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Facial Uplift: Plastic Surgery, Cosmetics and the Retailing of Whiteness in the Work of María Cristina Mena

Kyla Schuller

University of California, San Diego

This article analyzes how Mexican American author María Cristina Mena's short magazine fiction boldly illustrates the emerging U.S. beauty industry as effectively producing whiteness for sale in the neocolonial marketplace. Her representations of Mexican women's use of cosmetics articulate how the beauty industry both lends structure to and is structured by the idea of race; at the same time, she reminds her audience that the impact of beauty products and services is in large part determined by the political and economic context of the goods themselves. Through the techniques of role reversals, character development and dramatic irony, Mena's stories portray the U.S. beauty industry as a dynamic trade that exports new forms of whiteness across its southern border. Far from depicting Mexican women as passive consumers in the neocolonial marketplace, however, Mena shows how beauty products and services can be appropriated as limited yet potent acts of resistance.

Keywords: María Cristina Mena / race / neocolonialism / beauty industry / consumer culture

Heavy promotion for beauty products and services first appeared in North America during the first two decades of the twentieth century. While the vast majority of nineteenth-century Americans had interpreted cosmetic adornment as an indecorous alteration of a woman's "natural" body, many in the early twentieth century came to embrace not only the rise of a multitude of beauty products such as commercial soaps, skin care treatments and cosmetics, but also dramatic new medical technologies of body modification including cosmetic surgery. It was not an easy shift, however, for people to unequivocally embrace the physical display and physiognomic flexibility that the new cosmetic and surgical technologies of beauty afforded to women of means, some of which were understood to change skin color and the perceived ethnic profile of the nose. Many people were unsettled by the wide availability of products and services that enabled women to alter their bodies, an entity that, since the previous century, an increasing variety of scientific and popular practices had formulated as the most reliable indicator of one's racial status, moral worth and personal character. In fact, Euro-American intellectuals, activists and cultural workers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border increasingly regarded traits such as an aquiline nose or recessed brow as universal indicators of an individual's racial fitness and individual health, and this ideology of aesthetic determinism undergirded immigration and sterilization policy, public health campaigns and social movements of many kinds¹ Widespread legislation even prohibited individuals with visible disabilities from publicly soliciting money from passersby in the form of the so-called "Ugly Laws."² Yet how could a wide range of early twentieth-century nationalists, reformers and scientists define "beauty" as a fixed sign of racial identity and physical vigor when so many others increasingly accepted the practices of body adornment and modification in the commercial age? How are we to understand the seeming paradox of this aesthetic indeterminism?³

Writing stories of Mexican women in highbrow US literary magazines such as *Century*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *American Magazine* during the years of the Mexican Revolution, Mexican-American author María Cristina Mena (1893-1965) restages these competing ideas about the propriety of cosmetics by turning readers' attention to the political and economic context of beauty products themselves. Her stories bring beauty to life as a commercial commodity that exposes the fallacy of universal notions of both beauty and race as a priori facts. Illustrating the ways that beauty and its alleged correlative, whiteness, were increasingly mass-produced, transportable products throughout Mexico, her work makes the politically significant point that beauty was available for purchase in the twentieth-century neocolonial marketplace rather than existing outside it as a disinterested, universal ideal. Illuminating the political economy of beauty, Mena interrogated the beauty industry as a potent agent of neocolonialism that negatively impacts her characters' self-conception, social relations and economic independence at a time when US

companies gained control over the most important sectors of the Mexican economy. Once exposed to the cultural and racial ideals of the North, her characters seek to correct their own perceived deficiencies through aesthetic interventions that whiten their features. They redden their cheeks with rouge, apply “an extra coat of powder to . . . already well-whitened features,” bleach their hair and even undergo aesthetic surgeries to remove areas of dark pigmentation from their skin and to transform nose, brow, jaw and wrinkles (29-30). However, her characters are also active consumers who appropriate the goods of the beauty industry according to their own religious and cultural interpretations, some applications of which work on the discursive level precisely to counter the growing influence of North American economic control. As such, her stories emphasize the roles women and indigenous and *mestizo* cultural traditions could play in resisting the encroachment of the United States into the Mexican national body.

In stories such as “The Gold Vanity Set” (1913), “The Vine-Leaf” (1914) and “Marriage by Miracle” (1916), Mena’s portrayal of the cosmetics industry sheds light on the very contingency and mutability of the notions of beauty and “race,” a highly unconventional and perspicacious focus in the early twentieth century. Her emphasis on the material history of makeup and nose jobs identifies how beauty products gave rise to new ideas of whiteness as a commodity even as preexistent ideals of whiteness guided the aesthetic ideals underlying her characters’ application of cosmetics and solicitation of surgeries. She reframes an ongoing debate over whether cosmetics have a positive or negative impact on racial progress by illustrating how the beauty industry both lends structure to and is structured by the idea of race itself, the ultimate significance of which is in large part determined by the political and economic context the products appear within. That is, a critical history informed by Mena’s representations of beauty and race as co-constitutive phenomena can draw attention to how consumer goods and aesthetic practices have themselves shaped modern notions of whiteness. Through the techniques of role reversals, character development and dramatic irony, Mena’s stories portray the U.S. beauty industry as a dynamic trade that exports new forms of whiteness across its southern border. Far from depicting elite and indigenous Mexican women as passive consumers in the neocolonial marketplace, however, Mena shows how beauty products and services can be appropriated as limited yet potent acts of resistance.

A Brief History of Beauty and Race

Ideals of physical beauty have both lent structure to and been structured by “race” at least since the emergence of the modern idea of race through Western science and other ventures during the late eighteenth century. Whether one considers Petrus Camper’s calculation of facial angles, Thomas Jefferson’s biological justification of slavery or Cesare Lombroso’s portraits of criminals, the presence or absence of certain Anglo-Saxon or Greco-Roman features deemed beautiful — especially the shape of the nose, forehead and pelvis, skin color and the quantity of body hair — figure as the physical signs of distinct racial differences amongst the peoples of the world. These alleged aesthetic disparities were interpreted as evidence that severely unequal political, economic and cultural hierarchies based on “race” were merely following nature’s order. Such aesthetic determinists often promoted specific facial features as the archetypes of beauty and as metonyms for one’s rank on an evolutionary ladder; prominent evolutionist E.D. Cope claimed in 1886 that “[t]he Greek nose, with its elevated bridge, coincides not only with aesthetic beauty, but with developmental perfection” (116). At times, boundless confidence that beauty was a universally homogeneous and quantifiable marker of racial fitness encouraged racial scientists and their numerous supporters to turn to aesthetics as a barometer when other data proved elusive. For example, one prominent social scientist in the 1920s argued that “[i]n the absence of more scientific tests of the racial potentiality of the individual, beauty must be used as our guide,” for “the problem of racial betterment is the problem of conserving beauty, and eliminating ugliness” (Dunlap 55-56). The widespread popularity of better baby and fitter family contests organized by local eugenics committees and national publications in the years following the First World War testifies to the degree to which eugenicists used beauty as a proxy for the nebulous concept of racial fitness.⁴

Yet eugenicists and others embraced beauty as the best indication of racial identity in the midst of an explosion of consumer goods and services that offered beauty as a product available for purchase. One analysis might suggest that commercial cosmetics and aesthetic medical procedures emerged precisely as

a means to capitalize on the increasing importance of personal beauty by offering consumers with spending money the ability to circumvent its racial requirements while supplying the producing class with a new source of profits. Yet such an interpretation would elide the more fruitful examination of how beauty products themselves played a hand in the shifting meanings of race and the body at the turn of the century. In a word, the ontological complexity of “race” at the dawn of the new century explains a great deal of the apparent contradiction between the availability of beauty for sale on the one hand and enduring enthusiasm for the belief that beauty reveals one’s inherent place in the racial hierarchy on the other. The notion of race in the early twentieth century was a way station for major scientific paradigm shifts, at once containing residual eighteenth-century explanations of physical difference among humans as a result of climate, enduring nineteenth-century beliefs in the Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics and emerging twentieth-century understandings of the predominantly genetic basis of physical traits.⁵ While scholars often interpret race in the Progressive Era as a biological identity thought to unilaterally direct one’s behavior, a great many people in fact saw habitual actions, significantly including the regular purchase and use of consumer goods, as both cause and effect of one’s racial makeup. Race was an amalgam of moral, intellectual, cultural, physical and hereditary characteristics in the era, as George Stocking, Jr. has shown, and one of the effects of this ontological multiplicity was the simultaneous and overlapping belief in the body’s morphological flexibility and its fundamental rigidity, even within the thought of a single person.

I would argue that the beauty industry functioned as a lightning rod for racial thinking. Since the potency of cosmetics was in their perceived ability to impact the racial embodiment of present and future generations, debates about cosmetic products stood in as a proxy for a larger struggle between competing notions of race. The increasing availability of beauty products and services shocked determinists, by and large members of the social elite and the white middle classes who embraced the status quo, who tended to accept the emerging view that emphasized heredity over environment and increasingly ruled out the role of habits in changing one’s physical legacy. For example, one commentator in the 1880s argued that cosmetics posed an evolutionary threat because they disguised the real physical worth of women, and thereby tricked men into marrying racially unfit wives who would pollute the national stock (Peiss 32). In contrast, beauty services electrified those who believed that the habitual acquisition and application of cosmetic goods would trigger Lamarckian physical adaptations that future descendents would inherit. Many white reformers and people of color held onto the belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics as a promising blueprint for uplift and saw cosmetics as a tool for achieving beauty — and therefore, racial fitness — by enabling users to consciously direct the aesthetics of their evolution. The highly profitable and black-owned Madam C.J. Walker Company, for one, produced and marketed hair care treatments, skin creams and skin lighteners as political strategies to overturn a long-standing correlation between blackness and ugliness, perhaps with evolutionary consequences (Peiss).⁶ The company’s advertising strategies repeatedly suggested that women’s efforts at beautification would have a concrete effect on the long-term physical and social progress of the race. An ad printed in 1928, for example, trumpeted the “Amazing Progress of Colored Race — Improved Appearance Responsible” and encouraged women to purchase its products as their duty to improve the social lot of African Americans: “Look your best . . . you owe it to your race” (qtd. in Peiss 204). Praising Walker upon her death in 1919, W.E.B. Du Bois eulogized that she had “transform[ed] a people in a generation” through “revolutioniz[ing] the personal habits and appearance of millions of human beings,” words that gain additional meaning given his own insistence on the political expediency of the inheritance of acquired characteristics (Du Bois 131).⁷ Given the degree to which racial status was structured by the presence or absence of beauty, the new beauty industry seemingly provided a means for people of color to upend the racial hierarchy.

While many scholars today incorrectly identify race as unilaterally understood as determining one’s destiny in the early twentieth century, María Cristina Mena’s stories index the ways in which debates about the emerging beauty industry were a facet of the multiple and competing conceptualizations of culture, the body and behavior in the era. She restages the debate between those who support and detract from cosmetics use as either enabling or thwarting racial progress by examining how cosmetics use

helped to generate competing ideas of race themselves. Her stories animate white, Northern characters whose use of cosmetics is at once a deceitful disguise and a material prerequisite of their own assumption of whiteness, as well as Mexican women whose use of beauty products and aesthetic surgeries immediately modifies their racial identity, in the contemporary terms of habits, character and physicality. However, her stories caution that the beauty industry itself will not bring either racial progress or degeneration of the sort her contemporaries believed, for cosmetics and medical procedures are tied up within a larger political economy that determines their outcome. In Mena's work, cosmetics and plastic surgeries are contextualized as facets of a neocolonial marketplace that privileges the aesthetics of whiteness and effects the cultural and economic impoverishment of Mexican women. Mena suggests that cosmetics may be a tool of personal and political advancement only if they function within a larger interpretive framework that discursively turns the political economy of the beauty industry on its head. Her stories repurpose cosmetics use as a vehicle of Mexican cultural self-determination rather than an imitation of whiteness, pointing to the ways in which both indigenous and urban Mexican women might turn to the imaginative powers of Mexican cultural traditions in their efforts to resist the advances of the US juggernaut.

A Brief Biography of María Cristina Mena

Born in Mexico City in 1893 to wealthy parents of European descent, María Cristina Mena began writing poetry at the age of ten. Within another decade, she became the only author of Mexican descent to publish in respected and widely circulated US literary magazines during the early twentieth century (qtd. in Cabello 66). All told, she published eleven short stories and two non-fiction articles in *The Century Magazine*, *The American Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Household Magazine*, *The Texas Quarterly* and *The Monthly Criterion*, mostly between 1913 and 1916. Her greatest literary success was the selection of her story "John of God, the Water-Carrier" (1913) for the anthology *The Best Short Stories of 1928*, following T.S. Eliot's republication of the piece in a 1927 issue of his *Monthly Criterion*. In her later years, she published five children's books, most of them drawing from her own short fiction as well as Mexican history and folklore.

Mena's class background provided her with the training, time and social circumstances necessary to indulge her love of language, hone her craft and break into the highly stratified US literary market. Her education at an elite convent and English boarding school enabled her to gain fluency in English, French and Italian. Later in life, she learned Braille and translated fiction, including her own children's literature, into the language as part of her advocacy work for the blind. At fourteen, her parents sent her to live with her father's wealthy business partners in New York City in order to protect her from the class revolt and accompanying tumultuousness of the impending Mexican Revolution. Mena remained in New York City until the end of her life, where she participated in an active literary milieu and married Henry Kellett Chambers, a playwright of some renown whose works were mounted in major stage productions and on the silver screen. Although they never had children, her productivity tapered off dramatically after her marriage in 1916. She continued to move in literary circles, however, and following Eliot's republication of "John of God," she maintained a correspondence with D.H. Lawrence for the four years prior to his death in 1930. Their letters reveal that the two writers cherished their shared interest in recounting "the life implicit instead of the life explicit" and their common objections to the prudishness that led to the censorship of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the United States (qtd. in Doherty xiv). A two-week visit at Lawrence's Italian villa, accompanied by his wife and Aldous and Maria Huxley, was the subject of her last published piece, which appeared a year before her death in 1965.⁸

While Mena's work was read by the first wave of Chicano literary critics as "obsequious" and "trivial and condescending," more recent work in multiethnic and feminist literary studies has uncovered the complex acts of cultural negotiation, resistance and political critique that characterize her writing (qtd. in Doherty vii, x). Mena's fictional work enabled her to criticize, albeit often obliquely, the takeover of the Mexican economy by US firms, the attachment of the Mexican elite to racial and class hierarchies that facilitated US expansion southward, and women's lack of political power in Mexico, factors that had conditioned her own removal to the United States. Indeed, Mena's final stories turn to the radical

potential of the Mexican Revolution and narrate both elite and proletarian women who reject their domestic roles and participate as *soldaderas* in armed revolt, including a character who learns to fashion bombs from doorknobs. Amy Doherty's recovery of Mena's disagreements with her editors at *Century* magazine reveals her struggles to maintain control over her work and to subtly counter the anti-Mexican sentiment the periodical regularly promoted. When her editors tried to excise indigenous characters, Mexican religious icons like *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and common Spanish phrases from her writing, Mena insisted on introducing the complexity of Mexican culture to her reading audience in the United States, a public much more accustomed to quaint travel stories or invectives against Mexicans on account of their alleged racial inferiority. Recent critical attention to Mena's skills of dialogical writing, incorporating tropes of Mexican culture and figures of resistance and subtle commentary on political economy that escaped the censure of her editors has earned her an important place in early Latina/o literature.⁹

The Beauty of Neocolonialism

Mena's first published story, "The Gold Vanity Set," (1913) debuts many of the traits that came to be predominant features of her work, including metaphors of visuality, role reversals, contrasting motifs of Spanish colonialism and US neocolonialism that indirectly cast the United States in an unflattering light and themes of the strength of Mexican cultural traditions. In this ten-page piece she enlists the US beauty industry's influence in Mexico as a rich synecdoche of the cultural impact of US neocolonialism and identifies how the beauty industry was producing and distributing whiteness as a commodity for sale. Her reverse fetishization of the cosmetics compact at the center of her story functions to illustrate the active roles consumer goods play in constructing ideas of race. That is, in Mena's hands the gold cosmetics compact does not conceal the larger social relations of its manufacture, but rather illuminates the conditions of its consumption in the United States and the politics of its distribution and, ultimately, appropriation in Mexico.

The "Gold Vanity Set" centers on Petra, a young indigenous woman whose beauty is key to the success of her family's business. While dominant discourses of race operative in both Mexico and the United States situated Petra's body as the constitutive outside of beauty, her narrator introduces her to the reader as "tall and slender" with a "small head with extremely delicate features" resting atop a perfectly straight spine (1). Countering typical descriptions of indígena physicality as coarse, hunched and stunted, Mena attributes Petra with the refined appearance allegedly characteristic of Anglo beauty. These sexual "attractions made her useful to her father-in-law," who requests that she position herself in the doorway of his restaurant located in the pueblo's inn, wooing customers in her capacity as the establishment's waitress and advertisement (2). Far from a naïve, noble beauty innocent of the artifices of civilization, Petra consciously fashions her own appearance just as she sets herself to the task of her other labors:

And so she began to wait on customers, and soon she would awake in the morning with no other thought than to twist her long, black hair into a pair of braids which, interwoven with narrow green ribbon, looked like children's toy whips, then to take her husband his *aguardiente*, the little jug of brandy that begins the day, and then to seat herself at the door of the inn, watching for customers beneath trembling lashes, while bending over the coarse cloth whose threads she was drawing. (2)

Petra's beauty is not only enmeshed in, but productive of, her family's economic relations and her subservient position within them. At the turn of the century, one of the key conditions of "Indianness" in the popular and elite imagination was the alleged abuse and enforced labor of women by men to a degree that eroded the gender difference upon which civilization was thought to rest. In this story, Petra is indeed represented as a submissive, abused Indian woman, but she is nonetheless a very feminine one who artfully dresses her hair in ways that parallel the fabric she weaves, a portrayal that works to counter dehumanizing ideas of Indian women as lacking basic gender differentiation. Furthermore, her conscious attention to beauty and femininity is her strength and power, her "toy whip." However, this weapon is

merely childlike and ineffectual in comparison to her husband Manuelo's explosively violent temper, which is often exacerbated by his heavy drinking. A microcosm of the story itself, these opening passages suggest that Petra's beauty is at once her source of strength and a condition of her subjugated position.

One afternoon Petra's workplace is "invaded" by an army of US tourists, one of whom leaves behind a gold cosmetics compact that proves crucial to Petra's physical self-preservation (3). The "invasion" of tourists is led by the aptly named Miss Young, who assumes occupancy of Petra's father-in-law's inn (3). Miss Young and her "gold vanity set," a phrase signifying both the cosmetic itself and her wealthy and self-serving entourage, are representatives of US financial and cultural influence that severely undercut postcolonial Mexico's claim to independence. Miss Young gleefully declares to her fellow travelers, "[t]his is my house — and I invite you all in," a statement that betrays her failure to notice the manager's "resentful" looks directed at the "inquisitive strangers occupying the benches of his regular customers" (3). In response to the takeover, the locals form "welcoming ranks" for the vanity set and promptly give up their usual seats in favor of straw mats on the floor (3). Images of military conquest depict the US not as a friendly neighbor to the north, but as a neocolonial powerhouse whose economy and people increasingly had control over banal locations in even the most ordinary of Mexican towns.

Mena emphasizes the importance of physical appearances and ocular knowledge to neocolonial power dynamics that place particular weight on women's bodies. Miss Young and her entourage not only commandeer the space of the tavern through their presence as intrusive white North American tourists, but also implement and manage a visual economy of neocolonialism whereby their privileged gaze entitles them to relegate the locals to mere souvenirs. Throughout this scene, Petra is "followed by the admiring looks of women and men as she moved back and forth, her naked feet plashing softly on the red brick floor" (3). Miss Young trains an especially probing eye on Petra, whom she attempts to turn into a token of her travels when she pulls out her camera and exclaims, "Oh, what a beautiful girl! I must get her picture" (3). Far from a benign mechanism of photographic reproduction, Miss Young's "little black instrument" becomes a tool of conquest over Petra's beautiful body (3). The camera mechanizes the neocolonial gaze, rendering Petra's beauty a disembodied good available for the white tourists' consumption. Petra herself refuses to cooperate and in fact "rebel[s] — rebel[s] with the dumb obstinacy of the Indian, even to weeping and sitting on the floor," a contrast to the *Patrón's* assurances that Petra is "at [Miss Young's] disposition" (4). In response, Petra's husband interprets her refusal to put her beauty to work for the family's tavern as an opportunity to assert his patriarchal authority and beats her cruelly in front of the appalled visitors.

While Petra successfully resists Miss Young's attempt to subject her to this form of visual control, she nonetheless appropriates the aesthetics of white femininity she embodies. When she discovers the cosmetics compact Miss Young leaves behind in her hasty departure, she anxiously opens one of its three compartments, only to be "startled" and "saddened" by the face its mirror reflects (4). Petra's encounter with a white "New Woman" possessing mobility, economic power and a certain degree of sexual freedom that is a far cry from her own subservient state convinces her that her own visage falls far short of the "cheeks like poppies" praised in her husband's songs and visible in the glowing radiance of Miss Young (4). True to the dynamism of neocolonial consumer culture, however, the North American's presence also provides the material means for Petra's recompense. Rouge and powder are nestled alongside the mirror, and Petra dusts her hands with "ivory tint" and reddens her cheeks, "with a nice discretion partly influenced by her memory of the brilliant cheeks of the American *señorita* of the brave looks, the black box, and the golden treasure" (5). Despite being a pre-modern relic from "the youth of the world," in the wealthy *Patrón's* turn-of-the-century evolutionary view, Petra quickly teaches herself how to use the cosmetics compact and appreciates its status as a condition of Miss Young's modernity (8). The narrator's link between the tourist's crimson cheeks that illuminate the whiteness of the underlying skin, her technological progress and her ease of self-assertion neatly portrays the important role consumer sophistication played in constructing one's physicality and character.

Sensible of "an esthetic improvement," upon painting her face, Petra divines a plan to secure her own safety through her heightened sexual appeal that mimics the freedom, power, and mobility of the white woman who appeared in her town with the muster of a military leader (5). The overture proves successful,

as her husband is so enchanted by his wife's newfound beauty that to her unending delight he promises never again to become intoxicated or mistreat her. The cosmetics set has enabled Petra, in some measure, to achieve a new gendered and racial status, including a new form of embodiment as well the habits and character of an independent, modern woman with consumer muscle. Petra partially assumes the position of a beautiful, youthful and mobile woman like Miss Young whose beauty is an asset, not a liability, and is no longer a subservient, "petrified" artifact of pre-history deserving of nothing so much as abuse.¹⁰ Mena illustrates how consumer goods are part of the early twentieth-century idea of whiteness itself, a racial status that the overseas expansion of US markets and tourists were paradoxically making available to Mexican women, even down to Petra's pueblo.

In "The Education of Popo" (1914) Mena similarly portrays whiteness as a commodity that US women's economic power, in contrast to most Mexican women's poverty, allows them to attain. The arrival of a white tourist in Popo's town compels him to compare her "hair like daffodils" and "complexion of coral and porcelain" favorably to the "dark-eyed, demure, and now despised damsels of his own race" (49). That her shimmering hair is later revealed to be the consequence of skilled peroxide treatments illustrates that white characteristics have emerged as a commodity for the well-off — of whatever supposed racial background — in the modern consumer market. Indeed, the purchase and use of beauty products soon became a crucial element of the idea of the liberated and confident modern white woman. At a time when many of her contemporaries were asserting beauty as a universal indicator of racial worth, Mena's stories explore how beauty products help produce the phenotypes, behaviors and habits constitutive of the notion of race in the period.

In "The Gold Vanity Set," Petra's exposure to US consumer culture enables her to shift her racial status somewhat away from the behavior of conditioned subservience allegedly constitutive of indigenous culture toward a modern, relatively independent woman. Yet at the same time, the story importantly emphasizes how indigenous culture provides a wealth of resources to resist the cultural takeover of the United States. Mena delineates the limits of a consumption-based approach to racial and gender equality by highlighting how consumer goods are fetishes, little idols that transport complex economies and function as part of larger socio-political system. As the introductory description of the vanity set as a "beautiful thing of gold, a trinity of delicate caskets" suggests, Mena paints the U.S. cosmetics with motifs of Spanish colonial expeditions in Mexico for gold and other treasure, Catholic iconography and death, tropes that work to link the expansion of the US economy southward with Spanish colonialism (4). The story's heroine resists the aesthetic, religious and economic conquest the vanity set represents by ultimately appropriating it into her own religious sentiment that is heavily shaped by indigenous Mexican traditions. Whereas Spanish explorers had cloaked their search for Mexican gold in religiosity, Petra appropriates an agent of US colonialism as a tool of divine intervention delivered by the patron saint of Mexico. When Petra first discovers the set, we are told "she extracted the treasure" (4), which soon becomes the seed of a "fantasy dimly symbolic and religious" (5). Its smell is "holy," like "church," and Petra recognizes the "talisman" as the fulfillment of her prayers to the Virgin of Guadalupe to stop Manuelo from drinking (5). This characterization positions her as a primitive being whose only frame with which to interpret consumer goods is a religious one, but it also provides her with a rich cultural resource to fashion an independent and resistant use of the "caskets." Manuelo's oath never again to mistreat her leads Petra to place the cosmetics set on the breast of the chapel's statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, amongst the other gifts from worshippers grateful for a miracle, and its presence on the holy shrine encourages Miss Young to permanently relinquish her own claims to the instrument. In a reversal of the El Dorado motif, it is Petra who seizes the "blessed" gold from the North American tourist, maintains ownership over it and directs it toward her own purposes (5).

As in Mena's other works, such a characterization upon first reading seems to affirm stereotypes of indigenous primitivity, namely that Indians understand modern goods only as divine gifts, more than it meaningfully resists the racial expectations of her US audience. Indeed, Mena represents Petra as retaining some of the hypothetical qualities of a "primitive" wife, including superstition, a passionate love of nature and the subservient tendency to approach her newly respectful husband with the "trembling joy of a spaniel too seldom petted" (6). As such, the story portrays the fixity of the early twentieth-century

racial hierarchy even as it demonstrates how neocolonial markets were producing new habits, behaviors and social relations with the potential to disrupt it. Yet Petra's use of the cosmetics set is a complex act of cultural and religious negotiation, whereas the narrator notes that Miss Young has a correspondingly "simple" concept of the utility of the vanity set (5). Furthermore, when following Petra's "pilgrimage" to the Chapel of the Virgin of Guadalupe at the story's conclusion, the *Patrón* informs Miss Young that Indians, "[w]ith their passion, their melancholy, their music and their superstition[,] . . . have passed without transition from the feudalism of the Aztecs into the world of today, which ignores them; but we never forget that it was their valor and love of country which won our independence" (10). Collapsing the Mexican overthrow of Spanish rule in the early nineteenth century with Petra's own appropriation of Miss Young's golden treasure and the neocolonial threat she represents, this passage at once indulges in romantic racialism that condemns Indians to a position frozen in time and points precisely to the rich cultural and political resource this bodes for Mexico in its struggle to fend off the behemoth to the north. In response to the landowner, Miss Young issues a self-assuaging declaration that Petra and her people "certainly are picturesque," thereby book-ending the story with her assertions of ocular control (10).

While Mena confirms ideas of Indians as primitive and superstitious, she also deploys them to unsettle the expectations of her audience more accustomed to reading about the benefits of US expansion in Mexico and the delights of southern travel than to portrayals of resistant Indians.¹¹ Mena's characterization of Petra's noble, resistant primitivity anticipates *indigenismo*, the bourgeois project that positioned indigeneity as a rich cultural resource necessary to form a unique and unified Mexican nation in the decades following the Revolution. As with other aspects of Mexican nationalism, this widespread cultural and artistic project often repudiated the political and economic agency of indigenous peoples themselves in favor of an abstract notion of Indianness as a pre-modern font of cultural authenticity.¹² In Mena's view, Petra's fundamentally irrational and romantic nature proves a bulwark against neocolonial modernization in her successful appropriation of the beauty set into a religious treasure. While she portrays Petra as a racial "other" whose primitive folkways would be of interest to her educated readership, she also points to the past history of resistance and ongoing acts of appropriation that native Mexicans might use against the United States itself. In the end, the appearance of the beauty set in Petra's pueblo has not only imparted a new racial ideal, but has provided Petra with a tool she needed to upend the gender and racial hierarchy to her own advantage.

The Unfortunate Features of the Impoverished Elite

As "The Gold Vanity Set" illuminates, the body acquires meaning through a dense network of political, economic, technological and cultural factors and as such both its physicality and significance change from time to time and place to place. In fact, early twentieth-century notions of race as a complex of behavior, physicality, habitual actions and morality determined by a mixture of environment and heredity partially acknowledged the ways that the notion of race was a precipitation of larger social structures, even as many clung to its alleged "truth" and universality. In the years preceding Mena's stories, rapid advancements in surgical technique especially illustrated how the beauty industry was both structured by and produced ideas of race. Modern aesthetic surgery was heavily informed by racial science and developed during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, largely in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. A variety of new products and procedures of various degrees of safety were soon marketed to the wealthy, including face-lifts, nose jobs and eyelid reconstructions that had the capacity to transform features thought to be markers of race. Many affluent Mexicans considered themselves to possess many of the gendered behaviors, values and physical characteristics constitutive of whiteness. As expensive beauty surgeries promised the potential to deliver the elite from any stray features that might trouble these claims and even to trigger further character shifts, such procedures effectively promised a surgical formula for whiteness.

In her stories "The Vine-Leaf" (1914) and "Marriage by Miracle" (1916), Mena points to the availability of new medical technologies in Mexico City that produced whiteness as a commodity somewhat available for elite consumption. Despite leading Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio's protestation that "the classical model of beauty, the Greek model, does not exist, nor has it ever existed in

Mexico” (qtd. in R. López 308), in Mena’s vision “a Grecian nose of the most delicate modeling” was in fact beginning to appear amongst the “newly rich, Americanized society” of Mexico City (Mena 120). In “Marriage by Miracle,” an enterprising US beauty surgeon sells Westernized features to Mexican women anxious to achieve whiteness through both their physical appearance and their mastery of the self-serving consumer habits of the modern woman. Mena points to the ways in which the beauty industry produced ideas of race, at once reaffirming the importance of Euro-American aesthetic ideals and giving rise to new forms of embodiment in ways that challenge nationalists like Gamio or US eugenicists’ continued reliance on beauty as a fixed indicator of racial worth. These women, however rarefied their experience, function as national symbols that dramatically embody the vulnerability of Mexico to US influence. Nonetheless, they also demonstrate the urbanity of Mexican elite to an audience more inclined to see all Mexicans as primitive, as well as highlighting resources women of their social class could use to resist the ways that neocolonialism might literally transform the Mexican national body.

In “Marriage by Miracle,” aesthetic reconstructions figure as the most extreme strategy of the Ramos Blancos family’s struggle to manipulate appearances for their own social advantage. Mena’s characters cling to outward looks as a reliable indicator of class and racial status, despite their intimate acquaintance with the ease of falsifying one’s self-presentation. Mena cleverly literalizes the modernist theme of appearance versus reality, revealing “beauty” to be a quality women consciously work to achieve for their economic survival rather than an essential and unchanging proxy for biological fitness. Devastatingly ironic prose places the bodies of her characters at the center of her story and parallels the decaying of the Ramos Blancos’s stately home with the declining fortunes of the family, who are forced to let part of the house to renters “in order to keep their bones clothed with flesh” (113). Anxious to appear as wealthy as possible before their penniless neighbors, the family goes to extraordinary measures to scrimp and save on non-essential items. For example, they require their servant to “ostentatiously” (113) parade numerous covered dishes through the hallway before each dinner, thereby disguising a light meal of soup, beans, and tortillas as a multi-course procession of “the fish, the omelet, the pigeons, the fried fruits, the *frijoles*, the cheese, ices and pastry, all with their appropriate wines” (114). Such elaborate artifice was a “symbolic rite,” Mena writes, “by which the Ramos Blancos deceived their neighbors, and I think, even their own stomachs” (113). These local color images of pretend bounty contrast with the starkness of their actual nourishment, as Ernestina performs fashionable verse at the table to the delight of her sister and mother who applaud with “thin little hands.” Furthermore, her sister Clarita “stuff[s] her mouth full of fingertips,” rather than food, when she misspeaks (114). While the Ramos Blancos family believes that one’s body, like an ancestral home, can be quietly rented out and yet maintain its “façade” before the world, their bodies and their behavior reveal the same “cracks and gaps” that the family mansion betrays (113).

Yet despite her orchestration of elaborate physical deceptions, the matriarch of the Ramos Blancos insists on the body’s reliability as physiological evidence of heritage and birth, boasting “that she could *smell* family distinction a mile away” (116, italics mine). When her younger daughter Clarita acquires a suitor, Doña Rosalia “inspected” Sr. Maldonado “through her opera glasses” (116), a visual analogy to a biologist peering through a microscope, and concludes that he suffers a distinct lack of breeding. Through images of diagnosis, Mena emphasizes the ways that Doña Rosalia takes the body as a reliable reflection of the wealth and honor of one’s ancestors. Mena portrays Doña Rosalia as a member of the elite who, in general, increasingly relied upon an individual’s physical self-presentation as a transparent indication of her familial and racial background and eschewed the role of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. The irony lies in the ways Mena carefully undercuts the accuracy of this method of appraisal through depicting the matron’s intimate acquaintance with the viability of costuming one’s bones.

As the beauty and birth of her upper-class daughters are Doña Rosalia’s primary social capital, she insists that they broker an alliance that unites them with another family of generations-long breeding and high social standing. The organicism of the family’s very name, “Ramos Blancos,” which translates as the white branches of a tree, emphasizes the stock the family places in good heredity and breeding. In contrast, Clarita’s admirer is “rich as the Indies, but as to family a mere mushroom,” akin to a fungus that would graft socially insignificant relations onto their family tree (117). Compounding the problem is the

suitor's liberal sprinkling of US "dollars" (116) around the neighborhood in his attempt to win his beloved, as well as his father's approach to Doña Rosalia with a "French chauffeur" and "English footman" (117). These imperial trappings raise the matriarch's concern about the Maldonados' desires to implant themselves amongst the Mexico City elite in ways that would portend a financial windfall at the cost of a dramatic loss of influence for Doña Rosalia herself. Anxious not to appear to be condescending to these double-edged attractions of a fortune that lacked family breeding, the matron declares that Clarita can accept her suitor's hand only after her older sister Ernestina finds a husband. However, the exchange value of upper-class brides, Mena suggests, is based on their beauty and desirability, and the face of the eldest daughter Ernestina meets nobody's idea of a marriageable woman. Indeed, Doña Rosalia is happy to use Ernestina's literally "unfortunate nose" as a means to stave off Sr. Maldonado (121). This only increases the pressure placed on Ernestina's body, for the family's financial status as well as her sister's happiness now rest on her ability to attract a mate.

The trials that Ernestina undergoes to make herself beautiful for her sister's sake animate the terms of the ongoing debate about race, beauty and the body. Cosmetics and beauty services were immersed in an ongoing discussion about which was the proper course of self-improvement available to women. One side advocated a fixed correspondence between the body and the mind that cast ethical and spiritual purity as the only way to achieve a lofty brow and a smooth complexion and the other touted an allegedly democratizing access to beauty through a wide variety of products on the market that promised women of multiple races and classes equal opportunity to be beautiful. Some beauty advice of the former variety held that women must keep their expressions static and serene to preserve wrinkle-free skin by avoiding mental, physical and emotional activity (Banner 207). Warning Ernestina, "but for charity do not wrinkle thy forehead so," Clarita admonishes her sister to remain passionless for the sake of both of their marriage prospects (118). One of the most prominent proponents of this idea that the physical body is reciprocally linked with inner character was Francois Delsarte, who taught a system of acting that delivered altered mental states through careful, delicate exercises of relaxation and grace that were quite popular among elite US women (Banner 140-41). In Mena's fiction, this phenomenon crosses the southern national border, as Clarita flirts with her suitor through exhibiting her "leisurely and Delsartian technic" (119) of hoisting her love letters onto the balcony from below. But after ten years of these holistic approaches to physical beauty, Clarita's beloved one day delivers "an attractive illustrated booklet" containing before and after pictures that advertise a US beauty surgeon's ability "to improve the faces" of his clients (120). When Clarita threatens to elope and ruin the family name if Ernestina does not submit to surgery, Ernestina consents to "the excruciating attentions of the surgeon of beauty" and solicits a new face (121). As we shall see, this procedure grants her the physical characteristics of whiteness and transforms her character in ways she manipulates to her own benefit.

Uplifting the Face

The alteration of Ernestina's eyes, wrinkles, and nose and Dr. Malsufrido's removal of a birthmark from the Marquesa's back without a trace in her story "The Vine Leaf" register the increasing popularity of cosmetic surgical procedures in the 1910s, a historical context that illuminates the incisiveness of Mena's portrayal. While surgeries with cosmetic results were performed in the colonial period in both the United States and Mexico, modern consumer culture and recent advances in physicians' techniques to prevent infection and minimize pain stimulated the new availability of aesthetic medicine across the Americas — not only in Mena's fictional surgeries set in Mexico City, but also in medical journals describing eyelid surgery in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro in 1884 and in Havana in 1891 (Patterson 201, 204, 205).¹³ Encouraged by the legitimacy plastic surgery gained as a result of the large amount of facial reconstructions performed on World War I veterans, the field soon began to professionalize in order to ward off irregular "beauty surgeons" with high rates of scarring and other disfigurement (Haiken)¹⁴ The first board of plastic surgeons was founded in the United States in the 1920s, the standardization of such training was complete in the years immediately after World War II and the first training program and plastic surgery unit was established in Mexico in 1944 (Flores), all milestones in the institutionalization of commercial medicine in the Americas.¹⁵

In developing the techniques of performing and marketing modern aesthetic surgery, early cosmetic surgeons like Charles C. Miller of Chicago, John O. Roe of Rochester, New York, and Jacques Joseph of Berlin turned to racial scientists' expertise in the aesthetic qualities and racial significance of the shape of the head and angle of the nose to guide their improvements and legitimate their actions. Beauty surgery was not respected as a worthy application of the Hippocratic oath at the turn of the century, and in response its early practitioners enlisted racial science in order to frame racial features, such as a phenotypically Jewish nose, as debilitating to the psychological well-being of the patient and thus in need of medical correction (Gilman, *Creating Beauty*). Jacques Joseph of Berlin, credited with developing the techniques of the modern, scarless nose job still in use today, first performed the procedure in 1898 in order to relieve a patient suffering from "Jewish nose" (Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*). The successful, scarless surgery started a nose job craze in turn-of-the-century Germany and Austria amongst a largely Jewish clientele, and Joseph occasionally even offered free surgeries for those he felt to be psychologically harmed by their Semitic appearance (Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful* 185-87). Similarly, Roe, who in 1887 performed the first documented reduction rhinoplasty in the West, justified the surgery on the grounds that it was a psychological imperative for his patient to rid herself of the "deformity termed pug nose" that, according to physiognomists, signified "weakness and lack of development" (Roe 114). Citing physiognomists' categorization of five racial classes of noses, the Roman, Greek, Jewish, Snub or Pug and Celestial, Roe elaborated that the pug nose was long associated with hereditary syphilis and "degeneracy" (qtd. in Roe 114), a significant problem in a culture that often turns to the nose "as a measure of force in nations and individuals" (114). For an exorbitant fee, he pioneered techniques to transform pug noses into features of symmetrical proportions pleasing to classical canons of beauty. If we are to accept surgeon Jacques Maliniak's contention in 1934 that "plastic surgery had its origin in the reconstruction of the nose," surgeons' early efforts to "correct" the feature's "strong and easily discernible racial characteristics" are a good barometer of the extent to which the origins of cosmetic surgery were informed by racial hierarchies (55).

Yet the field of cosmetic surgery was not merely shaped by ideas of race, but itself contributed to an idea of race as a phenotypic appearance that could be purchased on the open market. Beauty surgeries produced the physical features of whiteness and as such both reaffirmed and unsettled the ontological status of Anglo-Saxon attributes as the peak of the racial hierarchy. US surgeons in Mexico distributed whiteness as a commodity, and Mena's portrayal of Ernestina's makeover emphasizes the racial changes her surgery effects. Her "nose of ridicule ... became a nose of dignity" and Ernestina's eyes, that were "once like two fleas, now actually represented eyes," shone forth from a "pale and symmetrical face, as smooth as an egg" (121). The juxtaposition of the image of dark fleas and a white, symmetrical egg recalls contemporary scientists' insistence that symmetry was an indicator of racial development in contrast to the animalistic qualities of the "lower" races. Furthermore, Ernestina's newly egg-shaped face now parallels the visage of her sister, whose name "Clarita" puns on "clara de huevo," the Spanish term referring to the white of an egg. Another name pun, which for better or worse was one of Mena's most relied-upon techniques, underscores how aesthetic surgery "relieved" elite Mexican women of suffering from the visible signs of race. After the beauty surgeon bestows a "Grecian nose" (120) upon a Mexican woman saddled with an allegedly degenerate pug nose who is consequently nicknamed "La Chata" (pug-nosed), she can then be called by her birth name, "Consuelo Quiroz," which closely resembles the Spanish for "surgical consolation." Finally, in "The Vine-Leaf" a doctor removes a dark, vine-leaf shaped birthmark from the skin twice described as "as pure as the petal of any magnolia" of the Spanish-born Marquesa, restoring the delicacy and whiteness of her form (89, 91).

As discussed earlier, turn-of-the-century racial discourse often embraced the Lamarckian notion that bodily habits such as cosmetic adornment could change one's character and hereditary material. Surgical procedures were frequently interpreted within this same framework, so that physical modifications were thought to have the potential to trigger behavioral changes and thus raised the specter that medical interventions could actually change the perceived physical and behavioral components of race. Aesthetic surgeries to whiten patients were justified on the grounds that they would alleviate psychological concerns, using bodily corrections as a means to create patients of well-adjusted character (Gilman,

Creating Beauty). Yet for others, medical procedures such as the X-ray were feared on account of their alleged capacity to change both the physical and behavioral characteristics of patients' racial identities. At the turn of the century, numerous print media outlets reported that X-ray technology lightened the skin of African Americans, a threat compounded by the impact on behavioral traits this shift might effect (de la Peña). What this might portend for the patients' descendents was anybody's guess. So persistent was this linkage between physical change, personal character and hereditary permanence that Maliniak, writing about cosmetic surgery in the early 1930s, was forced to clarify that "[u]nfortunately, eradication of the defect in the parent does not prevent its transmission to the child!" (62).

Mena animates these Lamarckian beliefs in the effects of surgery and the relative mutability of one's race by representing Ernestina's operations as changing not only the allegedly physical but also the mental and emotional components of her racial status. When her bandages are removed, instead of rejoicing in her newfound beauty, she is horrified to discover that her face is frozen in a mirthless expression. The surgeon confidently assures his patient that "English immobility" was all the rage amongst fashionable Mexico City women, suggesting that a character makeover is an added benefit of his whitening procedure (122). In this biting satire, whiteness is framed as a frozen, passionless life through analogy to ethnic stereotypes of English restraint and decorum. The narrator's ironic comment that "not being very logically inclined, Ernestina found no comfort in these arguments" works through subtle humor to situate race-based aesthetic surgery within a larger neocolonial marketplace that solicits Mexican women as clients but punishes their desires for social mobility by leaving them bereft of the capacity for happiness (122). While packaged as a local color piece that might delight a US audience with its sensationalistic details, this story poses the stakes of women of color attaining Western notions of beauty, a quality that many have defined by using their bodies as a negative referent. In effect, surgical technologies create results identical to anti-cosmetic notions of women's need for inner purity embraced by determinists, for both offer beauty in exchange for a life bereft of happiness. In Mena's analysis, beauty technologies do not provide a reliable means of escape from the hierarchies of beauty so much as they raise the question of whether or not the subaltern woman can really beautify.

And yet, the materialization of whiteness as a neocolonial product gives Mena's wealthy female characters a very limited form of mobility. In a consumer economy, products are open to use in a variety of contexts, especially within a framework that understands surgical operations and feminine consumption habits more generally to have the potential to shape one's character and physical form. The contemporary flexibility of the body works to grant Ernestina some agency in how she will incorporate her newfound "English immobility" into her life. Rather than mimic the metropole, racial thinking enables Ernestina to appropriate the results of her moment of weakness into a badge of religious strength, as her physical transformation triggers a spiritual conversion. After adopting the guise of a six-week, veiled religious retreat in order to buy herself private recovery time, Ernestina "sought to atone for the deception" by in fact dedicating those weeks to religious devotion that precipitates a heartfelt turn toward Christianity (121). When she reenters society with her inhuman expression, Ernestina's community interprets her beatific stare as an indication of spiritual magnanimity, and she comes to embrace her new face as a revelation of her true calling to a religious life. She easily parlays her disastrous side effects into both the cause and effect of a spiritual transformation, for in aggregate her contemporaries were as eager to believe in the body as a shifting, dynamic template of one's character as they were ready to celebrate beauty as an eternal, fixed quality. Mena thus illustrates the belief in beauty surgery's ability to alter character and behavior, for Ernestina's face is modified by medical technologies and, once frozen, retroactively attributed with an inborn piety. Even so great a judge of the body's character as Doña Rosalia believes that she is in the presence of a "saint" (122). As Mena emphasizes, at a time when the human form was ever more flexible, figures like Doña Rosalia were ever surer of its transparency.

Mena's story highlights the paradoxes of contemporary racial and beauty discourse that understood beauty as both immutable and alterable, a permanent essence and a commodity bought and sold for US profit touted as holding the capacity to transform one's character. Ernestina repurposes her immobile face from a quality of Englishness into an expression of Mexican religious belief that enables her to become an important cultural resource for the people of her neighborhood that simultaneously lifts her to an even

higher status among them. “She became famous far and wide as a saint,” and “all paid gratifying tribute thereto” and sought out spiritual blessings from Ernestina (122). Her religious stature benefits her own social standing, as well as becomes a force of faith and hope that binds the different segments of her community together, for elite “[f]astidious young women friends,” “[s]ick friends,” “[e]xpectant mothers,” and “the common people” all sought solace in her “holy face” (123). As Petra had done, Ernestina turns to Mexican religious traditions to appropriate the products of the US beauty industry in her own terms, to transfigure her “holey” face into a “holy” one that bolsters rather than undercuts the cohesiveness of her community. Ernestina’s widely recognized spiritual grace and newly high social standing also permits her to refuse a suitor’s hand in favor of religious solitude, claiming a social and economic freedom to remove herself from the sexual economy of beauty that Petra in “The Gold Vanity Set” depended on for her very safety. Her new public importance, furthermore, enables her to convince her mother to consent to Clarita’s marriage to Don Maldonado. Manipulating the local color genre, Mena recasts stereotypical ideas of Mexicans as primitive, superstitious and religious as fonts of resistance to US-led modernization. Her multifaceted stories show her characters’ consumption of beauty products from the North at once as evidence of neocolonialism and as a new source of self-fulfillment and cultural cohesion in everyday life.

Retailing Race

While some critics point to neoliberalism as creating the conditions for the products and services of bodily improvement to masquerade as political autonomy and personal subjectivity, such discourses of individual mobility have surrounded medical procedures and beauty products at least since the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Indeed, many beauty industry boosters in the Progressive Era saw beauty as an unmitigated tool of progress. Mena, however, considers the larger context of beauty products and investigates the economic and political consequences of the distribution of US beauty goods and services in Mexico. Contrary to cosmetics promoters, Mena concludes that they pose a threat to the social and political independence of Mexican women.

Yet her portrayal of her characters’ consumer agency that can transform products of US enterprise into a tool of Mexican religious expression similarly places great weight on the political expedience of beauty commodities. In her early stories, women’s political efforts are tied to their role as consumers. If Ernestina and Petra show that beauty products and services can be appropriated in ways that partially counter their conditions of production, the Marquesa of Mena’s story “The Vine-Leaf” solicits her aesthetic surgery in a manner at once less and more compromising to women’s ability to maintain agency within a political economy that had solicited women’s participation primarily as consumers since the origins of capitalism in North America in the 1830s and 1840s. Rewriting Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” (1843), wherein a man of science insists on removing his wife’s unsightly birthmark at the expense of her own life, Mena creates a female patient who maintains an upper hand over her doctor, demanding “[f]or favor, good surgeon, your knife!” (89). The Marquesa purchases and undergoes the removal of an area of dark pigmentation from her skin without ever revealing her face to the doctor, a man who later suspects that she had the incriminating feature removed because it had been painted by a dying artist as the identifying trait of his killer. The story’s narrative ambiguity places the reader on the same plane as the doctor; both are ultimately unsure whether or not his services have enabled the Marquesa to be unsuspected of the artist’s murder, or if she is captive to her husband who knows her guilt. In modern capitalism on both sides of the US-Mexico border, such strategic consumption is a hallmark of women’s agency. Like the readers of “The Vine-Leaf,” Mena’s audience in general is left unsure whether her characters have managed to get away with murder or if they are forever doomed to captivity in the consumer economy. That Mena came to see the limits of such an approach is suggested by her later stories that tell of female revolutionaries who learn to use bombs, rather than wish to be blondes.

While they were marketed to the public as offering a chance for women to escape the strictures of race, cosmetics in Mena’s fiction work to fulfill the very lack they have helped to create. Petra’s familiarity with the vanity set, for example, acquaints her not only with the remedy for the off-color of her cheeks and the disproportionate size of her eyes, but of these shortcomings in the first place. As Mena

dramatizes, cosmetics and aesthetic surgeries cannot be used to make up for biological determinist frameworks, for they actually produce some facets of racial thinking itself. Indexing contemporary thinking on the intersection of race and beauty, her stories depict the ways that cosmetics use came to stand in for the debate between aesthetic determinists, who saw the body as destiny, and Lamarckians, who embraced the possibility of self-consciously directing human evolution. Importantly, her use of dramatic irony, role reversals and character development effectively stages this debate in a manner that undercuts the viability of each position. She explores the ways that beauty products challenge determinists who cling to fixed notions of race by showing how beauty and race were co-constitutive phenomena. She also corrects the notion that long-standing cosmetics use could work to erode a preexistent flaw, a position embraced by many reformers and anti-racist leaders, by illustrating how commercial beauty helps to produce the racial unfitnes it promises to redress. As such, Mena's critical eye is as instructive for our own time as it might have been for her contemporaries. Her attention to the dynamism of the notion of race in the early twentieth century might help us unfold the ways that consumer goods and aesthetic practices continually disrupt, unsettle and generate ideas of race into the twenty-first century, offering a vital tool of analysis in our ongoing efforts to fashion political, economic and cultural forms less productive of racial hierarchies.

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Notes

¹ While sterilization legislation was a major priority of the eugenics movement in the United States, in Mexico only the state of Veracruz briefly enacted a sterilization law (Stern 258).

² On the so-called “ugly laws” and the cities that passed them, including San Francisco, Chicago, Columbus, Cleveland, Denver, Omaha and Lincoln, see Schweik.

³ This phrase borrows from Stocking's characterization of US social science as mired in biological indeterminism at the turn of the century. He overturns the conventional analysis of the era's notion of race as a fixed inheritance that can never be modified by emphasizing the fluid boundaries among race, culture, environment and heredity in the period that effectively conceptualized the body and culture as dynamic entities. See his *Race, Culture and Evolution*, chapter 10.

⁴ Stepan usefully characterizes eugenics as “above all an aesthetic-biological movement concerned with beauty and ugliness, purity and contamination, as represented in race” (135).

⁵ For example, Lamarckian theories of inheritance propose that a man's son would be born with a larger brain and an increased aptitude for schooling as a result of his own university training, though things might go a bit haywire with daughters. While Lamarckism was discredited worldwide by the early 1940s, there are currently shades of interest in a modified version of the theory, especially in the field of behavioral neuroscience.

⁶ Peiss emphasizes that the Madam C.J. Walker Company sold skin lighteners only after the founder's death in 1919, as part of a larger company shift away from political struggle and women's self-determination and toward a profit motive.

⁷ On Du Bois's development of Lamarckian evolutionary ideas, see Reed and Schuller.

⁸ This section draws on the work of Doherty and Tiffany López for biographical information on Mena.

⁹ Critics responsible for securing Mena's role in Latina/o literature and U.S. literary history include Doherty, Tiffany Ana López, Ammons and Rich.

¹⁰ The pun on the name “Petra” and the concept of “petrified” works in both English and Spanish.

¹¹ For more on the portrayals of Mexico in the magazines Mena published in see Doherty and Tiffany López.

¹² See Rick A. López's history of the India Bonita Pageant of 1921 for an example of how Mexican commercial and cultural leaders, as Mena had done, turned to the beauty industry to facilitate their creation of a notion of indigenusness useful to their own nation-building efforts.

¹³ On surgeries in colonial New England, see Rogers. On rhinoplasty in sixteenth-century Mexico, see de León, et al.

¹⁴ For a good discussion of how cosmetic surgery emerged from the beauty industry, in contrast to other historiographies that position it as an outcropping of war medicine, see Haiken.

¹⁵ On the significance of cosmetic surgery to larger trends toward the commercialization of US medicine, see Sullivan.

¹⁶ For an example of an analysis that treats body modification as a consequence of neoliberalism, see Schaeffer-Grabiel.

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