

Sex and Sexuality in Latin America

Edited by
Daniel Balderston
and Donna J. Guy



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Introduction

Are sex and sexuality embedded solely in the body, or are they linked to mind, culture, race, and ethnicity? Are sex and sexuality different in Latin America than in other parts of the world? Can we talk about any aspect of Latin America without including consideration of gender and sexuality? This volume is an effort to open conversations among those interested in sexuality studies and Latin American studies.

This is more than a volume about gender and sexuality. It explores the process of crossing over: crossing over visually so that apparel can disguise, reveal, determine, erase, or dynamize a particular moment in time and place. We are crossing over into the minds of writers, judges, doctors, lawyers; women and men; gays, lesbians, bisexuals, heterosexuals, and those who are not fixed in a given “preference” or “orientation.” We examine events that range from the imaginary to the all too real, from stories of the *Monja Alférez* in the colonial period to a Cuban film of the 1990s. From *La Difunta Correa*, a popular saint in Argentina, to a contemporary painting of Simón Bolívar in drag, from sodomy cases in early-twentieth-century Brazil, from the performance of Chavela Vargas, the lesbian Costa Rican/

Mexican singer: from all of these we can learn about the deployment of sex, sexuality, and gender in Latin America.

By crossing over we can accept that Argentine truck drivers pray to a saint in a red dress, her breast exposed to view, because they believe she personifies the ideal wife and heterosexual partner. We can believe that even though prostitution regulations in Brazil were hidden from the rest of the world, the police and public officials made sure that poor female prostitutes knew where to live and what were the rules of the game. We can dismiss the criticism of *Bom Crioulo*, the story of a tragic love affair between a black sailor and a white cabin boy, as unrealistic because it can be shown to be closely paralleled by testimony in courts martial of the time. We can come to understand the ways in which “heterosexual” intercourse in a novel by José Donoso requires the full range of the “polymorphous perversity” of desire. We can examine how the construction of masculinity in Latin American letters of the early twentieth century, as well as in such different spaces as the tango ballroom, the football stadium, and the “mean streets” of the Nuyorican novel, is permeated by homosexual desire.

Believing is only one part of understanding the dynamics of sex and sexuality in Latin America. We must also find a way to integrate this knowledge into more traditional methods of teaching about both sexuality and Latin America. Gender and sexuality were never central preoccupations for early Latin American specialists, but their strong interest in interdisciplinary approaches to this geographic area provided the field with a degree of flexibility that would ultimately enable others to approach these topics. The advent of feminist studies has shifted the ground in the field to an important extent, privileging questions of women’s history and writing, women’s participation in the political process, and so forth (see, for instance, the early book by Ann Pescatello on male and female in Latin America, on voting patterns, the gendering of politics, and related topics). There is now a very substantial bibliography on women’s and gender studies in the several disciplines in Latin American studies (in our final bibliography, see the entries by Stoner; Castro-Klaren, Molloy, and Sarlo; Acosta-Belén and Bose; Kaminsky; Sommer; the Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America; Lavrin; Miller; and so forth).

The paradigm shift that is now under way, and that this book is necessarily a part of, is to look at “gender” and “sexuality” in a broader context, refocusing a number of earlier questions and debates, in a conscious effort to link gender studies and gay and lesbian studies in ways that transcend to some extent the questions of identity politics that provided the initial impetus to these efforts. Interestingly, the stimulus for some of these discussions in Latin American studies has been the opening up of the question of the

configuration of masculinity in Latin America, one that has encouraged a more pluralistic vision of what constitutes gender in the region.

From the perspective of gender and sexuality studies as they have emerged, the need to consider cultural variations in different parts of the world is beginning to be explored. Cultural biases inherent in much of Anglo-American gender and sexuality studies have meant that some culture-bound characteristics have been taken to be universal; cross-cultural (and interdisciplinary) work in gender and sexuality studies is a useful corrective to this tendency. Among the most important recent work, however, is that concerned with places and periods where different paradigms of identity and behavior competed for hegemony, such as George Chauncey’s pathbreaking *Gay New York*, which studies the different patterns of male sexuality that coexisted in New York City depending on national origin and class. This sort of paradigm conflict is also central to work on male homosexuality in Latin America by Joseph Carrier, Tomás Almaguer, Roger Lancaster, and Stephen O. Murray. Because of the uneven modernity that characterizes Latin America, as well as the fissures opened by differences of race, ethnicity, class, and religion in the constitution of Latin American cultures, the constructions of sex and gender are spaces of conflict, revelatory of culturally significant issues.

This volume begins by questioning the nature of sexual identity in Latin America. Roger Lancaster sets the tone by raising some fundamental questions about how we perceive sexuality in others in Latin America as well as in ourselves. His experiences in Nicaragua lead him to develop his thoughts about “trans-vestics,” that is, the way we sort out sexuality issues through performance and play. He asks how we should interpret signals that others give us about their sexuality. His answer: with great care and with attention paid to nuanced actions. Not everything is as concrete and clear as we would like, and we, like Roger, sometimes play the “straight” man to someone else’s performance. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano similarly explores the ways in which desire and fantasy respond to the strong gendered and sexualized, and powerfully transgressive, performances of Chavela Vargas. Ben Sifuentes examines the complex construction of the transvestite and of sexual desire in Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites*, suggesting in terms similar to Lancaster’s that transvestic performance unsettles fixed identities.

The next section explores the state and hegemonic efforts to “police” or sanitize sexuality (Beattie, Caulfield, Montero, Buffington, and Quiroga). These essays are linked not only by issues of policing but also by the crossing of historical documentation with literary and cultural discourse. Despite certain differences, they are united by their willingness to question the meanings of historical events and to remind us that truth can be a slip-

pery slope on which we must tread carefully. Peter Beattie uses “evidence” regarding Brazilian military prosecutions of sodomy to show fissures and ambiguities in this modernizing process. Why should a society intent on making the military an honorable space for young males simultaneously try men for homosexual practices yet refuse to eject those convicted from the armed forces? From the perspective of a secret history of prostitution control in Rio de Janeiro, Sueann Caulfield questions how race and nationality were constructed. The documents she examines reveal, as is often the case in Latin America, that race is as much socioeconomic as biological. Equally important, gendered perceptions of physical beauty anchor all discussion of race and prostitution. Oscar Montero examines one of the most “homo-social” of cultural movements in Spanish America, the “modernismo” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to show how homosexual desire is policed and censored but never wholly erased. Rob Buffington asks how criminologists determined the relationship between criminality and sexuality in Mexico. To these thinkers, homosexuality signaled degeneration and disorder. How “scientific” was their scientific evidence? Finally, José Quiroga examines the constructions of homosexuality in revolutionary Cuba, where the discourses of repression and the radical use of stereotyping paradoxically made male homosexuality visible, as exemplified in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s film *Fresa y chocolate*.

Family values, that slogan of recent U.S. discourses around sexuality, provide the context for the next section. But what do we mean by the Latin American family? And what is “typical”? Donna Guy asks what is “natural” about the reproductive sexuality that is constructed in political, medical, and religious discourse in Argentina. State efforts to promote hygienic motherhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prioritized goals of producing healthy children, goals that often limited the “natural” power and authority of male heads of households. So men sought other models through popular Christianity. Nina Menéndez examines Cuban women’s fiction and other texts of the late 1920s, showing the debates about women’s roles in the home and in the public sphere; the “family romance” in the novel she studies is fractured by these debates, as well as by a tacit lesbian subplot. Daniel Balderston studies the contradictory messages at play in another “family romance,” that of the complex mother-son relation in the Mexican film *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*. The film refuses self-definition in favor of a broad spectrum of sexual—and personal—possibility. Eduardo Archetti examines tango lyrics and the chants of football fans in Argentina for their implicit construction of an imaginary individual and an imaginary family, strikingly different from the conventional or the supposedly typical. The “family values” revealed in his and the other essays in this section call

into question many of the commonplaces that circulate about the family in Latin America.

The final section consists of three papers that redefine the questions of identity often posed in relation to gender and sexuality. Francine Masiello looks at the ways in which citizenship is constructed by dress, from without instead of from within; the cases she examines range from the eighteenth century to the late twentieth. Arnaldo Cruz unsettles the often heroic narratives of resistance in Nuyorican fiction and theater by showing how masculinity is constructed through abjection, a term he takes from the work of French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. And Sylvia Molloy looks at the diversion or refusal of the sexual (and specifically of the lesbian) in an extraordinary text by the Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik. These final “redefinitions” seek to open, not to close, the questioning of identity and practice that has characterized much recent work in sexuality studies, as in the initial essay in this volume by Roger Lancaster.

The essays in this volume query only a limited number of the cultural sites that could be usefully examined. Future research could explore the uses of butch/femme roles in Latin American lesbian culture (a topic already discussed in U.S. Latina lesbian culture by Yarbro-Bejarano, Moraga, Trujillo, and others); the breaking down of the supposedly traditional active and passive roles in male homosexuality in contemporary Latin American culture; what Jonathan Ned Katz has called the “invention of heterosexuality” in its Latin American forms; questions of the ethnic, racial, and religious contexts in which gender and sexuality are constructed; the culturally central role that bisexuality in its diverse forms plays in Latin America; and how identities are constructed in relation to gender and sexuality.

Also, there are obviously countries and regions that have not been examined from these perspectives here or elsewhere to the extent necessary (Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Andean countries); similarly, there has been insufficient attention to indigenous and other nonwhite cultures in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries and elsewhere in the region. Much of the work represented here is in historical, anthropological, and literary studies; Latin American popular culture and the visual arts deserve far more attention than they have received to date.

We hope that these reflections serve as a springboard for discussion in basic courses in gender and sexuality studies as well as in Latin American studies, from literature to politics. How can these topics spark discussion of new critical issues in introductory courses? Can we continue to think of the formation of the modern nation-state without contemplating its impact on the construction of gender and sexual identity, or without interrogating the idea of the national as a figure of desire? How have concepts of masculinity

and femininity been constructed differently in different places and times? How are gender and sexuality constructed vis-à-vis class, race, religion, and ethnicity? Posing these questions may reveal new dimensions of Latin American realities. These are the challenges we present to our readers in the hope that they will provide some of the answers.