

La Reina Negra: Neoliberal Citizenship in the election of the first Black Miss Colombia, 2001

Diana Carolina Becerra Sierra

Women's Studies, University of Michigan

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North Quad 2245

Three decades after the resurgence of indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements, and ten years after the 1991 Constitution recognized the “ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation,” the National Beauty Pageant crowned Vanessa Mendoza, the first black beauty queen in the pageant’s sixty-five year history. Popularly known as the “Black Barbie,” Mendoza won the crown in 2001 as the representative of the Chocó, one of most impoverished departments whose predominantly black residents lack access to basic necessities, including potable drinking water.

In a country where a beauty queen is crowned every two days, many impoverished communities have resorted to a neoliberal exchange in which beautiful bodies are the preferred commodity. The Chocó had offered the nation one of its regional resources, black female beauty, and in exchange called upon the nation to reciprocate via economic assistance to the Chocó and racial affirmation of black peoples. Supporters strategically drew upon the power of the pageant, which according to many, rivals the state in its ability to create concrete shifts in Colombian society. However, in using beauty as a tool for advancing claims to citizenship, pageant supporters and especially Mendoza accepted the terms of neoliberal citizenship, which reduces cultural, social, and economic rights to consumption in the market economy. Within this neoliberal exchange, only beautiful bodies capable of attracting the national and corporate gaze can claim rights, and physical survival itself often becomes contingent on the possession of this “resource:” beautiful women.

