

# Sex, Beauty and Success

## Productive Heterosexuality, Good Hair and Learning to be Decente in 19th Century Venezuela

ELIZABETH GACKSTETTER NICHOLS, Greenleaf Visiting Library Scholar

Thursday, January 15, 2015 @ 12 - 1 p.m. | Zimmerman Library, Waters Room



Image: Photograph of Sra. Mercedes Mutis de Ibarra, ca. 1800, reprinted from UNM University Libraries.

The contemporary Venezuelan focus (or obsession) on appearance and physical beauty is a widely recognized phenomenon by both citizens and scholars alike. Venezuela's dominance of beauty pageants, the preeminence of her beauty experts and the statistics related to aesthetic surgery and consumption of cosmetics in the nation all support a general understanding of the centrality of beauty to contemporary Venezuelan society. While the above is rarely in dispute, there is less consensus on what that focus means. In the past decade, Dr. Nichols has traced the roots of the current focus on beauty (understood here as physical appearance, in the main for women but also for men) back to the early years of the Venezuelan state, where beauty began to be constructed as evidence of genetic "purity," whiteness, work ethic and moral value. Decency, as the young protagonist of Antonia Palacios' novel learns, is intrinsically tied to class and race, and these concepts are in turn expressed

through standards of beauty and the beauty work required to achieve those aspirational standards. The popular magazines, commercial advertisements and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrate how women and men were enculturated to understand the confluence of beauty and worth. In this presentation, Nichols will present a brief overview of her research along with her findings at the UNM library, specifically in the Ibarra collection. Particularly in the periodical holdings, but even further in the personal papers and poetry of Sra. Mercedes Mutis de Ibarra, she will present new evidence of both forces of enculturation that helped shape societal understandings of the link between social class, race, and productive sexuality as well as the expression of those women who understood and lived those lessons.

Dr. Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols is Chair of the Department of Languages and Professor of Spanish at Drury University. She has been working in the field of Venezuelan literature and women's studies for fifteen years. Her current research investigates the construction of social norms of physical beauty in Venezuela and Latin America generally, with particular attention to visual and written representations of the forces of enculturation that define and set the boundaries for those norms. Dr. Nichols is the co-author of an introduction to Venezuela titled *Venezuela*, and numerous book chapters and articles, including: "Decent Girls with Good Hair: Beauty, Morality and Race in Venezuela" in *Feminist Theory*, "Taking Possession of Public Discourse: Women and the Practice of Political Poetry in Venezuela" in *Bottom Up or Top Down? Participation and Clientelism in Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy* and "Virgin Venuses: Beauty and Purity for 'Public' Women in Venezuela" and "Ultra Feminine Women of Power: Beauty and the State in Argentina" in *Women, Politics and Media in Emerging Democracies*.

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