
BOOK REVIEW

Queering the Political Economy of Migration: Identities, Space and Borders

A Review Essay: *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men*. By Lionel Cantú Jr. and edited by Nancy A. Naples and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz. New York: New York University Press, 2009, 256 pages, \$22.00 Paper.

RAY SIN

University of Kansas

Foucault reveals that sexuality and sexual identities are significant axes of power but it is only recently that they were incorporated into migration scholarship.

Manalansan (2006) laments that earlier studies see sexuality as a subsumed category under gender and conceive of sexuality only in a normative sense—heterosexuality. This obscures the experiences and renders invisible the socio-legal barriers affecting nonheterosexual individuals (Luibhéid 2004; 2008; Manalansan 2006). To rectify the inherent heteronormativity in migration scholarship, studies begin to incorporate a queer perspective. *The Sexuality of Migration* contributes and furthers this conversation about (non-normative) sexuality and migration.

Using a multi-methodological approach that encompasses ethnographic methods, participant observation, oral histories and archival data, *The Sexuality of Migration* investigates the role of sexuality in the processes of immigration and identity formation of Mexican gay male immigrants to the United States. What makes this book unique is that it considers the impact on sexuality from the perspective of both the sending country (Mexico) and receiving country (United States).

This book sees a dialectic relationship between macro level forces such as the global market and micro level processes such as identity formation in which the interaction between the two consti-

tutes sexuality, and sexuality in turn shapes those macro and micro level processes. As the authors write, “sexuality, as a dimension of power, shapes and organizes processes of migration and modes of incorporation. In turn, the contextual and structural transitions that mark the migration experience impacts the way in which identities are formed” (p21). This mutually constitutive relationship is what the authors call the “queer political economy of migration.”

The strength of this book is contextualizing the queer political economy of migration in the geo-politics of Mexico and the United States. As historian John D’Emilio (1983) demonstrated, the development of a modern gay identity is inextricably linked to the development of capitalism. Mexico is no exception. Arguing from a queer materialist framework, the development and persistence of a modern gay identity in Mexico cannot be conceptualized outside the material reality of the society that is shaped significantly by globalization, migration and trade relations with the United States.

The book explores a variety of issues such as the U.S Immigration policy, family experiences and masculinity. But the most significant contribution is its idea of space that is not articulately explicitly. *The Sexuality of Migration* discusses how migration, sexuality and space are intertwined in two separate chapters. First, the authors discuss the development of “a new *zona de tolerancia*” (zone of tolerance) as an unintended consequence of capitalism and migration.

Development of capitalism accelerated in Mexico because of trade relations with the United States. This has prompted authorities to define appropriate social and sexual codes through regulations. The repression of non-normative sexuality brought about by the capitalist development in Mexico helped to develop the modern gay identity in Mexico. This modern gay identity is called *internacionales*. *Internacionales*, having transnational connotations, suggests versatility and fluidity of sexual roles that do not collapse neatly into the dichotomy of the masculine dominant role and the feminine passive role that characterizes normative sexual expectations.

With the development of *internacionales* and the unabated capitalist development, what ensued was the commodification of the Mexican gay men through sex tourism. The allure was predicated

upon romanticized imagery of the hypersexual “Latin lover” or a savage version of the “gay *caballero*”. With Americans comprising the largest group of tourists in Mexico, their patronage and sexual consumption of the eroticized Mexican gay men alludes to a form of colonization. As a result, the commodified images led to the reinforcement of the “colonial desire” (white affluent Americans) to conquer the “exotic other” (poor and powerless Mexicans). Although the authors purport to focus on sexuality, they are nonetheless cognizant of the inevitable intersection of race and class when discussing migration.

The development of queer tourism in Mexico shifts the gay subculture (*ambiente*) from the underground onto the surface as a consequence. What used to be concealed under the privacy of homes is now celebrated publicly with the development of queer cruises, beaches and clubs. Homophobia that is inherent in Mexico becomes constrained because of the revenue generated from queer tourism. To reiterate what was stated earlier, this led to the creation of a “safe zone” for inhabitants (both queer Mexicans and American tourists alike) to articulate their sexuality without incurring official sanctions.

The second impact on space is the notion of home. Combating the perceived lack of a “gay space” in Mexico, many gay Latinos find themselves escaping to a seemingly more accepting and liberating environment in the United States. These men see their physical journey up north akin to a symbolic journey that actualizes their repressed sexual identity. However, most of them find themselves escaping one form of discrimination (homophobia) at home but encountering another form of oppression (racism) in their new environment. The realization that their exodus did not fully liberate them forces them to conceive and put into practice new family structures that provide some form of social support. Sexuality serves as a motivation to migrate. But at the same time, the racism encountered gave them an opportunity to renegotiate and reconstruct familial and social networks in the United States. The racial hegemony in the United States, ironically, acts as a catalyst for the formation and sustenance of a socio-cultural network for immigrant sexual minorities.

The construction of new family and social structures is facilitated by the concomitant development of gay Latino businesses in the United States, especially in the Los Angeles region. Just as American tourists precipitated the emergence of queer tourism in Mexico, the migration of gay Latinos led to the development of queer commercial establishments such as “gay clubs with a Latin flavor.” Like queer tourism in Mexico, those gay commercial establishments construct the gay Latino population along stereotypical impressions.

Despite that, those establishments provided a space for gay Latino immigrants to network and form social support networks. Because of that, they were able to amass critical mass to politicize. *The Sexuality of Migration* reveals that the issue that they were most politically vocal about was HIV/AIDS preventative programs. This gave the gay Latino immigrants an opportunity to challenge the sexual hegemony between the immigrants and the natives as well as reclaim their autonomy and agency.

The authors stressed that crossing boundaries can be both liberating and constricting. The “new *zona de tolerancia*” serves as a safe area for gay Latinos to express their sexuality freely but at the same, it essentializes the gay Latino identity and reproduces stratified relations along racial and class lines. Similarly, by escaping homophobia back home and encountering racism in the United States, gay Latinos find themselves almost in the same situation as they did before, albeit in a different form.

However, the authors were astute to argue that these migrants are not entirely powerless. By politicizing the HIV/AIDS issue, it gave them a chance for self-empowerment and ownership to their own experiences in a foreign land. At the same time, through politicizing their position, it challenges the stereotypical impression of Latino gay men as ineffectual and working class.

This book speaks to an interdisciplinary audience. It contributes to Latin American studies, sociology of migration, queer studies, geography and sexualities. However, the appeal of this book is hindered by the disjointed connection between chapters. This is understandable because the author, Lionel Cantú Jr., passed away before the completion of this project. The editors (Naples and Vidal-

Ortiz) went through his field notes and published it posthumously. The idea of a “queer political economy of migration” contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the material realities of both sending and receiving countries affect sexualities, although in different ways. At the same time, the intersection of race and class further complicates the realities of these migrants.

The Sexuality of Migration speaks only to gay men from Mexico. It is reticent on the issues of other non-normative sexualities such as bisexuals, transgender and even lesbians. To what extent are the experiences of Mexican immigrant gay men similar to or different from lesbians? If the queer political economy of Mexico and the United States reproduced inequalities along race and class lines, in addition to sexuality, how different would it be for queer immigrants from a different political economic context—like for example Australia? These are some interesting points that future research might pick up from where *The Sexuality of Migration* left off.

Bibliography

- D’Emilio, John. 1983. “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” Pp. 100-13 in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Luibhéid, Eithne. 2004. “Heteronormativity and Immigration Scholarship: A Call for Change.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 10:227-35.
- . 2008. “Queer/Migration.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 14:169-90.
- Manalansan IV, Martin E. 2006. “Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies.” *International Migration Review* 40:224-49.1