

Review / Reseña

Rodríguez, Juana María. *Putas Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. 288 pp.

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In *Putas Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex*, Juana María Rodríguez offers an expansive, creatively wrought treatise on the politics of representing sex work, the processes by which the stigma that so stubbornly attaches to non-normative and racialized subjects becomes “a visual phenomenon,” “a bodily sign” (2). Yet this is a book not just about how stigma congeals and marginalizes, but also about how its targets resist and resignify the very identity that designates them as deviant: in embracing the epithet *puta* and leaning into their deviance, sexually non-normative Latinas disarm their detractors of their most potent weapon, that of shame. Interestingly, if one omits the comma from the book’s subtitle, the phrase invokes a distinct and perhaps simpler phenomenon: the visual representations of those who have sex for work. And indeed, much of the book is dedicated to the various technologies of surveillance that have captured the likenesses of sex workers, from nineteenth-century registration annals to *Belle Époque* street photography to contemporary documentaries. However, the simple punctuation that cleaves the subtitle into two conveys a subtly different project, one that expands the field of sexual labor and plumbs the radical possibilities of observation. In reaching beyond sex work per se, Rodríguez thinks capaciously about putas and their lives; after all, as veteran activist and scholar of sex work Gail Pheterson has written, “any woman could be

stigmatized as a whore” (Pheterson 2005). And in opting for “seeing” rather than the more voyeuristic gestures of “watching” or “looking at,” Rodríguez suggests an interactive practice that aims to liberate, rather than discipline or imprison, the visual subject. “That representation is flawed, that it is dangerous, that it is susceptible to causing harm, does not mean we should refuse its potential to change how we see ourselves, others, and the worlds we share,” she writes in the book’s introduction (22).

In five chapters grouped into two parts, Rodríguez boldly analyzes the aesthetics and semantics of depictions of sex workers and otherwise sexually deviant Latina subjects in pornography, state records, graphic novels, social media, biographies, and photojournalism. While the first part proffers close readings of images of sexualized subjects in the historical record, the second presents case studies of two notorious putas and a host of unknown ones, the latter having found a resting place in a shelter for aging and retired sex workers in Mexico City. While this approach results in a somewhat disjointed whole, one that perhaps could have been strengthened by a clearer overarching narrative arc, each individual chapter is excellent. One analyzes the *registro de mujeres públicas*, a short-lived public registry of prostitutes from nineteenth-century Mexico City, invoking Foucault to argue that the advent of photography facilitated the emergence of novel forms of biopolitical governance and sexual taxonomy. By rendering them visible, ostensibly for the purposes of public health and order, this technology of statecraft quite literally created the subject of the public woman, an object of scorn yet also one of intrigue and titillation. The titillation of observing the sexually aberrant persists to this day, of course, and Rodríguez artfully probes the representational techniques of several recent documentary projects chronicling the residents of Casa Xochiquetzal, home to elderly putas such as the idiosyncratic Raquel and the longsuffering Norma. From unsettlingly prurient nude portraits to a thoughtful film borne of a longstanding relationship between an artist and her subjects, her readers are presented with different renderings of the sex worker as muse, some extractive and facile, others abstaining from tidy narratives about suffering and redemption in favor of close and humane character studies. It is clear which works Rodríguez finds superior, and through her thick descriptions, I found myself fully convinced.

Throughout the book, Rodríguez is attentive to questions of power, agency, and pleasure, the perennial and perennially contentious debates surrounding sex work. While she unabashedly celebrates the subversive potential of puta life—the “beauty, value, and spirit of putas everywhere”—she also acknowledges the violence,

exploitation, and coercion that some of the more uncritical celebrations of sex-worker agency omit. In “refusing the false binary of the happy hooker or hapless victim,” Rodríguez joins scholars and sex worker activists such as Heather Berg, Juno Mac, Molly Smith, and Natalie West by allowing space for contradiction and nuance when tackling the “vexed question of how pleasure might endure in the shadow of violence and abjection” (126). As she grapples with this ambiguity, Rodríguez is remarkably astute: she manages to honor the ways in which her subjects find empowerment and agency in experiences that cause her to wince at their racism and misogyny, yet simultaneously reserves the scholar’s prerogative to offer alternative readings that complicate, or perhaps even complement, rather than correct or supplant. Most importantly, she shows how through their own self-representation, putas “rescript the misogyny and violence that surround puta life” (187). For example, famed porn star Vanessa del Rio’s memory of sex with a police officer under duress could be both a wild, youthful adventure that excited her with its illicitness and a chilling episode of state violence. Another chapter on the former sex worker and health educator Adela Vázquez fills out these ideas of the multiplicity of representation and the unlikely or unexpected sources of freedom for subaltern subjects. For Vázquez, a poor, trans immigrant from Cuba, peddling stereotypical Latina eroticism in local classified ads and onstage as a performer was both essentializing and pleasurable, a survival strategy that was not devoid of joy and aplomb. Diverging from a liberal conception of atomized, negative rights, for those already living outside “the structures of sexual and social legibility, those moments of carnal pleasure, liberated from the constraints of language, and reason, might burst open to create possibilities for something akin to liberation,” Rodríguez tells us (139).

In terms of methodological practice, Rodríguez expertly models the emancipatory modes of spectatorship she proposes as a means of remedying the more harmful aspects of representing puta life. While she traces various genealogies of repressive, humiliating, and violent forms of visually depicting the sexual other, her own gaze is keen, compassionate, and imaginative. Ever attendant to the smallest of details in the images she analyzes—the coquettish tilt of a chin, the luster of expensive fabric, a sadness about the eyes—she follows Saidiya Hartman in pursuing a project of “critical fabulation,” a generous and rich speculation about the lives of women rendered one-dimensional by the archive. In keeping with her scholarly ethic, Rodríguez’s practice is one of care, attempting to swap out an exploitative, leering tradition of image-making for an honest meditation on “the inherent impossibility of

fully capturing subjectivity” (200). While questions remain about the inherently extractive nature of academic research, *Putta Life* is not inhibited by such concerns, but rather uses them to enrich, and even problematize, its own analysis.

The text is peppered with a liberal dose of self-reflection, with colorful and confessional musings on Rodríguez’s own relationship to puta life as a sexually precocious queer Latina whose social and intellectual pursuits have brought her into close contact with some of her subjects. She is quick to point out, however, that her status as a tenured professor secures a degree of social capital that insulates her from the scorn reserved for society’s most abject. Yet her identification with racialized queer and otherwise non-normative sexual subjects, both in the long-ago past and among her neighbors in San Francisco, hints at a powerful solidarity, a radically inclusive politics of *putería*. To that end, some of the book’s most poignant material stems from the author’s reflections on aging: what happens to a puta who gets old? Rodríguez finds queerness in the refusal to retreat from expressions of overt sexuality as “the materiality of the body and the bounce that collagen provides fade with age...even as the sexual tricks we have learned and the erotic imagination that worldliness provides fuel new possibilities (12).” In these passages, Rodríguez is at her most tender, yet somehow also her most trenchant; her vulnerability and candor do not blunt the clarity of her analysis.

As a final note, Rodríguez leaves us with an appeal for the decriminalization of sex work, the enduring demand of sex worker activists across the world since the inception of their social movement in the 1970s. In the face of criticism from neoabolitionists that decriminalization would amount to a tacit acceptance of the scourge of prostitution, this claim remains a clarion call to dismantle the prison systems that have for so long rendered sex workers insecure. And while stigma would undoubtedly persist even after decriminalization, as it surely does in the many countries in which buying and selling sex is not illegal, we can count on the putas to turn it on its head.

Works Cited

Pheterson, Gail and Margo St. James. “Sex Workers Make History: 1985 & 1986-The World Whores’ Congress.” Report of the European Conference on Sex

Work, undated. <https://www.walnet.org/csis/groups/icrse/brussels-2005/SWRights-History.pdf>.