

# The Latina Femme Promise of Vulnerability and Access

Rodríguez, Juana María *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. New York: New York University Press 2014 (243 pages)

**CAN AN ENCOUNTER** with an academic book feel like a deliciously queer one-night stand, outside of the confines of your semi-orderly life and leave you glowing with enthusiasm, satisfied, and yet eager for the promise of more? Can a review be an amorous gesture, a simple pleasurable *yes*? In the spirit of scholarly respectability, we tend to assume a review should involve some form of cooled off distance, a cautionary and critical *no*. Yet, if as Rita Felski (2015) contends, there are limits to critique, then a piece of (queer) scholarly writing, like a work of art, could move a reader beyond simple identification or recognition.

In the afterglow of several nights spent with Latina femme scholar Juana María Rodríguez' second book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* I am pulled by her flirtatious invitation into dialogue and her active engagement with her reader ("was I kind?"; "are you repulsed?") and am convinced that "it is not about the explication of desire but about a willingness to sit with the enchantment and funk of our own contradictions" (Rodríguez 2014, 184). The book starts from the promise of friendship and is a lot more than what Rodríguez modestly calls "awkward attempts at haptic textuality" (183). To me, the promise of this kind of queer femme sexual theory lies precisely in the ways it offers an affective engagement with queer bodies of flesh and knowl-

edge. The guilty pleasures of intellectual arousal generated by (femme) scholarship also engender a desire for radically different sexual futures.

It has been argued that even if, what we now commonly understand as, queer theory has its origins in a radical critique of (hetero)sex, which began with the work of among others, Gayle Rubin and Leo Bersani, queer studies has become less concerned with sex as a practice and more with anatomical sex and its gendered variations and mutabilities. Many, especially gay male theorists in different geopolitical academic locations (including Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Don Kulick, and others) have lamented this development. Queer feminists in turn have critiqued the very phallic nature of the so-called anti-social turn of thinking sexuality as no future (Hammers 2014) and they have also gone to considerable length to challenge assumptions about the inherently transgressive nature of for instance BDSM practices (Weiss 2011).

Rodríguez takes a different route, in this book as well as in other work. “To move from theoretical investigations of detached textual desire, to a critical consideration of an actualized sexual imaginary,” Rodríguez (2007, 282) wrote in a previous essay, “necessitates performance as the methodological project of investigation.”

In a field which is indeed strangely abstract in its treatment of fleshy subjects, dirty fantasies, and urgently made up affinity structures, she works in the spirit of the late José Esteban Muñoz and in intertextual conversation with a range of mostly US-based scholars who employ a queer of color critique, as both methodology, politics, and world-making. Throughout her work, Rodríguez dares to acknowledge and work with the impact her own erotic gendered relations have on her thinking. She writes brazenly about sex, not primarily as representation, scientific investigation, or autobiographical confession, but as a kind of enfolded archive animated through interpretations of gestures and utterances.

Rodríguez’ complex and intensely gestural, brazen, and hopeful queer Latina femme body is a seductive and engaging figure to move with through a distinctly feminine and always already racialized and colonial sexual landscape. Even if, as she notes, some bodies more than others are associated with their gestures; queers, Latinas and other racialized

subjects, those who seem out of line with straight white-washed culture have stories to tell, something that we learned already in Rodríguez' first book, *Queer Latinidad* (2003). A focus on gesture, she contends, "animates how bodies move in the world, and how we assign meaning in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing" (2). Here gesture is literal and metaphorical and specifically emergent in the body politics of dance and sex, activism and family making. Rodríguez' queer Latina femme figure moves her readers, through her insistence on moves, and turns her attention to those ephemeral gestures of desire that are often difficult to capture in writing.

The book is divided into four distinct chapters. The first, "Who's Your Daddy?" immediately sets the scene of Rodríguez' perversely pleasurable imagination by reminding us that sexual pleasures and reproduction/parenthood, while far too often being cast as radically different trajectories of queer politics, are symbolically and affectively enjoined through kinship as "the imagined site of our most intimate bonds" (29). The chapter, to my mind, does two things: First, it is a strong and timely contribution to a critique of the dream of marriage and homonormativity as a project of affluent white assimilationists that casts aside the vast majority of queer families. Indeed, as Rodríguez reminds us the majority of queer households with children are not those who have carefully planned their reproductive futures via accessing expensive technologies, but rather, those who are poor, of color, multi-generational, and forged through a range of much more complex temporary and enduring bonds. Secondly, it is a serious engagement with the intense pull that "Daddy play" and other forms of erotic playing with kinship terms has for many of us, showing that in fact, these trajectories of kinning are not separate. This chapter is a strong argument for a sexual future in which we do not have to choose; asexual respectable parenthood in the service of the nation's (white) children or sticky radical sexual politics. Repeatedly, Rodríguez gestures toward the "contradictory functions of law, discipline and regulation" (66) reminding us that the possibility for agency, sexual, reproductive or otherwise, is always already cast within a framework of global capitalism and its uneven distributions of resources, power, and sovereignty.

The second chapter, “Sodomy, Sovereignty and Other Utopian Longings,” takes a different and distinctly radical queer Latina approach to the increasingly popular topic of homonationalism and uses Puerto Rico as its case for discussing the sexualization of politics and the relationship between ideas of sovereignty and (political) fears of sodomy, reminding us in poetic detail of how localized activist gestures cannot be dislodged from large-scale political forces.

In the third chapter, “Gesture in Mambo Time” Rodríguez takes us dancing; carefully detailing the complexity of queer public spaces, and the ways bodies engage, move, respond to music, and exist. Anyone who has spent any time in queer dance club scenes is bound to feel enthused and engaged at this form of queer erotic ethnography.

Then, in the final chapter Rodríguez looks for her Latina femme in politically incorrect sexual fantasies, offering a different contribution to a growing field of porn studies, with a complex analysis of racialized sexual agency. In the tradition of interdisciplinary queer studies that insists on the importance of theorizing every day life of both family and friendship, clubbing and cooking, is to my mind a radical and hopeful contribution to several seemingly different but ultimately clearly overlapping fields, the book thus engages a range of timely questions for queer studies, including archives and temporalities, citizenship and sovereignty, representation and reproduction.

Needless to say, Rodríguez’ arguments are specific; she is deeply enmeshed in her own trans/national and regionally specific setting, but the way she stitches her stories has much to teach. The club and sex scene of Latino San Francisco, queer subculture, racialized working class and immigrant communities, are among those most prevalently highlighted in the book. She is, as many queer scholars and works produced in American settings, intrinsically suspicious of the state, which might perhaps appear (at least historically) strange to Scandinavian scholars, who have tended to understand the state as “women-friendly” rather than as an obstacle to living out one’s fantasies. To my mind, however, the time is more than ripe for examining the profoundly uneven distribution of rights and privileges among differently situated queer subjects

in the Nordic region as well the degree to which Nordic LGBTQ (re-productive) politics has become enmeshed in what Butler (2002) has famously called “desiring the state’s desire.” Here Rodríguez’ cultural studies approach, affective methodology, and eclectic range of materials might offer inspiration.

In a time when we are told that #lovewins and we simultaneously witness increasing racialized violence and heightened economic disparities in a queer nation that is far from united, where growing regulation and intense commodification shape our encounters and the treatments of the very archives and legacies of queer lives, we need new models and modes of imagination. That is, ways of imagining the future of queer politics and scholarship that go beyond the dichotomy of striving for respectability and reproduction of normative ideals on the one hand or the radical and impossible complete disavowal of such “norms” on the other. To my mind, a great part of that concerns our ways of crafting stories, making arguments and having engagements. Few queer scholars’ prose is as moving as Rodríguez’; indeed her writing is itself a gesture, an address, not to everyone but certainly to those of us who wish to think further and more complexly and specifically about what sexual politics means for kinship and nation, performance and pornography, dance floors and bedrooms. To my mind, Rodríguez’ aspiration to “conjure a pedagogy of vulnerability and access,” what she calls, “a practice of opening for another, spreading wide in the service of fuller social relations of recognition and care, taking in the heartache and hope and being willing to carry the load” (184), offers both a way of inhabiting a broken world and a truly original queer fem(me)inist model of scholarship.

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