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Salsa on St. Clair

Consumer Consumption and the Construction of Cultural Identity

Winning essay of the 204 TLN-Telelatino Essay Prize

by

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TLN-Telelatino PRIZEWINNING ESSAYS

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The TLN-Telelatino Essay Prize is awarded annually to two York undergraduate students demonstrating exceptional writing on the experiences of Hispanic people in Canada. The first essay prize is worth \$800, the second \$450. The competition was established through a donation by Telelatino (TLN), a Canadian television channel that broadcasts programs of interest to the Hispanic and Italian communities.

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Salsa on St. Clair:
Consumer Consumption and the Construction of Cultural Identity

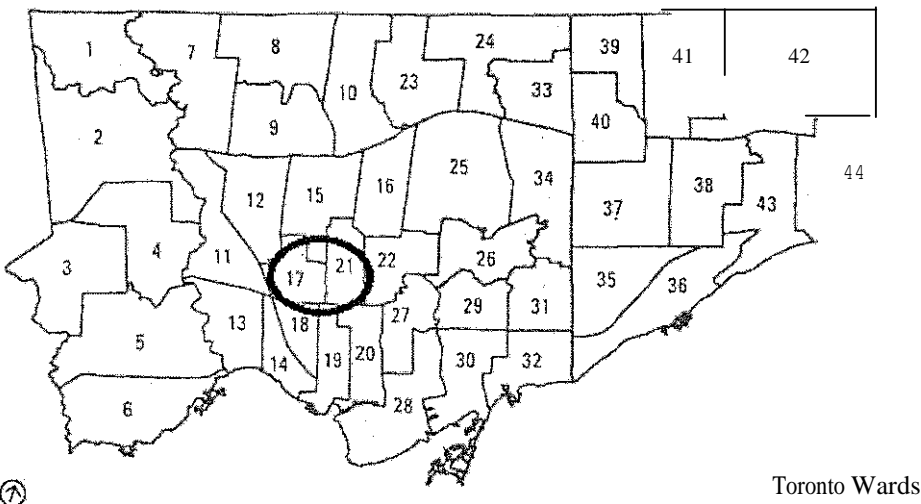
Introduction

Hailing to be "Canada's largest Latino-themed street festival" (TLN Telelatino Network, 2014, official website) running along St. Clair West avenue, one would expect the *Salsa on St. Clair* festival to take place in the heart of Toronto's Latin American community. The rise of cultural consumption in Toronto in recent years, particularly within urban spaces, has been taking place alongside a growing context of gentrification and urban renewal. Included in this context has also been the exodus of large proportions of ethnic/immigrant communities to the suburbs, leaving behind commercial identities often founded upon ethnic identities which no longer reflect the new ethnic landscape of the community. While ethnic transformations are occurring in many urban spaces throughout Toronto in terms of residential patterns, ethnic businesses continue to remain, often key to the process of gentrification, as neighbourhoods such as Little Italy, Greektown, and India Bazaar display. Similarly, the rise of *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival presented by TLN Telelatino Network (Spanish language cable television network) in the St. Clair West corridor encompassing the Hillcrest Village BIA (Business Improvement Area), falling within Ward 21 (St. Paul's) is increasingly understood as a space home to Toronto's Latin American community.

Although residential patterns of Toronto's Latin American immigrant and ethnic community do speak to their presence in Ward 21, this presence is limited and tends to be concentrated in the northern outskirts of this ward, removed from the St. Clair West corridor. In this situation market conditions tend to focus on ethnic consumer consumption without an actual strong ethnic community, placing the ethnic landscape at odds with the commercial identity. Thus, the celebration of Latino

"culture" in the Hillcrest Village BIA via the creation of an ethnic community's imagined existence has much to do with gentrification and economic strategy which place value on ethnic commodification. Guided by the work of Sheenagh Pietrobruno (2001), Isabel Malina-Guzman (2010) and Angharad N. Valdivia (2010), while the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival may be linked to the business strategy of the Hillcrest Village BIA in Ward 21, rather than a celebration of authentic Latin American "culture" in Toronto, the construction and commodification of a surmised group culture plays a powerful role in assumptions about identity and consciousness about this diverse and little known community-Latin American-particularly women, by dominant society.

Figure 1



Toronto Wards, Source: City of Toronto Website, Word Profiles.

Methods

This paper is based on an examination of the ethnic and commercial patterns and activities of the landscape surrounding the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival, with respect to the Latin American diaspora. Spatial residential patterns and concentrations of the Latin American diaspora in the St. Clair West corridor was acquired through data collected by the city of Toronto for the neighbourhood home to and surrounding the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival. Hailed as the largest Latino-themed street festival in Canada (TLN Teletatino Network, 2014, Official Website) and examination of the urban

landscape surrounding this commercial manifestation of Latin American "culture" is intended to understand how ethnicity and economics shape and inform cultural identity.

Literary Review

Ethnic Packing and Gentrification: The Case of Four Neighbourhoods in Toronto

Jason Hackworth and Josephine Rekers in their work on urban landscapes study of the process of gentrification in four urban Toronto neighbourhoods-Corso Italia, Little Italy, India Bazar, and Greektown-all commonly thought to be ethnically parallel, in terms of residential makeup, to their fundamental ethno-business monocultures. According to the Hackworth and Rekers the ethno-commercial activities and offerings of these key urban neighbourhoods, all of which are business improvement areas, play a key role "in the valorization of local real estate markets," via "ethnic packing"-manufactured ethnicity, targeting a particular type of clientele of an affluent socio-economic position-particularly "young urban professionals of many ethnic backgrounds (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p.232)." According to the authors, "ethnicity is now sometimes commodified in a way that challenges both explanatory models of gentrification and traditional notions of ethnic landscape formation in urban theory (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p.212)." In such situations manifestations of "culture" throughout targeted neighbourhoods is "strategically produced, rather than organically chosen by complete autonomous customers (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p. 215)," which does not reflect the ethnic makeup of the community's residential patterns (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p.232).

Taking the position of Hackworth and Rekers with regard to the role of ethnic based business in the gentrification process, and ultimately the upward opulence of a neighbourhood's real estate market; I understand the *So/sa on St. Clair* street festival to be a key component of increasing land and property values in the Hillcrest Village BIA. Despite not physically being a permanent commercial business the annual *Salsa an St. Clair* festival adds the marketability of the area, through the process of ethnic commodification. Like the four urban neighbourhoods studied by Hackworth and Rekers, the

construction of ethnics the Hillcrest Village BIA has been key. The Hillcrest Village BIA is unique in its offering of multiple ethnic offerings, which allow residences of the neighbourhood to "travel" to multiple foreign spaces in a relatively small geographical area, catering to consumer desires for diversity, reflecting an open market economic approach and the value of ethnicity, commodified and marketed for consumption. Despite attention given to multiple ethnic groups, I hold the commercialization of ethnicity in the Hillcrest Village BIA is similar to the observations of Hackworth and Rekers with respect to the production of landscapes and the valorization of property.

Hackworth and Rekers give an in depth insight into the link between culture and economies in the gentrification process occurring in urban Toronto, some questions and areas of exploration still remain. Specifically, how does "ethnic packing" affect the general public's understandings of identity with respect to the commodified ethnicity? While the role of marketing ethnicity in transforming urban landscapes has been identified questions surrounding identity remain ambiguous. Particularly left unanswered is how the commodification of ethnicity, in the case of *Salsa on St. Clair-a "caliente!"* (hot!) "showcase of Latin life"(TLN Telelatino Network, 2014, Official Website) effect constructions and understandings of identity, specifically diasporic communities whose histories in Canada are relatively short for which understandings of dynamics is limited, like the Latin American community in Toronto (Teixeira et. al., 2012, p.257).

Findings

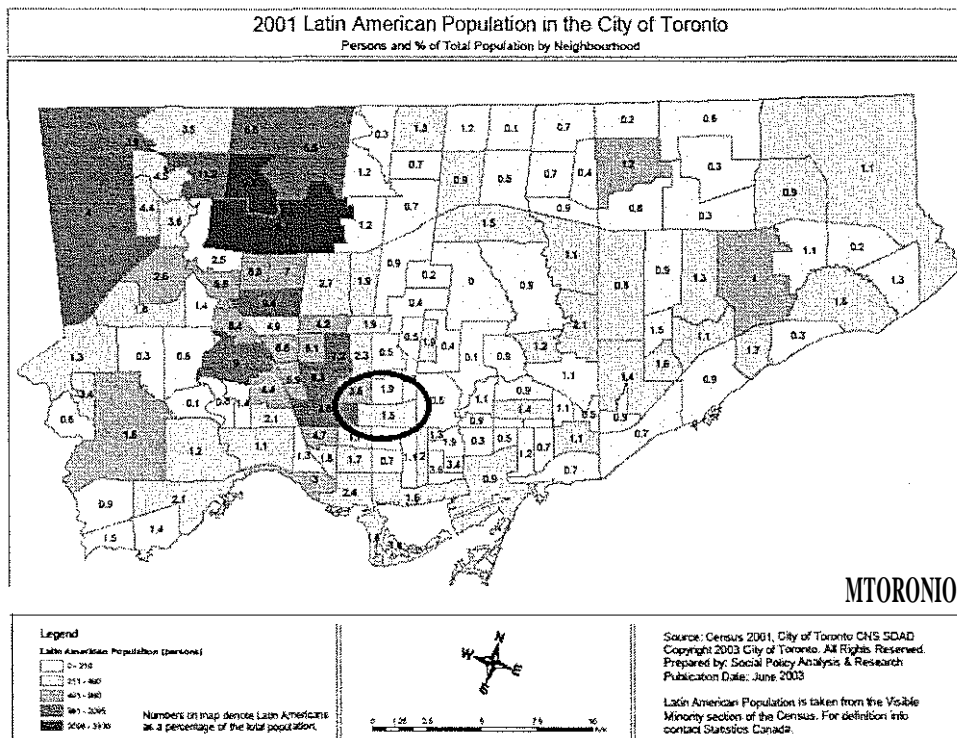
Neighbourhood Comparison: St. Paul's versus Davenport

An investigation into the spatial concentration and distribution of Latin Americans in Toronto reveals that despite being an area containing a Latin American diaspora, the St. Paul's Ward (ward 21) is not a neighbourhood home to significant levels of this diasporic community when compared to other Latin American diasporic communities throughout Toronto. Despite being home to one of the largest visible representations of the community-Sa/sa on St. Clair street festival, and a number of Latin

themed eateries, *figure 2* visually displays the discrepancy between the commercial identity of St. Paul's ward and the actual ethnic landscape, in terms of Latin American representation. Representing the total Latin American population in persons, as well as the percent of the total population Latin Americans represent in various neighbourhoods throughout Toronto, *figure 2* reveals that in St. Paul's Ward Latin Americans residing in the areas surrounding St. Clair West make up approximately between 1.5 and 1.9 percent of the total population, ranging from 211-400 persons and 0-210 respectively. This map of the Latin American population in the city of Toronto for 2001 by neighbourhood reveals that in Toronto the ethnic landscape and the commercial identity of neighbourhoods do not necessarily coincide, contrary to traditional urban theory.

In the next ward over, Davenport (ward 17), representation is quite different than in St. Paul's with spatial concentration of the Latin American diaspora being relatively high. According to *figure 2* Latin Americans make up a low of 3.8 percent of the total population and a high of 8.3 depending on the neighborhood. The concentration of Latin Americans in this ward with a high of 8.3 percent of the total population representing a range of 2006-3330 persons, among one of the highest residential concentrations of Latin Americans in the city of Toronto, behind the city's north-west neighbourhoods, roughly wards 7, 8, and 9. In these regions, consisting of Jane-Finch, Jane-Sheppard, Keele-Wilson, and Keele-Finch neighbourhoods, Latin Americans constitute a high of 11.2 percent of the total population and for the most part fall into the 2006-3330 persons per neighbourhoods range. The difference in ethnic representation of Latin Americans in Davenport versus St. Paul's Ward suggest strategically produced ethnicity as part of the economic strategy of the Hillcrest Village BIA, similar to that discussed by Hackworth and Rekers (2005).

Figure 2



Latin American Population in the City of Toronto, Source: Centre for Studies in Food Security, Ryerson University, 2009

St. Clair: An up and coming neighbourhood

The *Salsa on St. Clair* festival running along St. Clair Avenue West from Winona Drive to Christie Street for the past nine years has not been the only new addition to the St. Paul's Ward, which in recent years undergone much transformation. In recent years this neighbourhood has undergone gentrification, with the exodus of ethnic Italians from the area coinciding with recent valorization of the housing market; while simultaneously marketing of ethnicity has diversified and intensified (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p.227-228). Although the marketing and commercialization of Italian "culture" still predominates today, other ethnicities have been manufactured into the landscape of St. Paul's Ward, which can be seen in the annual *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival in the Hillcrest Village BIA. I understand the expanding of manufactured ethnicity to include Latin America "culture" to be part of an economic

strategy to add some "Latin heat"-through the "caliente", "showcase of Latin life"(ethnic cue used to promote the *Salsa on St. Clair* on the TLN Telelatino official website, describing the festival as *caliente*- "hot") and tap into an ethnic niche market in the Hillcrest Village BIA to promote valorization, agreeing with observations that "values of multiculturalism are highly marketable (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p.232)."

Historically European immigrant neighbourhood, in terms of ethnic composition and business, not too much had changed about St. Clair Avenue West, **until** recent years which have witnessed the incorporation of non-European establishments. The first immigrant residents to this neighbourhood were British, followed by a wave of Italian as well as Jewish immigration post-World War II (Michael Buzzelli, 2001). While Italians have been immigrating to the area, changing the identity of this neighbourhood, Italians did not come to dominate business in the area until the 1980s, with most businesses being under British or Jewish ethnic ownership (Buzzelli, 2001, p.579). In these time periods business ownership reflected the residential patterns in terms of ethnicity. In recent years there has been a rise in non-European ethnic business offerings, most notable ethnic cuisine (Hillcrest Village BIA, 2014, toronto.ca). However with respect to St. Paul's Ward the rise in non-European themed business does not reflect the ethnic landscape of the neighbourhood in terms of residential patterns, contradicting classical urban theory and the notion that ethnic commercial ventures are reflective of ethnic residential patterns (Jason Hackworth and Josephine Rekers, 2005, p.211). According to the 2001 ward profile for St. Paul's the top five ethnic origin groups starting with the number one ethnic origin group were Jewish, Filipino, Canadian, Italian, and English (Ward 21St. Paul's Profile, 2001, toronto.ca). For 2006 these figures remained relatively unchanged, with the top ethnic origin groups being Jewish, Filipino, Canadian, Italian, and Chinese (Ward 21St. Paul's Profile, 2006, toronto.ca). In 2006 English as an ethnic origin group left the top five, while Chinese entered, rounding out the top five.

Figure 3



Mi Tierra Restaurant (Colombian Cuisine)
828 St. Clair Ave. W
Source: hillcrestvillage.weebly.com

Figure 4



La Cocina de Dona Luz (Peruvian Cuisine)
807 St. Clair Ave. W
Source: blogto.com

Figure 5



Mezzetta Restaurant and Tapas Bar
(Middle Eastern Cuisine) 681 St. Clair Ave. W
Source: google.ca/maps

With the disagreement between the ethnic landscape and the commercial identity of St. Paul's Ward, Salsa on St. Clair should be understood as a key part of a commercial improvement strategy and residential valorization for the Hillcrest Village BIA (Business Improvement Area) based on construction and commodification of Latin American "culture". *Figure 6* shows the scope of the Hillcrest Village BIA in terms of street confinements, running along St. Clair West from Winona Drive to Christie Street, which falls within Ward 21 (St. Paul's) and also happens to be the precise geographic area of the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival. A Business Improvement Area (BIA) is a partnership between local commercial owners and tenants with Toronto City Council to improve their neighbourhoods with the goal of attracting "more visitors to shop and dine, as well as to draw new business to their area (Business Improvement Areas, 2014, toronto.ca)." Given this I elect that the *Salsa on St. Clair* festival be understood as more of a presentation rather than a celebration, aimed at injecting the area with new levels of economic value.

Figure 6

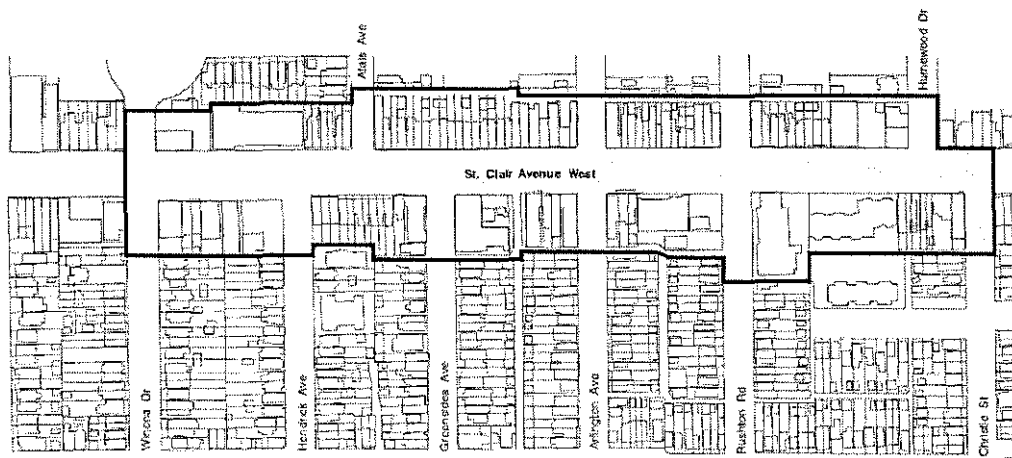
TORONTO

Business Improvement Areas

Hillcrest Village

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Hillcrest Village BIA, Source: City of Toronto Website, BIA listings, Ward 21.

Analysis

The Politics of So/sa on St. Clair

In her work of the phenomenon of mainstream, non-ethnic Latin American society consuming Latin dance in Montreal, Pietrobruno (2001) discusses the various outcomes of the commodification of Latin dance, particularly salsa and its popularity amongst non-Latina diaspora. Pietrobruno discussion of how a salsa dancing has been commodit'1zed and consumed by the non-Latina market, compliments the work of Hackworth and Rekers (2005) and their assertion that the artificial manufacturing of ethnic endeavours within neighbourhoods as key to the process of gentrification and the valorization of real

estate in localities as a new phenomenon in Toronto. According to Pietrobruno the commodification of cultural practise, in the case of her work salsa as a Latin dance, disrupts identity formation as a result of the manner in which commodification expresses identity (Pietrobruno, 2001, p.14)."

In Pietro bruno's work the commodification of Latin dance has created a tension between salsa as an expression of identity and its status as a commodified cultural practise for the Latin American diaspora where many individuals "of Latin descent adopt salsa as part of their cultural heritage only after arriving in Canada, connecting through salsa, to a transnational Latin identity (Pietrobruno, 2001, p.4)." Similarly, *Salsa on St. Clair* can be understood as creating a similar tension to that discussed by Pietro bruno for its ethnic commercial identity in an unacquainted ethnic landscape, both creating and feeding consumer appetite for ethnic consumption. Beyond valorization of the geographic landscape, the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival is additionally fabricating Latin American identity where hypersexualization is dominant and key to commodification. With respect to the salsa and dominant society Pietrobruno notes, "salsa dancing, conjures up images of frivolity and sexuality, especially in the minds of those who have never danced salsa steps (Pietrobruno, 2001, p. 68)." When considering the situation of ethnic women notions of salsa's hypersexuality with respect to dominant discourses on Whiteness and femininity, is compounded knowing that, "women's bodies are equated with sexuality...a woman, consequently, suffers the consequences of her 'unfeminine' display and learns that certain expressions break the implicit rules that regulate gendered performance (Pietrobrno, 2001, p. 40)."

Figure 8



TLN Telematino Advertisement, Source: tlntv.com

Of particular importance in analysing how *Salsa on St. Clair* and ethnic commodification of Latin dance function with respect to the construction of identity in a space where the commercial identity does not reflect the ethnic landscape is how Latin American women fit into this construction. Knowing this, understanding how ethnic commodification helps to inform how dominant society both come to know and understand the "culture" being commoditized and the individuals racialized as belong to this culture is important, when analysing how identities are constructed and projected. For dominant mainstream society, salsa dance itself diverges from mainstream society conjuring "issues of gender and migration and the connection between dance and issues of gender (Sheenagh Pietrobruno, 2001, p.5)." In this process the female Latin body is understood to be domineering and hypersexual displaying a dance culture foreign to mainstream society, consisting of male/female partnering as well as female/female partnering, close contact both eye and body, and synchronized hip movements to a "sensual" rhythm(Pietrobruno, 2001, p.10). According to Molina Guzman and Valdivia (2005), "the female ethnic subject is othered through its categorization and marginalization in relation to dominant constructions of Whiteness and femininity (Molina Guzman and Valdivia, 2005, p.206)..."

Coming to Know the Other, Constructing Latina in Mainstream Society

Taking the position of Sander Gilman (1985) and Bell Hooks (1992) on notions of group sexuality of racialized individuals I contend that imagery of the Latina body is often used to represent group sexuality. In speaking to representations of the female black body Hooks concludes that the female black body, sexualized and reduced to the status of a spectacle, is forced into serving as a symbol of overall group sexuality (Hooks, 2003, p.123). With respect to *Salsa on St. Clair*, representations of a "cultural" dance which diverges from dominant society with respect to Whiteness and femininity, helps to construct an imagined identity of the quintessential Latin American diasporic female in Toronto which is both racialized and sexualized. Hooks' position on how the female body has come to symbolize notions and ideas which transcend the body is complimented by the work of Molina Guzman and Valdivia (2005) who sighting Rakow and Kranich (1991) hold in the current age, "women function as a sign, a stand-in for objects and concepts ranging from nation to beauty to sexuality (Molina Guzman and Valdivia, 2005, p.206)." I hold that this is especially true with respect to the racialized female body, where representations which conflict and contest mainstream notions of femininity are often reduced to the status of hypersexual and/or exotic.

For mainstream society the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival offers an opportunity to come to "know" a relatively small and unknown population in Toronto. Despite being among "one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in Canada", Latin Americans represent a small proportion of Canada's population, consisting of less than half a million nationwide (Teixeira et. al, 2012, p.257). Looking to the work of Gilman (1985) who earlier theorizes when speaking to imagining and construction, that the black female has become, "an icon for black sexuality in general" (Gilman, 1985, p.212). Similarly, the visibility of Latin American women in salsa dance, which diverges from dominant culture in terms of race, femininity, and sexuality, has placed Latin American women as the dominant image of Latino sexuality. According to Valdivia (2010) and Molina-Guzman (2010) such selected, essential signifiers Latin American identity plays an important role in the construction of national consciousness of the

Latino community informed by imagination-a imagined community. Guided by the work of Valdivia (2010) and Malina-Guzman (2010), in addition to engaging attendees in economic consumption through ethnic commodification, the *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival allows individuals to come to "know" the "cultural" identity of Toronto's Latin American community via a foreign dance which complicates mainstream dominance of Whiteness and femininity.

Figure 9



8th Annual Salsa on St. Clair (2010), Source: thestar.blogs.com

Conclusion

In understanding *Salsa on St. Clair* as putting Latin America on the map in the consciousness of mainstream society in Toronto, a community for which much is still unknown, it can be noted how a business strategy aimed at tapping into well-to-do consumers' desires for ethnic consumption and valorizing real estate is central to the construction of cultural identity. The strategic overlooking of nearby Latin American immigrant/ethnic strong residential presence (i.e. ward 17) has resulted in the creation of an imagined community for which women inside this group are highly visible in the imagination of dominant society. The *Salsa on St. Clair* street festival offers itself as a way in which Torontonians can come to "know" the Latin American community through the cultural commodification and consumption

of a foreign "cultural" dance. This process has increased the visibility of the Latin American immigrant and ethnic diaspora in the minds of dominant society, putting this community on the map in Toronto in a fashion which plays into a hypersexual conceptualization of the "hot" Latina. While the incorporation of a sense of Latin American diaspora into the commercial identity of St. Clair West, the Hillcrest Village BIA, and Ward 21 may be linked to attracting business and the valorization of real estate in this up and coming geographic space, the use of ethnic commodification in the gentrification process of this urban landscape has great implications on the construction of Latin American identity in dominant society particularly women.

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