AESTHETICS OF EXCESS

THE ART AND POLITICS OF BLACK AND LATINA EMBODIMENT

/ JILLIAN HERNANDEZ

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THE ART AND POLITICS OF BLACK AND LATINA EMBODIMENT

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DEDICATED TO MASAYA, ZAIDA MILAGROS "GRAM" MACHADO,
AND EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATED IN WOMEN ON THE RISE!

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INTRODUCTION

In 2004, I founded the feminist community arts project Women on the Rise! (WOTR) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Florida. I developed WOTR in response to learning about the increasing number of girls committed to the juvenile justice system in Florida in the early 2000s. When I researched the kind of educational opportunities available to them while incarcerated, I found that none of their classes provided a space for creative release in the midst of what was a profoundly disorienting and distressing experience. I learned that the girls were regularly subject to various forms of dubiously effective, and at times violating, state-supported group and individual counseling. When not in those spaces, the girls were either in remedial education sessions in dismal classrooms or forced to entertain themselves in the cell block with random collections of old DVD movies and books.

With that knowledge, I designed WOTR as an intergenerational feminist art praxis, rather than a form of art therapy, self-work, or carceral reform. The goal of this praxis was to generate a place for girls of color, both in detention and at other community sites, to engage in self-expression and critical dialogue, practices that they were either socially and institutionally excluded from (being artists) or were believed incapable of (being theorists).

Workshops for WOTR were conducted off-site from the museum in the spaces of collaborating nonprofit, government, and educational organizations that work with girls (ages ten to eighteen) and young women (ages eighteen to twenty-five). The project consisted of workshops that introduced participants to the work of feminist, antiracist, and queer artists. These workshops, which were free of charge, culminated in the production of artworks by participants in a range of media that were inspired by and responded to the particular practice of the featured artists. For example: girls created and documented silhouette forms they forged in nature with their bodies for the workshop on Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* pieces of the 1970s; they captured images in their schools and neighborhoods through gilded frames when they learned about Lorainne O'Grady's *Art Is . . .* (1983) project; and they composed performative instruction writings such as those found in Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit* (1964). Bedazzled photo-collage self-portraits are made when WOTR covers Mickalene Thomas, and participants fashion elaborate headdresses for iconic women of color in the project based on Firelei Baez's work. These workshops were collaboratively led and developed by Miami artists Nereida Garcia-Ferraz, Guadalupe Figueras, Crystal Pearl Molinary, Isabel Moros, Ali Prosch, Dionorah de Jesús Rodríguez, Monica Lopez de Victoria, Anya Wallace, and myself.[1] Teaching artists also conducted workshops based on their own work, and WOTR organized trips for participants to visit artists' studios and exhibitions around Miami.

This pedagogy fostered creative intergenerational and transracial relationships and genealogies between young working-class Black and Latina women and the artists who teach and are taught in WOTR. By focusing on other artists, the project also allowed participants to potentially explore personal issues without having to make revelations that could make them vulnerable in a group context. This occurred, for example, in workshops based on the work of Yayoi Kusama, where we discussed how Kusama's method of "obliterating" objects by covering their surfaces with polka dots provides her with a feeling of control during the hallucinatory episodes she suffers. Artists teaching for WOTR prompted the girls to utilize polka dots and other repetitive patterns to create their own obliterations of objects in Kusama-inspired collages. The resultant abstract works of colorful patterns concealed the girls' feelings, leaving them to decide whether or not to discuss the meaning behind their work in a group setting. Several girls shared that they chose to obliterate a troubling fear, experience, or anxiety.

The relations and praxis of Women on the Rise!, situated within Miami's particular formations of gender, class, and race, form the lens through which

I view the spectacularly styled bodies of Black and Latina women and girls. In particular, a series of converging events that occurred in Miami in the spring and summer of 2007 led me to study how the discourse of aesthetic excess, and its attendant debates, significantly structure the boundaries around legitimate and deviant forms of gendered Blackness and Latinidad. These events set me on the path toward understanding how Black and Latina girls and women artfully trouble these binaries through their bodies and creative, aesthetic labor.

"Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll"

I was teaching a WOTR workshop at the Miami-Dade County Regional Juvenile Detention Center in the spring of 2007 with a group of girls along with the local Cuban American artists Crystal Pearl Molinary and Jessica Gispert. The artists discussed how Latina culture and body image inform their photographic practice, and they worked with the girls on a hands-on art project.

I remember how I was dressed. That day, I was wearing tight black leggings under a fitted olive green sweater dress with a V neckline. My shoes were vintage-style, bone-white peep-toe heels. Half of my hair was streaked with chunky blonde highlights, and it was flat-ironed straight. I had thick black eyeliner on and brick-red lipstick. At one point in the workshop, a participant told me, "Miss, you look like a Bratz doll."

Bratz: the multiracial, mass-marketed dolls for young girls, styled with plump lips, elaborately made-up bedroom eyes, platform heels, and miniskirts. My initial response to the comment was the same as everyone else in the room—laughter—and I enjoyed following the girls' jovial yet intense debate over whether this was an accurate description of me. The participant qualified her Bratz doll comparison by indicating my makeup, heels, formfitting clothes, and highlighted hair. It was casual and lighthearted.

Later that evening, however, I found myself reflecting on this characterization of me. As an art educator, I believed that my style reflected my studied eclectic taste. *Was it a joke? Do I really look like one of those tacky dolls? She must have been kidding . . .* At the time, I did not associate myself with the "type" of woman who would look like a Bratz doll. Why was I viewed this way? More importantly, why was this comparison so objectionable to me?

As the girl child of first-generation, working-class Cuban and Puerto Rican migrants raised in the Latinx enclaves of West New York, New Jersey, and Miami, Florida, I knew what Bratz-type women looked like. They didn't

look like me. I attended a private Catholic elementary school and was college educated. They, on the other hand, were girls who did not perform well in school, hung out on the street, and dressed in clothes that were cheap and too revealing.

When I ruminated on this exchange with the girls, my thoughts turned toward examining my unacknowledged biases toward the Latina women my mother trained me not to emulate and confronting the repressed shame I harbored toward my own working-class-ness. I began to understand that I drew upon my identity as educated to disavow my family's considerable financial precarity, as my educational access came at the tremendous sacrifices of my mother, who worked retail and factory jobs, and my stepfather, who was a self-employed handyman. Yet, even while living in a run-down, pest-infested building in West New York, New Jersey, when I was a young girl in Catholic school, we always identified ourselves as middle-class. Looking back now, I can see how acknowledging our working-class status would have meant denying ourselves dignity and accepting the discourse of failure attributed to racialized communities.

My initial rejection of the participant's characterization led me to realize my own social proximity to the aesthetic excess attributed to working-class Latinas via appearance. If the girls think I look like a Bratz doll, who is to say that others haven't viewed me in the same way—like the men who have sexually harassed me as I've walked along the streets of Miami, or the older Latinas who looked at me disdainfully when I was a pregnant nineteen-year-old? Other than perhaps my thick-rimmed glasses, as my body navigates social spaces, does anything separate me from these so-called low-class women?

Enter Chongas

Like I did every Thursday, I picked up a copy of the *Miami New Times*, Miami's free alternative weekly newspaper. The cover of the June 14, 2007, edition struck me. It was a close-up shot of two teenage Latina girls against a bright pink background. They had exaggerated, vaudeville-like facial expressions and wide-open eyes. Their hair was heavily gelled and slicked tight against their heads. Large silver hoop earrings dangled down their necks. They posed their hands performatively to display their long acrylic fingernails.

The *Miami New Times* cover text read simply, "CHONGAS!" in large, bold lettering across the bottom of the front page, framing the portrait of the two young women (figure I.1). "Chonga" is a colloquial term used by Latinx

FIGURE I.1. Chonga *Miami New Times* cover (22, no. 2, June 14–20, 2007), art directed and photographed by Ivylise Simones.

in Miami to describe so-called low-class, slutty, tough, and crass young women. The cover was articulating a characterization, the presentation of a type, through staging the girls' bodies against a solid-colored background and the corresponding, definitional term "chonga." The cover communicated, "This is what chonga girls are."

The girls in the photo were the creators of the widely viewed YouTube video "Chongalicious," a parody that mocks young Latina women who don tight clothing, heavy lip liner, and large hoop earrings. The performers, who do not self-identify as chongas, were the subjects of the *Miami New Times* cover story, featured in an interview about their "Chongalicious" video's unexpected and rapid rise to popularity.

I took careful notice of this visual impression, joined with what I already knew about the perception of chongas in Miami as "bad girls." The image spurred me to reflect not only upon my own girlhood experiences of navigating bodily self-presentation, but on those of the working-class Latina and Black girls I worked with as an educator through WOTR. In that moment, viewing the *Miami New Times* cover image of these Latina girls, I felt that much was at stake in the chonga's dramatic coming into discourse.

The meaning making around class and gendered/racialized body aesthetics that appeared to me in these encounters animates the case studies on the art and politics of Black and Latina embodiment that make up this book, which span from 2007 to 2014. This was a time marked in the U.S. by economic recession, increasing urban gentrification and deportation of immigrants, and the murder of Trayvon Martin, a teenage African American boy, in Sanford, Florida, which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. At this time, while Black and Latinx lives were being systematically devalued by violence and an economy failing in significant part due to predatory mortgage lending practices aimed at working-class and racialized populations, Black and Latina women and girls were achieving unprecedented success and visibility in various cultural sites. The young Latina girls who created the viral YouTube video "Chongalicious" became instant celebrities, appearing on internationally broadcast Spanish-language television networks. Nicki Minaj became one of the most financially successful mainstream hip-hop artists. And the work of Black women artists like Wangechi Mutu and Kara Walker became some of the most highly visible and valuable art in the contemporary art world.

Yet these moments of woman and girl of color cultural recognition and material achievement also occasioned cultural debates that marked Black and Latina bodies as fake, low-class, ugly, sexually deviant, and thus damag-

ing to the public image of their communities. The sociocultural boundary formation performed by the differential aesthetic valuing of Black and Latina bodies and their representation is what concerns me in this book. I analyze how these assessments are produced and negotiated in cultural production, the reception of body aesthetics in critical and popular discourses, and the creative and vernacular practices of Black and Latina girls and women. I ask why some gendered representations and embodiments of Blackness and Latinidad are celebrated and gain cultural and material value, while others are mocked, reviled, and considered dangerous. Throughout, I argue that the aesthetics of excess play a major part in defining what becomes legible as Blackness and Latinidad through varied processes of inscription, assumption, and disavowal.

Aesthetics of Excess centers on agitated responses (Garcia Hernandez 2017), such as my discomfort with being compared to a Bratz doll, as they illuminate the social and cultural stakes of Black and Latina embodiment and representation: the mockery and shaming of chonga girls; the harassment of masculine body–presenting young Black and Latina women; the vilification of superstar rapper Nicki Minaj's body as fake and plastic; and young women's reactions of repugnance and embarrassment at sexual images of women crafted by contemporary Black women artists.[2]

Continually subject to oppression and marginalization, women of color have, as Stuart Hall writes about Black people in the diaspora, "used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation" (1996, 473). Beyond tracing the politics and cultural effects of these often-hostile responses, this book also reveals the power and potential that the visual economy of aesthetic excess offers for contesting and reimagining formations of race, gender, class, and sexuality for Black and Latina women and girls as they make art with and about their bodies.[3]

Where Girls and Art Collide: WOTR as Performative Site

Feminist artists and art historians have attested to the unwieldy and radical ways that girls encounter and read art. Tracey Emin claims that those who best understand her deeply personal explorations of sexuality and relationships are working-class teenage girls, rather than art critics (Robinson 2006, 2). And Anna C. Chave has described how, when two teenage girls saw one of Donald Judd's 1968 floor box sculptures at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, they "strode over to this pristine work, kicked it, and laughed.

They then discovered its reflective surface and used it for a while to arrange their hair until, finally, they bent over to kiss their images on top of the box" (1990, 44). The multisited analyses in this book center on such encounters and pivot along the axis of my work with girls and young women through the WOTR feminist art collective.

Aesthetics of Excess draws on WOTR as a performative site, where the discrepant modes of cultural value in which aesthetics of excess are entrenched make themselves visible as girls and art collide. Art and theory are coproduced in spaces where they are not typically imagined, as WOTR takes art off the wall and activates it in social contexts that spark performative enactments by participants. Through these performances, they passionately debate the politics of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other vectors of difference. The girls who participate in the project often have agitated responses to the work displayed in WOTR workshops, due to elements such as the artist's nudity, the visibility of bodily processes and/or fluids, and content or aesthetics that they find unpalatable.

Rather than discipline the girls to appreciate these works in order to develop a form of cultured good taste, WOTR instructors utilize their agitation to probe what participants, instructors, and featured artists have at stake in the representations in question. What would compel an artist like Ana Mendieta, who was a young orphaned Cuban exile subjected to various forms of abuse and alienation in the U.S., to merge her nude body with the natural landscape and utilize animal blood as a medium? Might Wangechi Mutu's collages of deformed women be critiques of the racial ideals of the beauty industry? The girls' often highly performative and, to use Ruth Nicole Brown's (2014) phrase, "wrecklessly theatric" responses to such questions often reveal significant insights into the artists' works, and how participants theorize the aesthetic production and representations of gendered embodiment. I center these "dramatic, semi-confrontational, and passionately argued" (Brown 2014, 35) theatrics in crafting the arguments of this book, as I understand them as methods of theorizing, knowledge production, and self-fashioning innovated by the girls.

Through WOTR, I have gained a nuanced understanding of how notions of high and low culture are complicated when young women of color engage in cultural production, as well as how they challenge the disciplining of their bodies and sexualities through artistic authorship. Thus, the book chapters draw extensively from the insights of the Black and Latina young women I worked with, who are positioned in the text as artists and theorists of culture. I theorize in tandem with the girls, whom I also refer to as WOTR

artists, and my exchanges with them are also creatively evoked in the book through visual and textual interludes that feature their artwork, writing, and commentary, in addition to my creative responses.

I juxtapose the body practices of self-described gay and heterosexual WOTR artists in Miami with images produced by contemporary visual and pop culture artists whose works stage sexual bodies, such as Kara Walker and Nicki Minaj. These are figures who are taught in WOTR workshops or whose work is consumed by project participants. Rather than disaggregating girls' talk about themselves and their readings of cultural productions, I highlight how these narratives are enmeshed, illustrating the complex interplay between the sexual, racial, class, and gender discourses circulating in media and girls' aesthetic interpretations, transformations, negotiations, and incarnations of these meanings.

Ornamentalism and the Power of Sexual-Aesthetic Excess

There is nothing inherently excessive in the embodiments I discuss in this book, as to attribute excess would be to measure these styles against modernist European stylistic values, which were generated by influential white tastemakers, men who linked racial and gendered inferiority to so-called aesthetic indulgences.[4] For example, in "Ornament and Crime," the 1908 treatise on the role of style in modernism written by influential Viennese architect Adolf Loos, pleasure in elaborate aesthetic practices is framed as evidencing a deviant savagery. Loos states, "Primitive man had to differentiate themselves by various colours, modern man wears his clothes as a mask. . . . The lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power" (1985, 103).

Similarly, Le Corbusier, a French architect, tastemaker, and contemporary of Loos, disavowed aesthetic excess by forging a connection between adornment and practices of girlhood consumption that were just emerging in the early twentieth century. As Rosalind Galt explains, "Le Corbusier also abhorred glitter, posing aesthetic purity against the fashionable patterns beloved of shopgirls" (2011, 66). Racialized and hypersexual femininity in particular has served as a denigrated prism through which the superiority of authentic, truthful, and natural/simple (white) styles have been asserted (Lichtenstein 1987). These aesthetic theories have traveled from Europe to the U.S. through the institutionalization of canonical histories of Western art and design, and they find contemporary life in the negative, racializing assessments of working-class Black and Latina women and girls—whose elaborate embodiments situate them as the antithesis of high

style and therefore as sexual others, according to both modernist and classical Western discourse.

L. H. Stallings (2015, 11) has observed how the Western construct of aesthetics has worked as an apparatus for making "art as valuable as science" through the mobilization of formalistic judgments fashioned after imperialistic logics of value that dehumanized colonial-racial subjects. I work from a conception of aesthetics that is inspired by Stallings's (12) framework of *transaesthetics*, which offers an understanding of art as intertwined with culture, rather than divorced from it. In discussing transaesthetics in relation to African American literatures, Stallings asserts that writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, who blur the boundaries between ethnography and literature, "would distance their forms and aesthetics away from singular and binary sensory expressions in which objects could be easily commodified into a collectible artifact to reflect an empire or an empire's wealth. Transaesthetics made possible the survival of a posthuman imaginary over knowledge-power, the representation of black bodies, and the improvisational nature necessary for building black creative traditions" (12). *Aesthetics of Excess* shares this understanding of the aesthetic, and I use the term to denote creative, diasporic iconographies and practices of bodily styling, art making, and cultural production enacted by WOTR artists and the cultural workers they engage with. Rather than attempting to normalize Black and Latina body aesthetics as tasteful or normal, I plumb the discourse of ornamental excess and the power of sexual aesthetics to probe the social and cultural disturbances they spark, and thus illuminate how class, race, gender, and sexual difference are formed via contemporary visual culture and embodiment. I attend to how Black and Latina women and girls tarry with these formations of difference and make art and pleasure out of them.

After all, the embodiments, iconographies, and objects created by racialized and colonized peoples are the canvases upon which Euro-American modernism articulated itself—via Picasso's abstracted masks inspired by his visits to ethnographic museums in Paris, Adolf Loos's infamous Josephine Baker house, and, later, Keith Haring's graffiti-inspired works that stemmed from his erotic attraction to poor and working-class Black and Latinx young men in New York City (Cheng 2011a; Foster 1985; Cruz-Malavé 2007). Aesthetics of excess are the miscegenated products of what happens when these appropriated innovators engage in the remix of crafting their own bodies and representations, which trouble, seduce, and sometimes capitulate with the desirous gazes of the Euro-American West.

To exceed is to trespass. Gazes invested in neoliberal racial, class, gender, and sexual normativity perceive excess as a negative, a social liability or deviancy, but I frame the excess engaged in this book as abundance, as possessing more than the essential, the alternative value that Puerto Rican artist Pepón Osorio describes as "the philosophy that more is better" (as quoted in Walker and Walker 2004, 28). Aesthetics of excess embrace abundance where the political order would impose austerity upon the racialized poor and working class, viewed as excessive as in unnecessary, unproductive (Vargas 2014). They flaunt the visuality of difference where the social order invests in the material erasure of Black and Latinx bodies through mass incarceration, detention, deportation, and other forms of social death. As Lisa Marie Cacho notes, "Under Neoliberalism, impoverished African American citizens' consumption patterns are under constant scrutiny. Poor African Americans are not only represented as unentitled to 'luxuries'; they are also denied the power to decide what constitutes a 'luxury' and the power to define what they need and what they can live without" (2012, 21). This is why artist Kehinde Wiley poses young working-class Black men against floral baroque patterns and ornate gilded frames, why performer Celia Cruz wore spectacular gowns and wigs, why the late Chicana singer Selena bedazzled her bras with sequins and rhinestones, and why my Puerto Rican grandmother wore impeccable makeup and hair to work as a seamstress in a north New Jersey sweatshop.

To present aesthetic excess is to make oneself hypervisible, but not necessarily in an effort to gain legibility or legitimacy. Embodying such styles often stems from one's racial, ethnic, and gendered culture, and the desire to utilize the body creatively, admire one's self-image, and potentially attract the gazes of others. Aesthetics of excess are the targets of commodification, appropriation, cultural dismissal, and erasure—but they tend to spectacularly survive and morph, slipping through such attempts at capture. It's how we dress in the undercommons (Harney and Moten 2013).

While aesthetics of excess declare dignity in the face of white supremacist state surveillance of Black and Latinx consumption, they encompass and perform much more than that. These aesthetics that become targets of scrutiny and attack stem from diasporic creative, cultural, and spiritual lineages that predate European colonization, though they have been undeniably altered by it. This book takes up the queering work performed by aesthetic excess in upsetting the dehumanizing formations of race, gender, class, and sexuality operative in the twenty-first-century United States as criminalized populations express their subjectivities and power through them.

I use the term "queer" to describe the destabilizing force of the nonnormative and the misfit. Recognizing the ways that, as Cathy J. Cohen (2013) has shown, some queer theorizing and activism have unwittingly reinforced the binaries between the heterosexual and the queer at the expense of intersectional understandings of how heteronormativity marginalizes some heterosexual people, Black and Latina single mothers on public assistance, for example, I embrace the "bi directional" orientation of the "quare studies" framework offered by E. Patrick Johnson, which moves between "theory and practice, the lettered and unlettered, ivory tower and front porch" (2013, 112).

Aesthetics of Excess enacts a disidentificatory use of the term "queer," working against the ways it has been deployed to exclude struggles of race and class but maintaining its utility as a signifier of sexual, gender, racial, and class difference. It is used throughout the text to describe both heterosexual and lesbian participants. For example, the WOTR artists I engage in chapter 3 self-identify as gay, and I use that term in addition to queer to describe them, not in an effort to efface their self-definition and bring them in line with what is viewed as a more progressive sexual identification, but as a way of linking them to a wider collectivity of homegrown sub/working-class gender, race, and sexual radicals.

Queer also describes how others view the Black and Latina artists I center in the book as nonnormative, whether they are understood to be bisexual, straight, or lesbian. I claim queerness in a manner similar to how I reappropriate the discourse of excess as a productive force for Black and Latina girls and women. In so doing I follow Cohen, who proposes that the radical potential of queer politics can be "located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin" (2013, 75). The book focuses on how various manifestations of queerness (sexual, gender, classed, racial) are embroiled in the sociocultural power struggles mediated by aesthetics of excess.

Aesthetics of excess can describe a wide range of phenomena. The particular mode of excess I take up in this study is what I term "sexual-aesthetic excess." I offer sexual-aesthetic excess as a concept for theorizing modes of dress and comportment that are often considered "too much": too sexy, too ethnic, too young, too cheap, too loud (Hernandez 2009). Sexual-aesthetic excess identifies a field of visual perceptions, embodied performances, creative practices, sociocultural discourses, and their attendant values. Sexual-aesthetic excess is a racializing discourse that correlates stylistic deviancy with sexual impropriety, and vice versa.

Beyond indicating a hegemonic trope or normative gaze that mediates sociocultural value, sexual-aesthetic excess also signifies instances in which Black and Latina bodies, both in the flesh and in representation, present styles that agitate the visual field and expose the malleability of social norms through their conspicuous embodiments (Fleetwood 2011). Embodied performances and creative practices that mobilize aesthetic excess embrace ostentatious styling, hyperfemininities and hypermasculinities, raunch, grotesquerie, camp, voluptuousness, glitter, pink, and gold.

The agitating and racializing force of sexual-aesthetic excess is exemplified in a hyperbolically negative review of artist Kehinde Wiley's work by *Village Voice* writer Jessica Dawson (2015) titled "What to Make of Kehinde Wiley's Pervy Brooklyn Museum Retrospective?" Written on the occasion of the artist's retrospective exhibition, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, in an awkward quasi-tongue-in-cheek/quasi-serious critical voice, Dawson sets out to undermine what she believes to be Wiley's undeserved status as a highly successful, respected, and popular visual artist. The writer, a white woman, rehearses the trope of the criminally hypersexual Black man in her argument that Wiley's career has benefited from the art world turning a blind eye to his alleged sexual perversity. She writes,

> But look closer at the 50-some objects—painting, sculpture, stained glass—in "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic," and you'll see predatory behavior dressed up as art-historical affirmative action. Wiley's targets are young people of color who in these pictures are gussied up in the trappings of art history or Givenchy. Judging from Wiley's market and institutional success—in his fifteen-year career, this is his second solo at the Brooklyn Museum—Wiley has proven himself a canny operator seducing an art public cowed by political correctness and willing to gloss over the more lurid implications of the 38-year-old artist's production. (Dawson 2015)

The charge Dawson aims at Wiley is sexual predation upon the young Black men he recruits to pose for his paintings—paintings that quote masterworks of Western art history which exalt white men in power, such as Napoleon, and replace the figures with Black men (see figure I.2). The eroticism that some of Wiley's participants exude is read by Dawson as the result of a "casting couch method" targeted to "young Blacks from the ghetto." Dawson continues, "What Wiley and his subjects do behind the scenes may be none of our business, but his paintings kiss and tell. . . . In what world is

FIGURE I.2. *Portrait of Andries Stilte II* © 2006 KEHINDE WILEY. USED BY PERMISSION.

a Yale-minted artist who lures young men into his studio with the promise of power and glamour not predatory?" (2015). Dawson's agitated response to Wiley's work ignores the long tradition in Western art history of nude models posing for a painter. In Dawson's view, when a Black man takes up the position of the visionary genius, his methods and intentions must come under scrutiny for potential criminality.

The unacknowledged subtext to Dawson's review is the fact that Wiley is a gay Black man. Thus, in her view, his paintings of feminized and erotic Black male bodies posed against an excess ornamentalism of flower patterns, voluptuous Black figures, and arabesques are the prurient products of his sexual delinquency—not complex representations of Black men's sexuality, so often framed in media representations as one-dimensionally hypermasculine. As Derek Conrad Murray notes, "Kehinde Wiley's images function as a corrective to the fetishistic logic, the thinghood, and the racist erasure of Black queer men from the field of representation . . . a response to the racial and sexual fantasies about Black men that lock them into a state of inherent inferiority" (2015 , 110). By reading Wiley as a sexual predator, a "perv" and "perpetrator," Dawson is able to defuse the threat his work poses to the racist and exclusionary art world and to canonical art history. When Wiley poses Black men in positions of power that were once the province of white men, and with a baroque aesthetic of ornamental excess, Dawson feels compelled to contain the political work they perform by framing it as merely "affirmative action"—not a unique and significant artistic practice.

In addition to queer men of color, the bodies of working-class women and girls of color are subject to racialization through the discourse of sexual-aesthetic excess. For example, Latinas have been portrayed as "disorderly bodies" that are emotionally, corporeally, and sexually excessive. In analyzing the news coverage of Marisleysis González, the aunt of Elián González, a young Cuban boy who was at the center of a high-profile immigration and custody case in 2000, communications scholar Isabel Molina Guzmán (2007) notes that the focus on González's public crying, long acrylic finger nails, and formfitting clothes marked her as a brown, unlawful body that did not fit the framework of a proper U.S. subject. The mobilization of González's excessive body discursively unraveled the privileged, model minority status of Cuban Americans and helped to frame them as bad, disorderly subjects who held impassioned demonstrations on the streets of Miami following the decision to return Elián to Cuba.

The hyperbolic, stereotypical representations of Latinas as "forever tacky" (Rodríguez 2014, 3) in visual culture are measured against an imagined

white/middle-class construct of U.S. citizenship. Latina bodies are read as out of control, and thus queer, in the framework of normative embodiment. As Juana María Rodríguez notes, "We [Latinas] swish too much and speak too loudly. The scents we exude disturb the numbing monotony of straight middle-class whiteness. We point with our lips, flirt with our eyes, and shimmy our shoulders to mark our delight. Our racialized excess is already read as queer, outside the norms of what is useful or productive" (2014, 2). Black women and girls' bodies and sexualities are also marked by excess and occupy an untenable position in normative conventions of productive, respectable citizenship.

In her discussion of how Black girls were treated by staff at a homeless shelter in Detroit, Aimee Meredith Cox describes how the white woman director there believed that "acceptable bodies, like acceptable workers (especially line workers), were neat, contained, efficient, stripped of any excess (streamlined), and desexualized. . . . Visible pregnancies, large breasts, exposed midriffs, and wide hips in tight jeans were not only a personal affront to Camille [the director of the shelter] but, she implied, symbolic of what was wrong with the girls in the first place and partly to blame for their current situation of single parenting, and sometimes, their homelessness" (2015, 90). Cox argues that these readings are informed by the historical framing of Black femininity as materially, sexually, and physically excessive.[5]

As subjects who are marginalized and made vulnerable by their positions relative to race and gender, Black and Latina women and girls who embody aesthetics of excess are "thought to be morally wanting by both dominant society and other indigenous group members" (Cohen 2004, 29). For example, Saidiya Hartman notes the disapproval expressed by W. E. B. Du Bois in his sociological observations of young Black women in the early twentieth century, which informs how Cox's contemporary participants are perceived. Du Bois "bemoaned this tendency to excess, the too much, the love of the baroque; the double-descriptive: down-low, Negro-brown, more great and more better; the frenzy and passion; the shine and fabulousness of ghetto girls" (Hartman 2019, 117). The artists engaged in this book are the descendants of the Black women and girls Hartman (2019) poetically evokes in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* , which documents how they augured radical formations of intimacy as they migrated to the urban centers of New York and Philadelphia. Like Hartman, I insist on an understanding of my participants as artists to recognize their creative labor in everyday performances of public body presentation and social media self-display, to their dedicated practices of painting, photographing, and sculpting.

Aesthetics of Excess focuses particularly on the ways in which self-styling, art making, and cultural production provide a means for expanding the possibilities of inhabiting inventive bodies that express subjectivity and freedom.[6] Although they are ridiculed, Latina chonga girls embody ethnic pride, sexual autonomy, and indifference toward assimilating to whiteness (see chapter 2). In spite of being subjected to harassment and gender policing, masculine-body-presenting Black and Latina young women find that their styles attract sexual partners and allow them to perform socioeconomic success and self-love (see chapter 3). Nicki Minaj's plasticized aesthetics reframe and reimagine Black women's embodiment by embracing artifice and rejecting respectability (see chapter 4), and girls' encounters with the hypersexual representations of women of color in the work of contemporary Black women artists inspire them to utilize artistic authorship to declare their corporeal and erotic self-determination (see chapter 5).

Through interviews with artists, participatory research with Black and Latina girls and young women, critical readings of art and popular culture, and storytelling autoethnography, *Aesthetics of Excess* argues that the styles embodied by women and girls of color are creative practices that trouble sexual policing and reveal class disparity. Since the bodies of women and girls of color are routinely subject to surveillance in public settings such as schools, workplaces, and working-class neighborhoods, they are especially subject to the violence of what Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 49) describes as "aesthetic intolerance," an aversion that demarcates social boundaries .[7] The racially marked hypersexuality that is ascribed to Black and Latina women and girls takes the fall for the class exclusions that cannot be acknowledged in a contemporary neoliberal context saturated with discourses of meritocracy and mobility. In a neoliberal society, legitimate personhood, or its denial, is determined via visibility and bodily readings (Ngô 2011).

Neoliberalism and Embodiment

Black and Latina women and girls' embodied aesthetics are subject to visual readings that tend to racialize them through denigration or celebration-as-appropriation. Deborah Paradez has noted "the unabashed self-fashioning of working-class women of color whose creative stylings, often derided as excessive, frequently serve as inspiration for mainstream trends" (2009 , 45). Like Paradez, I find that the styles of working-class Black and Latina women and girls generate cultural and material capital when appropriated in art and media, while drawing mockery and censure in everyday contexts. Aesthet-

ics of excess are targeted for regulation when embodied by women and girls of color because they signify forms of class, gender, sexual, and racial difference that agitate normative discourses of respectability and social mobility. Conversely, when classified as art or appearing in mainstream popular culture, these aesthetics generate value as ironic, streetwise, and edgy.

In demonstrating the sociocultural processes that enable the traffic and value extraction of aesthetics of excess, this book expands the scholarship on the "racial workings of neoliberalism" (Woods 2007) by mobilizing a transdisciplinary and transaesthetic approach that assesses its gender and sexual politics. It is commonly believed in U.S. popular discourse that when women and girls dress in overtly sexual ways, they are viewed as "low class." I suggest that it is also the coding of class difference in the feminine and masculine body styles employed by Black and Latinx women and girls that racializes them as hypersexual.

My theorizing on aesthetics of excess is inspired by the class, gender, and racial appropriations and transgressions captured in *Paris Is Burning* (1990). The film documents drag competitions held by poor and working-class queer and trans people of color in New York City in the 1980s, which were organized around highly codified categories such as "butch queen" and "executive realness." The primary criterion that measured an effective performance in the ballroom circuit was the achievement of "realness," a body whose considerable crafting work in embodying a category could not be read on the surface. *Paris Is Burning* is the title of one of the drag competitions featured in the film, and it expresses the notion that the spectacular embodiments of the queer contestants involved would set the fashion metropolis of Paris on fire with their fierce inventiveness. I understand Black and Latina aesthetics of excess as setting neoliberal discourse ablaze by revealing the class, gender, sexual, and racial differences it occludes. One of the powers of sexual-aesthetic excess is that it makes class burn.

Paris Is Burning was filmed in the 1980s, when material consumption was intimately linked with status in a new and highly visible form, glorified in films such as *Wall Street* (1987). But today, thirty years later, the politics of consumption among elite populations in the U.S. looks dramatically different. The flashy cars and major-label clothing that once marked an insurmountable class divide are now more accessible to a broader public through increased credit opportunities and outsourced mass production. Thus, the status performance of the social group that Thorstein Veblen termed "the leisure class" ([1899] 2007), which flaunted status position through the possession of objects that had little use value, and thus were not purchased out

of necessity, has been replaced by the more modest consumer practices of what Elizabeth Currid-Halkett (2017) calls "the aspirational class ."

Currid-Halkett argues that, rather than displaying visible consumption of goods, acquisition of knowledge and awareness of social issues are the new markers of high status among upper-class and wealthy populations, who use their money to invest in their long-term life chances through spending in education, health, outsourced domestic labor (such as cleaning and child care), organic food, and yoga classes. Although income and luxury goods still hold sway as status markers, this new elite class is increasingly branding itself as such through cultural capital (Currid-Halkett 2017, 18). Yet consumer studies continue to find that working-class, middle-class, and sub-working-class populations of color purchase conspicuous luxury goods, such as jewelry, cars, and clothing, at a higher rate than white populations of the same socioeconomic groups (Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov 2007; Currid-Halkett 2017).

The explanations advanced for these differences often tell the story of how Black and Latinx populations, aware of how they are viewed in the dominant imaginary as criminal outsiders, utilize consumption as a means to demonstrate their socioeconomic success and inclusion. Such ideas are bolstered by data that show how "increases of mean income of one's own race in the state are associated with reduced visible spending" (Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov 2007, 4)—the idea being that once Black and Latinx populations achieve upper-class standing, the desire for conspicuous consumption declines.

Although these socioeconomic dynamics play a significant part in the consumer and aesthetic practices of Black and Latinx populations, the studies that provide the basis for such ideas are limited by a deficit-oriented perspective that juxtaposes the racialized working classes against monied white populations, as have-nots who are utilizing visible consumption in an instrumental fashion to achieve a defined social goal of inclusion. The consumer practices of Black and Latinx populations are portrayed in such studies as efforts toward securing social status, rather than, as this book argues, the actions of people compelled by erotic desires, aesthetic traditions, community belonging, or expressions of agency and resistance to white bourgeois norms of embodiment, style, and consumption. Perhaps, alternatively, one could conjecture that decreases in Black and Latinx spending on visual goods as they attain higher incomes stems from a related distance from one's community and proximity to less diverse, more elite spaces in which aesthetics of excess would be frowned upon and pose a liability to

membership, with the notable exception of figures like mainstream music artists, reality TV stars, and athletes who are often fetishized as commodities in and of themselves.

The shift of class politics from an emphasis on visible consumables to services that increase life chances stems from the increasing influence of neoliberalism on socioeconomic life over the last several decades. Neoliberalism is both a "political economic theory" (Harvey 2005, 2) and a wide range of market and political practices that gained traction in the 1970s and continue to dominate economic and social life in the U.S. and beyond. These theories and practices call for disinvestment in government social welfare programs and the deregulation of markets in the belief that people would be more liberated by "strong property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005, 2). This massive erosion of social welfare has produced structured insecurity and the maldistribution of life chances across populations (Spade 2015, 9). As a result, subjectivity and body presentation have become the work of self-branding (Banet-Weiser 2011).

Additionally, neoliberalism fails to deliver on its promise of engendering social equality via free market forces and instead promotes particular forms of racialized power (Woods 2007)[8]—namely, the marginalization, policing, deportation, and mass incarceration of populations of color who are viewed as unproductive subjects that weaken the national economy. These dynamics unfold via a discourse which denies that racism exists (Martinez and Rocco 2016). In negating structural inequalities and asserting that all individuals are potential entrepreneurs who can utilize the market for social mobility and wealth accumulation, neoliberal discourse occludes racial and class structures through circulating hegemonic narratives about the putative potential of overcoming one's given economic circumstances and "self-making" (Ramos-Zayas 2012). Such a discourse is especially salient in the U.S., a place in which class "is often held to have no meaning at all" (Harvey 2005, 31). The more rarefied forms of status performance operative today make it particularly difficult to acknowledge class differences, as these new elites appear to hold liberal political leanings, such as concern over the environment.

The decline in U.S.-based manufacturing that generated the service economy and increased value for cultural capital has resulted in the gentrification of working-class Black and Latinx neighborhoods by art galleries, high-end coffee shops, and restaurants. The minimalist industrial décor that pervades gentrified spaces, such as the slick, redesigned warehouses where people of color used to earn a living are now the markers of a new

class divide for folks who cannot afford rent or a five-dollar single-origin cold-brew coffee. Both industrial labor (in the repurposed warehouse) and racialized urban struggle become packaged as marketable throwbacks. The racialized sub–working classes are fetishized by the aspirational class, who read gourmet cookbooks with titles like *Thug Kitchen* and buy "crack pies" at high-end bakeries.

It is in this context that the body aesthetics of Black and Latina women and girls are viewed through a neoliberal lens that assesses how they succeed or fail in practices of self-branding that are thought to produce and reflect their productivity. These bodily readings are rooted in the history of Black and Latina women's racialization in the United States. Hazel Carby has analyzed how young Black women became the targets of social panic in both white and Black communities in the early twentieth century following the Great Migration, due to discourses circulating about their proclivity for engaging in prostitution as a way to avoid hard work in more traditional kinds of jobs. She argues that this discourse emerged from a fear of the new freedoms that migrant Black women found in urban settings, which resulted in acute surveillance of their bodies and sexualities (Carby 1992).

A similar panic over Latina bodies and sexualities also occurred in the early twentieth-century U.S., as young women donning zoot suits, known as *pachucas*, became the target of policing. In a World War II context in which austerity was viewed as an expression of patriotism, Mexican American youth who wore costly, flamboyant zoot suits made with copious amounts of fabric were perceived as immoral consumerists "participating in leisure activities, including *inactivity*" (Ramírez 2009, 58) and therefore as deviant citizens. By donning masculine zoot attire in addition to "up-dos, pencil-thin eyebrows, and dark lips," pachucas "distorted a look popularized by some of Hollywood's leading ladies of the time, such as Veronica Lake and Carol Lombard" (Ramírez 2009, 58). The pachuca's performance of gendered, class, sexual, and ethnic difference resulted in her surveillance and arrest by the Los Angeles Police Department during the Zoot Suit Riots and Sleepy Lagoon incident, in addition to the disfavor of members of the Mexican American community who, like the Black middle class to whom Carby refers, viewed these young women's body aesthetics as a threat to their social inclusion and respectability as hardworking citizens.

Ruth Nicole Brown's conception of booty capitalism is particularly salient for understanding how Black girls' bodies are hailed in the contemporary U.S. political economy. She describes how "booty abounds in the capitalist underpinnings of the United States as it currently exists. White

supremacy and heteropatriarchy, mediated by popular culture, sell an ideal body type: the big-booty Black girl. The premise is fairly simple: the bigger the booty, the more patriarchal protection and privilege one is promised to receive via heterosexual conquest. To be bootylicious, then, is to be read as sexually attractive and marriageable. The irony is Black girls are expected to have big butts yet reap none of the constructed and imagined benefits" (Brown 2013, 206). Neoliberal booty capitalism creates a double bind for Black girls. They are expected to embody the desired sexual excess of bootyliciousness, yet this performance does not result in the promised payoffs of heteronormativity. Instead, embodying bootyliciousness more often punishes Black girls in the contexts of education, employment, and social services.

In refusing or failing to self-brand in line with neoliberal conventions of productivity, bodies signifying aesthetics of excess have the power of unmasking realities of class stratification by signaling forms of class, race, gender, and sexual difference that are intolerable in the contemporary neoliberal U.S. nation-state. These bodies are then policed for the transgression of expressing (in)difference through discursive racialization as sexually and aesthetically excessive, and therefore deviant. In line with neoliberal discourse, these judgments are rarely articulated through rhetorics of class, but rather of style (Bettie 2003). But neoliberalism is not a totalizing formation—through aesthetics of excess, Black and Latina women and girls also embody and perform bootyliciousness for their own pleasure.

Charlas and Body Narratives

In producing knowledge about the art and politics of Black and Latina embodiment and sexualities, *Aesthetics of Excess* centers the collective and dialogical, drawing on my interactions with hundreds of WOTR artists as an instructor, in addition to semistructured group conversations I had with sixty-one participants throughout 2011–2013 at the facilities of WOTR partner organizations, such as Lifelines, which supports queer youth.[9] After its founding in 2004, I remained involved in WOTR in various capacities (program director, instructor, consultant) through 2015, when the project experienced a series of upheavals caused by the departure of the museum's longtime executive director and board members.

Artists are accustomed to working with me as a group through WOTR, and I emphasize the subtleties of their collective exchanges. These dialogues capture how they negotiate discourses of sexuality, race, gender, and

class through performative discussion of body practices: their own, those created by the women artists discussed in workshops, and those they consume in popular culture. Although girls have permission from their parents and guardians to participate in WOTR and in my research, they utilize the workshops as places away from family in which morals are relaxed, thus enabling the exploration of issues and ideas that may be considered taboo.

These group conversations are akin to Meredith E. Abarca's *charlas*: "The methodology of *charlas*, free-flowing conversations, creates a dialogue where unconventional fields of study, of knowledge, come together" (2006, 9).[10] The collaborative spirit of my informal group conversations with WOTR artists privileges multivocality and supports a power dynamic in which participants take active roles in the process, as opposed to the more stringent power relationship that attends one-on-one interviews. Esther Madriz (2003) describes how group discussions often escape the intentions of the researcher, as participants drive and deviate from the conversation. Such digressions, including disagreements among participants, moved me in unexpected and fruitful directions.

My charlas with participants produced what I call body narratives, stories about the experiences, desires, and memories of embodiment. These narratives appear in the book as extended portions of transcripts I excerpt in order to convey the tone of these stories to readers and evoke WOTR artists' unique voices and personalities. My discussions with artists prompted recollections of my own girlhood experiences, which I include in the chapters and interludes as autoethnographic reflections. Like artist Louise Bourgeois's spider women, we used the intergenerational space of WOTR to weave sticky webs of telling, of how we perform, negotiate, and theorize our embodied selves. Body narratives contain stories, icons, and lessons, some inherited and some we risk forging on our own, that shape our understandings of ourselves through aesthetics of excess.[11] When considering that the young women I work with bear the generational burdens of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial violence, "it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive" (Hartman 2008, 4). Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's poetic narrations of Black girls' stories and of Deborah Willis and Carla Williams's (2002) practices of archiving and photographically documenting Black women's lives, the body narratives serve as an assemblage of text and image that evokes flesh and voice. In so doing they constitute a historical archive of twenty-first-century Black and Latina girlhoods.

The webs of storytelling that produced the body narratives were often spun while my participants' hands were busy at work on their art projects in WOTR. Many of the charlas that shaped the chapters of this book were sparked by offhand comments and spontaneous debates among participants during their active art making. This is the time in the workshop when the instructors are doing the least instructing. We make rounds in the room to comment on participants' individual progress or to provide some tips with technical aspects of the project, but ultimately, during art making is when participants become primarily responsible for shaping the tone of the workshop and, ultimately, what gets produced creatively. Therefore, the charlas, processes of art making, and images of work by contemporary women of color artists that catalyze it all are tightly knit together. The body narratives are thus oral, visual, and corporeal all at once. They are the products of aesthetic labor and relations between Black and Latina girls and women—artistic *chusmería*.

Aesthetics of Excess cannot communicate an unmediated portrayal of WOTR artists, but I work to maintain the integrity of what they shared. The girls are not objects of my observation but subjects, in the most complex sense of the term, who stimulate, challenge, affirm, and expand my thinking. I acknowledge them as critical interlocutors in the knowledge production process. Together we make art, ideas, and conversations over Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Flamin' Hot Cheetos, and sometimes tea and Bahamian coconut bread baked by my WOTR colleague and friend Anya Wallace. I honor what they have given me by sharing their creative genius, insights, and experiences.

Rather than providing evidence that helps us know young women of color, the body narratives show how young women of color know and how their knowledge can contribute new perspectives to artistic, cultural, and social knowledge and praxis. I am not so interested in articulating how real girls of color feel about the art and politics of Black and Latina embodiment, but in conjuring how they see and make sense of their own bodies and the bodies they encounter in WOTR and culture—on TV, smartphone, and computer screens, and in their daily lives. Talk among the girls, and in my charlas with the girls, has been mediated by cultural texts such as artworks, popular songs, and music videos that are displayed as part of WOTR praxis or are part of the worlds they bring to the space.

I had worked with participants through WOTR for over six months to one year prior to our semistructured group charlas.[12] Each group consisted of five to twelve participants, and the adult women who worked as casework-

ers or program facilitators would also join at times. The girls had the option of creating their own pseudonym to protect their identity, and if they did not want to create one or could not come up with one, I would create it. In several instances, I had the sense that a participant might have used a name associated with a social networking account, and in those cases, I gave them an alternate pseudonym.

All charlas and relevant WOTR workshops were documented with a voice recorder and later transcribed. I conducted textual analysis of the transcriptions for salient themes and critical commentary regarding body practice, race, gender, class, and sexuality in everyday life, art, and popular culture. In addition to discursive textual analysis of the transcriptions, I have listened to the discussion recordings several times to home in on affective expressions that escaped translation into words and communicated significant insights. At times, the space of the group was one of support among the girls, and at other times of tense disagreements; these dynamics attest to the complexity of the charlas as a research method and to the active roles assumed by participants in driving the discussion, notwithstanding my authoritative role as instructor/researcher.

The two-part semistructured group discussion first asked WOTR artists to describe what their ideal embodiment would be in detail (clothes, accessories, hairstyles, and body modifications, if applicable). I prompted them to articulate their ideal embodiment in order to examine the physical traits and aesthetics that they found to be the most valuable and desirable. Participants wrote descriptions and/or made drawings of their styles on index cards, and I asked them to share their ideal embodiments with the group if they felt comfortable doing so. The index cards were meant to help the girls remember the style they imagined when it came time for them to share. More importantly, utilizing the index cards slowed down the process of responding to my prompt, making it possible for girls to be thoughtful about the style they wished to craft, and to edit and revise their ideas. The index cards also provided me with a document to analyze after the charla had concluded.

When participants were finished with the index cards describing their ideal embodiments, which I collected at the end of the discussion, I asked them questions like, How would this look make you feel? What do you think this look says about you to a stranger walking by you in public? What do you think other girls your age would think about this look? How about other boys your age? Would your parents, caregivers, teachers like this look for you? Why/why not? Is this look inspired by the style of any celebrities? If so, who?

In the second part of the charla, I showed participants images of work by artists taught in WOTR, such as Nikki S. Lee, who draw from the style practices of young women of color, as well as images of pop culture figures, such as Minaj, who were inspirations for girls' styling practices. I also prompted them to comment on images of chonga girls and products related to chongas and Minaj, such as Barbie and Bratz mass-marketed dolls. The unscripted questions I posed to participants in this part of the discussion encouraged them to critically analyze the images and share their thoughts on how they felt the women and girls in these works were being represented, on the meanings of race, gender, sexuality, and class articulated in the images, and on whether the styles or products depicted were ones they would purchase and/or adopt.

Most of the sixty-one participants of the charlas were between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. The youngest participant was ten years old, and the oldest was thirty-one, as several youth-serving professionals participated in the study alongside the girls and young women with whom they worked. Eighteen participants identified as African American, and eleven identified as Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean with references to countries such as Jamaica, Haiti, and the Bahamas. Twenty-five participants identified as Latina or Hispanic, six identified as multiracial, with two naming themselves part Native American, and one did not identify with a race or ethnicity. It is not my aim to frame the insights of these participants as reflecting how young women of color in Miami generally feel about issues of body practice and representation. I work instead to situate the body narratives produced in the charlas within the spaces where I met and worked with the girls. Their responses should not and could not be generalized, but the wealth of insights they presented contribute unique perspectives that have rarely, if ever, been engaged in art history or feminist, sexuality, ethnic, critical race, and queer studies.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1, "Reading Black and Latina Embodiment in Miami," situates the study within the history of ethnoracial formation and struggle in Miami-Dade County, Florida. In so doing, it raises questions regarding how a relational and comparative analysis of race and embodiment in Miami necessitates an examination of its underresearched gender and sexual politics to illuminate the social, cultural, and artistic workings of aesthetics of excess. Chapter 2, "Sexual-Aesthetic Excess," tracks the deviant figure of the

chonga girl through the realms of Miami folk discourse, popular media, and the elite contemporary art world. The discourses of sexual-aesthetic excess that circulate and congeal in these sites reveal the stakes of chonga embodiment and representation in negotiating the politics of class through debates over ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in Latinx communities and in the realm of cultural production more broadly.

Chapter 3, "Fine as Hell," contributes to research on gender performance and masculinity by centering the insights of Black and Latina young women who identify as gay and fashion masculine body aesthetics.[13] Through engaging their body narratives, I describe the corporeal and psychic pleasures, as well as social injuries, that attend their style practices—personal styles which, in the assessment of normative social discourse, are often construed as deviant masculine excess. I also note how, as revealed in a debate that occurred in WOTR regarding the embodiment of a masculine-body-presenting photographic participant of the Black queer South African artist Zanele Muholi, that the significations of trans embodiment contest the limits of both gender and aesthetic norms.

Chapter 4, "Rococo Pink," assesses the political potential of incarnating fakery for women and girls of color. I examine how the aesthetics of the ostentatious and hyperfeminine French rococo style has been mobilized in images of superstar rap artist Nicki Minaj, and I draw parallels between the critical denigration of the rococo in the eighteenth century with the contemporary vilification of her body. I close the chapter with a discussion of the exhibition and performance *Let's Talk about Nicki Minaj: A Rococo Side-Show/Salon*. The chapter argues that aesthetics of fakery are subject to critique because they disturb notions of racial authenticity, gendered sexual respectability, and established hierarchies of race, class, gender, beauty and sexuality.

Through turning to a more exclusive focus on WOTR praxis and pedagogy, chapter 5, "Encounters with Excess," documents how engaging participants in discussions about the sexual bodies figured in the work of contemporary Black women artists have activated spaces for them to analyze, critique, and/or affirm representations of racialized hypersexuality in art and popular culture. In particular, I explore how WOTR artists have responded to the work of Wangechi Mutu, Kara Walker, and Shoshanna Weinberger. Workshops based on these artists became sites in which girls theorized the heteronormative ways that men gaze upon women's bodies, articulated anger over the exploitation of Black women, exhibited shame when viewing artwork that explored sexuality, and expressed pleasure in crafting their

own representations of erotic bodies, which included works that utilized their own bodies as material. I also interrogate the panic I felt when a Black grandmother, along with her young granddaughters, attended a public lecture I presented on Mutu's use of ethnic pornography in her work. My reflections on that experience, along with WOTR girls' creative responses to the work of Black women artists, provoke consideration of the potential a feminist arts praxis that embraces sexual-aesthetic excess holds for opening spaces for Black and Latina girls to express self-determination and pleasure through encountering the hypersexual.

Last, the epilogue applies the book's argument to recent art world developments in Miami, and in contemporary museum politics more broadly, by telling the story of how the WOTR project itself became a commodity subject to appropriation by both corporate and elite art world entities. I close with a body narrative photo poem, inspired by the creative methodologies and practice of Ruth Nicole Brown (2014), to claim the power and futurities of aesthetic excess for Black and Latina girls and women.

I don't wanna have a rich life but I just wanna dress up and just look nice.
I love dresses, skirts, I love wearing jewelry, spraying perfume. I love things that sparkle.

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My mom is in a very tight situation where she has to take care of an old lady and she only gets paid $500 every two weeks. And I ask for money to buy clothes and she can't give me the money, she can't at all, so I'm restricted to just literally this.

When my grandmother, Zaida "Madelyn" Rivera, mother of my mother, passed away, my godmother, Maria "Chippie" Rivera—sent us this picture via text message of an altar she created after she found out. She said it reflected my grandmother—a "classy lady."

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I have an aunt named Betty and she loves Betty Boop.

Me too my aunt loves Betty Boop.

What do you think older women might like about Betty Boop?

Like maybe when they were younger that was their Bratz or Barbie doll.

She's trying to be like sexy.

I wanna get a tattoo of her.

She sexy; She cute; She fly with her shit

Like she got an innocent face but—

HER BODY

Because they kinda wanna be like her, they like her style, she has her little hair going on, her little dress.

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NOTES

Introduction

Parts of the introduction originally appeared in "'Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll': On Chonga Girls and Sexual-Aesthetic Excess," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 21, no. 3 (2009): 63–91, and "'Chongas' in the Media: The Sexual Politics of Latina Girls' Hypervisibility," in *Girls' Sexuality in the Media*, edited by Kate Harper and Vera Lopez (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

1. This is not an exhaustive list of all the women artists who have participated in WOTR as past, visiting, or short-term instructors, directors, assistants, or interns. Here I center on those with whom I have worked most closely on the project. I would like to acknowledge Shara Banks, Vanessa Garcia, Kathleen Staples, Kristen Stoller, Susan Lee Chun, Rosemarie Chiarlone, Naomi Fisher, and all those who at any point in time were a part of WOTR.

2. I draw from Yessica Garcia Hernandez's (2017) analysis of the antifandom of the legendary Chicana performer Jenni Rivera. Hernandez suggests that expressions of agitation by antifans conduct significant work in circulating social discourses among Latinx communities for policing the sexuality and body presentations of women and girls.

3. I use the term "visual economy" in a manner similar to that of Krista Thompson, whose definition draws from that of Deborah Poole (1997), as attention to "the circulation of objects and images in local political economies and across global networks—to emphasize the industries and economies surrounding image production" (Thompson 2015, 24).

4. By using the term "embodiment," I work to, as Elizabeth McDowell (1999, 39) describes, mark the "sense of fluidity, of becoming and of performance" that attends the relations between bodies and society.

5. Cox (2015) cites Nicole Fleetwood's notion of "excess flesh," a concept that "attends to the ways in which black female corporeality is rendered as excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess" (Fleetwood 2011, 9). The overdetermined meanings and visual representations Fleetwood refers to are colonial narratives of Black women's bodily and sexual aberrance, which have shaped the notion that Black girls and women are always already sexually deviant (Knupfer 2000; McClintock 1995). Amber Jamilla Musser (2018, 16) uses the term "sensual excess" to describe the fleshiness and opacity of women and queer people of color's uncontainable "brown jouissance." Though Musser also analyzes the work of contemporary artists of color that are considered here, such as Kara Walker, her emphasis on sensuality differs from my focus on class relations and the traffic of Black and Latina bodies between vernacular, popular, and elite art cultures.

6. My notion of the complex subjectivities of women and girls of color is informed by Ruth Nicole Brown's (2013) book *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*.

7. Brown has discussed how visibility for women and girls of color regularly leads to "increased surveillance, and, at other times, death. . . . Many times, youth of color are punished because of what someone, typically with more power, has seen and surmised as truth" (2013, 105).

8. Clyde Woods urges a consideration of the "racial workings of neoliberalism" in the United States through accounting for how "the Southern pillars of racial supremacy and an anti-union-low-wage economy effectively eviscerated the welfare state" (2007, 48, 47).

9. I have altered the names of collaborating institutions in order to protect my participants' confidentiality. My references to the girls and young women I worked with via WOTR move variously from "WOTR artist" to "participant" and "girl," a term of affection used by WOTR instructors to reference participants of a wide range of ages. For us, saying "girl" did not constitute an infantilizing gesture, but rather named a recognition of youthful spirit and creative energy. It is important to note that girlhood is often denied to Black girls and working-class Latina girls, who are viewed through tropes of deviance. "Girl" is a word that the instructors often used to address each other as well. By employing these different terms, I acknowledge participants as creative authors, members of the collective space of WOTR, interlocutors of my research, and as people whom the WOTR instructors held dear. My use of "girls" in the plural is meant to evoke a radical and often raucous collectivity. The distinction "WOTR artist" is used to help clarify for readers when I refer to a young artist in WOTR or one of the institutionally supported artists I write about such as Nikki S. Lee.

10. Abarca mobilizes the charla in her study of working-class Latinas about food and cooking as a way to subvert the established hierarchies of scholarly production, as the "researcher and the women in the field are intellectually on the same plane" (2006, 9).

11. I am grateful to Juana María Rodríguez for suggesting this framing of body narratives.

12. Parents and guardians granted permission for the girls under eighteen years of age to participate and for me to record our conversations. As the WOTR program

served girls who moved in and out of various education, social welfare, and juvenile justice institutions and processes, I would sometimes meet a girl only once, while I have consistently worked with others for over seven years as of this writing.

13. None of the participants I worked with identified as trans.

CHAPTER ONE. *Reading Black and Latina Embodiment in Miami*

1. The exhibition was titled *Modify, as Needed*, curated by Ruba Katrib.

2. I am grateful to Hoang Nguyen for suggesting this framing.

3. I use the term "Miami-Dade County" to reference the greater Miami area. The city of Miami is a specific municipality within Miami-Dade County, and WOTR praxis took place within and beyond this particular area. We conducted our work as far south as Homestead and close to the northern Miami-Dade County limit in North Miami. When I use the term "Miami," I am referencing this expansive Miami-Dade County area.

4. For more on artwashing, see Vorick (2018); Pritchard (2018); "Artwashing and Soho," *Art and Labor* [podcast], n.d., http://www.artandlaborpodcast.com/podcast/episode-4-artwashing-and-soho/; and Mel Evans's (2015) book *Artwash*.

5. Monika Gosin (2009) offers an extensive analysis of Afro-Cubanxs experiences of racialization in the U.S. among Cuban enclaves in Miami and Los Angeles.

6. This overwhelm and fear led me to agree to the removal of Molinary's image in the promotional materials for the lecture series, in concert with the overall position of the upper administration at MOCA. However, the image was nevertheless discussed in depth by Molinary at our panel.

7. The girdle is typically understood to be a tool of patriarchal control of women's bodies, but the work of feminist scholars, such as Dorothy Ko's (2005) examination of Chinese women's foot binding, and the modest body presentations of pious Islamic women donning headscarves examined by Saba Mahmood (2005), suggests that such body technologies are also utilized by women to exercise their agency in transforming and crafting their bodies.

8. I am grateful to Juana María Rodríguez for pushing my analysis in this direction.

9. For an extended discussion on race, gender, and the beauty and labor politics of beauty service and body aesthetics, see Miliann Kang's (2010) study *The Managed Hand*.

10. Here I use the term "practice of freedom" in the spirit of India Pierce (2017), who mobilizes it as a framework for conjuring Black queer futurity through cultural production.

11. Bedazzling Scars is a WOTR project that instructor Anya Wallace developed. It invites participants to create a representation of a physical or emotional scar and to embellish it with rhinestones, glitter, and other materials to enact a form of healing, rather than covering over. In the dissertation chapter "Spacetime and the Margins: Black Girlhood In and Out of the Black Hole," Wallace (2019) analyzes how the emotional vulnerabilities opened up by this project in the context of the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center's girls' cell block unwittingly resulted in a collective explosion of anger by the girls that was directed at each other, at us as instructors,