Review of Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and their Sex Lives by Gloria González-López

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/richard_mora/28/
Erotic Journeys is a superb sociological examination of the sex lives of Mexican immigrants residing in the United States. By focusing on the sexual histories of men and women both prior to and after their migration to Los Angeles, CA, González-López persuasively shows how migrant experiences can influence sexualities and, thus, fills a “gap in the migration and gender and sexualities subdisciplines within sociology” (p. 8). What is more, rather than attributing particular generalized gender identities to all Mexicans (and others from Latin America) and Mexican immigrants in the U.S., she aptly explains how gender regimes and identities are regionally and geographically defined and constructed.

González-López relied on her training as a couple, family, and sex therapist to conduct open-ended interviews with 40 Mexican women, who were interviewed as part of her dissertation study, and 20 Mexican men, who were interviewed for her postdoctoral research. Half of the men and half of the women in the study were from the “pre- and semi-industrialized rural areas” of the state of Jalisco, where “the masculine charro culture” is prevalent (p. 9). The other half of the men and women were from Mexico City, a large, densely populated urban city. González-López chose research participants from different geographical regions because, as she explains, there are “manifold sexualities and gender identities in Mexico” (p. 5). Overall, with the study, she seeks:

... to accomplish four objectives: (1) examine the social, cultural, and historical context shaping [her] respondents’ sex lives as they evolved in Mexico and during and after migration to and settlement in the United States; (2) explore the nuances and complexities of their erotic experiences as they simultaneously embraced a dominant sexual identity (i.e., heterosexuality) and marginalized social identities, such as being Mexican, monolingual, second-class citizens, and socioeconomically segregated; (3) study their heterosexual experiences as relational processes that are fluid, nuanced, changing, contextual, and contested; and (4) incorporate Mexican men’s experiences of heterosexual sex, love, and relationships in order to study the demands and sacrifices patriarchal contexts impose upon them. (p. 4)

As part of her data analysis, González-López transcribed the interviews verbatim herself, identified recurring themes throughout the interviews, and developed a coding scheme.

The central argument of the book is that as a result of the patriarchal gender regimes, Mexican women “use virginity—represented by an intact hymen—as a commodity they may exchange to improve their living conditions and their socioeconomic future” upon marriage (p. 5). Virginity as “capital feminino” is socially constructed
within “regional patriarchies,” which González-López defines as “diverse, fluid, and malleable but regionally uniform and locally defined expressions of hegemony and their corresponding sexual moralities” (p. 6). In both the rural towns of Jalisco and the urban neighborhoods of Mexico City, a woman’s virginity is associated with her family’s *honra*, or honor; thus, her virginity is not a personal matter, but rather a familial resource to be safeguarded. However, value placed on a woman’s virginity varies regionally, as it is highly dependent on the sexual moralities present in a particular region and the ease with which the sexual lives of young women can be policed. So, consequently, the women and men from the small towns of Jalisco placed a greater “capital” value on women’s virginity as a result of the “rural patriarchies” they experienced than did the women and men from the metropolitan area of Mexico City who were exposed to less-restrictive “urban patriarchies.”

While in Mexico, the women’s sexuality was situated in a pleasure-danger continuum. Some women sought to experience the pleasure of sexual intimacy with partners prior to marriage. Women who had sexual intercourse faced the possibility of getting pregnant, being forced into a marriage, and both familial repercussions and emotional distress for tarnishing their family’s name. For all the women, there existed the danger of losing their virginity as a result of a sexual assault (i.e., rape or incest). In fact, for one-third of the women, rape and/or incest were their first sexual experience, a fact that points to the role that dominance plays in the patriarchal gender regimes in which the women lived.

Unlike the virginity of Mexican women, the virginity of Mexican men is not a commodity, nor is it associated with family honor. However, many of the young men were afraid of impregnating their girlfriends and of being forced into unwanted marriages by their families. As a result of these fears, many of the young men who grew up poor in Mexico City had sex with prostitutes. Men who grew up in rural towns of Jalisco also frequented sex workers, though unlike the urban men they usually did so after being encouraged by their male peers.

González-López also finds that in Los Angeles, the women “reshape their sex lives … as part of their everyday life experiences within new socioeconomic contexts characterized by anonymity, geographical distance, softened family control, social networking, and laws protecting women such as regulations against domestic violence” (p. 17). With the reshaping of sexual lives, came the renegotiating of gender dynamics between the women and their sexual partners (e.g., husbands); the same is true of the men in the study and their sexual partners. Additionally, both the women and men reported that as parents they found it necessary to address the fact that their children were growing up in society with sexual moralities that differ from those in Mexico.

This excellent book is a must read for those teaching courses on, or interested in the study of, gender identities, sexualities, and immigrant populations. Given its many academic contributions, it is likely to prove to be a seminal work in the field of sociology.

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