageable, despite our attempts to iron it (this was before the availability of flatirons). We were emulating the white girls we saw in *Seventeen* and *YM*, even though we were a far cry from them.