

BOOK REVIEW

Poetic Embodiments of Black and Latina Women and Girls

Gloria A. Negrete-Lopez

Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment.
By Jillian Hernandez. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. pp 303
\$27.95 (paper)

In Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment, Jillian Hernandez crafts a beautifully elaborate argument that examines aesthetics from the position she terms “sexual-aesthetic excess.” According to Hernandez, sexual-aesthetic-excess is a concept that theorizes the style and bodily comportment of Black and Latina girls and women that marks them as “too much.” Throughout the book Hernandez highlights how media, art, and geographical space weaponize the term “excess” against Black and Latina girls, while simultaneously appropriating this style to generate cultural and material capital for the artworld and media. Additionally, the author problematizes the sexual policing of Black and Latina girls and women by revealing how these critiques are rooted in issues of class. Utilizing a diasporic and transcolonial framework of Blackness and Latinidad, the author complicates theories of class, gender, race and sexuality in order to demonstrate how the creative practices used in her study challenge such stereotypes.

Divided into seven chapters and four autoethnographic interludes, Hernandez structures each chapter thematically and walks the reader through a majestic, gilded, and ornate mansion of cultural aesthetic references that begins in

North Miami, Florida. The book is a product of a feminist community art project started in 2004 by Hernandez called *Women on the Rise!* (WOTR) based out of the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Florida. This project developed in response to the increasing numbers of Black and Latina girls sent through the juvenile justice system in the early 2000's in Florida. Through an "intergenerational feminist art praxis" the project was able to carve out a space in the highly gentrified and art-washed landscape of North Miami.

The first chapter documents the racialized struggle that undergirds Miami which is exemplified in a 2012 controversy that centered photographs by artist Chrystal Pearl Molinary used by Hernandez to promote a lecture series, "Latina Women and the Body" (48). The controversy centered on the sexuality exuded by the two women in the photograph but it also revealed how Latina/o/x politics of respectability are rooted in anti-Blackness and a critique of class. For Hernandez, aesthetic excess is a process of freedom and in the rest of the chapters she documents how the artists of her study engaged in liberatory practices. The chonga style that frames the second chapter demonstrates how sexual-aesthetic excess marks the bodies of Latina/o/x women and girls with class differences that must be disciplined and denigrated daily. Yet, when this aesthetic is applied outside the context of Miami—such as the artworld or in mass media—it gains cultural capital. The third chapter discusses the sexual-aesthetic excess of gay/queer artists in the group and how they negotiate masculine embodiment as a way to subvert performing gender normativity and aesthetic respectability. Hernandez in this chapter explores masculine embodiment in queer community in a complex way that does not essentialize or simplify the desires of the artists/participants but instead traces new styles of embodiment and sexuality.

In the fourth chapter, Hernandez discusses Nicki Minaj's aesthetics of fakery, demonstrating how the rapper was able to gain cultural and material value in her embodiment throughout her career. From music videos to front page covers to Rococo style portraits, these mass cultural images compel a rich, critical analysis of the way sexual-aesthetic excess is deployed. Hernandez reclaims the pink aesthetic within her own writing through a manifesto which concludes the chapter and through a community event or "slide-show salon" curated by the author in North Miami. The fifth chapter centers the concept of "ambivalent grotesque" which Hernandez describes as both enticement and disgust when coming in contact with racialized erotic images. Within the epilogue, Hernandez launches a critical reflection on the WOTR program and the visual disruptions that took place in the Miami art scene. I see these chapters working alongside one another to give the reader a complex view of Black and Latina sexuality, but more importantly, these chapters demonstrate the complex theoretical knowledge production occurring in a collective space that supports, values, and centers women and girls of color.

Aesthetics of Excess is an exhilarating and refreshing book that constructs an ornate mansion filled with artistic and creative visions. This book should serve as a blueprint for scholars and students of Latina/o/x and Chicana/o/x studies. The Black Lives Matter movement has taught us that we have to actively work to undo anti-Black racism in daily life, including our own scholarship. The real-world implications of centering Blackness in Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x studies are manifold. Through Hernandez's project, we see a model that speaks against traditions of anti-Blackness and misogynoir in Latina/o/x studies and art communities. Hernandez's study shows us that we can work in opposition to racialized sexism, and that we must center the voices of Black women and girls within Latina/o/x studies. Many often

overlook the contributions of Afro-Latina/o/x women and girls in immigrant, organizing, and local communities. Through the work of Hernandez, we see a model that shows us that we can center Black voices within a scholarly project that also looks at Latina/o/x life, as an act of accountability. This book would be an excellent addition to undergraduate Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x studies classes along with women's studies classes.