



Natasha Varner. *La Raza Cosmética: Beauty, Identity, and Settler Colonialism in Postrevolutionary Mexico.* Critical Issues in Indigenous Studies Series. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020. Illustrations. 200 pp. \$30.00, e-book, ISBN 978-0-8165-4206-2.

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In Natasha Varner's tremendous first book, *La Raza Cosmética: Beauty, Identity, and Settler Colonialism in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, we are gifted an exploration of the politics of beauty in relation to gender, race, and place. Varner navigates the complexity of postrevolutionary Mexico to explain how race science, nation building, and a long-standing yet refined ethos of *Mestizaje* (interracial mixing) as national policy are combined and articulated through beauty, a process focused primarily on Indigenous women's bodies. *La Raza Cosmética* examines popular beauty culture, especially pageants, centered on the "phenotypes," mannerisms, and dress that supposedly marked Indigenous womanhood and then further traces these through the development of cinema, tourism propaganda, and postrevolutionary public art. Beauty, it is clear, from Varner's analysis, is central to understanding the gendered dynamics of coloniality, power, and disprivilege at work in postrevolutionary Mexico. Most pointedly: "Indigenous women's bodies were seen as the necessary channels through which the country would be whitened, modernized, and integrated" (p. 9).

As Varner convincingly argues, Indigenous women became the focus of settler colonial cultur-

al projects to create the Mexico of the future. The first of these projects handled in the book, the India Bonita contest, provided a language and imagery of the desired path to national progress that has enjoyed a long afterlife. India Bonita was a contest devised for Indigenous women, not so much to celebrate their beauty as to shape and ultimately narrow popular understandings of "authentic indigeneity," through the selective glorification of some elements of Indigenous heritage and denigration of others. Through the contest women were scrutinized for their Indigenous credentials, a process that focused on their look, especially submissive mannerisms, and particularly fetishized elements of Nahuatl-inspired dress, as well as language and location. Unsurprisingly many beauty candidates fell foul of the narrow criteria of authentic indigeneity the competition espoused, revealing how difficult it in fact was to separate markers of indigeneity from markers of modernity in the populace. The work of the competition was to position indigeneity as essentially backward and mestizo identity as futuristic. The India Bonita contest visually orchestrated a scheme of ethnocide: the logic that while it may not be practically possible to isolate Indigenous people in Mexico, as in the reservations and boarding

schools of North America, Mestizaje was nevertheless an incomplete project and Indigenous people should be “integrated to the point of disappearance” for the modern mestizo Mexican nation to emerge (p. 13).

Varner examines settler colonial identity projects of beauty and urbanization as aligned processes brought to life through festivals and pageantry that staged the identity and history of the city. Through various fiestas and “peasant festivals,” city authorities engaged in social engineering that centered on staging a palatable indigeneity, often rehashing the India Bonita trope, while legitimizing urban sprawl and the encroachment of Indigenous lands.

La Raza Cosmética then traces how the logics of the India Bonita contest as a vehicle for nation making continued into the development of a vernacular cinema, which rapidly became a favorite of postrevolutionary leaders. In film roles designed to depict the “submission, suffering, and humility” of Indigenous women, they were typically portrayed by light-skinned mestiza women “whose beauty conformed to European standards” (p. 82, 77). Cinema provided the opportunity to project a “romanticised, nonthreatening, feminine interpretation of Indigenous culture to national audiences” (p. 78).

In my reading of Varner's book, I was struck by the resonances with other processes at work in the region at this time and afterward, for instance, the process of projecting idealized Brown feminine identities to assert a modern nation that we see in the beauty competitions in Caribbean islands emerging from empire. Varner's study reveals similarities and differences with how indigeneity was imagined on the beauty stage and the marginal and highly specific roles reserved for dark-skinned Black and Indo-Caribbean women, when they appeared at all, in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and elsewhere. Beauty provides a lens to examine how appropriation and erasure are enacted in nation building. In Varner's work, the

light-skinned mestizo actors who were preferred to depict Indigenous women in cinema, used skin-darkening pigment, specific hairstyling, and costume to give the appearance of “authentic” indigeneity.

Nowhere perhaps is this appropriation and erasure of indigeneity more in evidence than in Varner's telling of the life and works of Doña Luz Jiménez: artist, educator, and model. Jiménez has been named the “most painted woman in Mexico” as a result of her work as a model and muse to the “nation's great postrevolutionary artists” (p. 122). As Varner's reexamination of her life reveals, Jiménez was in fact a collaborator and educator to such artists; they depended on her for their knowledge of language and culture but failed to acknowledge her role as a collaborator in their artwork or to pay her sufficiently well. As Varner describes, this illustrates many of the inherent contradictions of a cultural revolution that “circled obsessively around the question ... of the nation's so-called Indian Problem” but barred Indigenous voices from nation making (p. 124). Many grew successful from Jiménez's knowledge, while she lived in precarious poverty, supporting her family through a variety of supplementary jobs.

La Raza Cosmética demonstrates that gendered, racialized constructs of beauty can be central to our understanding of coloniality, power, and disprivilege, and the author reveals how these processes continue to shape lives. Varner's work stands as an important contribution to the genre of feminist cultural histories of beauty and gender, indigeneity, settler colonialism, and urbanization.

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