

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 6

June 2004

Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil; Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes

James R. Welch
Tulane University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti)

Recommended Citation

Welch, James R. (2004). "Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil; Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol2/iss1/6>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

English translation) cited to demonstrate modes of resistance. Ganson argues rightly that the “[book] demonstrates the value of using native language sources to elucidate the ideas and world views of these indigenous people” (p. 184). However, the author does not delve into the original Guaraní and basic textual exegesis is lacking. Though publishers are generally reticent to do so, inclusion and discussion of the original Guaraní would strengthen the work. Maps demonstrating the geopolitical shifts of the Independence period would also be helpful.

The book is a necessary addition to any library of colonial histories of the Americas and complements Spanish and Portuguese language work on the case of the Guaraní. It will be essential for graduate students new to the field of South Amerindian ethnohistory and Guaraní studies, is an excellent resource for experts, and is a valuable documentation of the struggles of South American indigenous peoples against and within colonialism.

Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil. Richard Parker. New York: Routledge, 1999. xvi + 288 pp., plates, maps, tables, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. \$85.00 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper). ISBN 0-415-91619-4, 0-415-91620-8. [www.routledge-ny.com]

Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes. Don Kulick. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xi + 269 pp., notes, references, index. \$50.00 (cloth), \$20.00 (paper). ISBN 0-226-46099-1, 0-226-46100-9. [www.press.uchicago.edu]

JAMES R. WELCH
Tulane University

Urban cultures are every bit as relevant to the anthropology of lowland South America as are indigenous and rural cultures. In both cases, we encounter unique local perspectives and practices in dynamic relationships with regional and global processes. In this review, I discuss two fascinating books that address Brazilian configurations of male homosexuality. Latin American, and especially Brazilian, sexualities have received considerable attention for involving gender structures that contrast with those that typify Western cultures. These two books examine these complex issues from very different angles. Richard Parker, in *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil*, addresses Brazilian homosexualities with a sweeping analytical brush, emphasizing their diversity and their relationships to broad historical processes. In contrast, Don Kulick, in *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, takes a very intimate

ethnographic approach to explore on its own terms a single urban homosexual subculture in the Brazilian city of Salvador.

Parker's deep understanding of Brazilian homosexual culture makes for a convincing and instructive, if somewhat predictable, analysis. His primary thesis is that Brazilian homosexual and gay identities are historically linked to national and international processes, such as urbanization, migration, and health advocacy. He effectively links on-the-ground mechanics of social interaction, what he calls "topographies of desire," with the larger historical processes that brought them about. For example, he discusses the dramatic division of street prostitutes between masculine (*michê*) and feminine (*travesti*) stereotypes in terms of their participation in Brazilian heterosexual notions of sexual activity and passivity. Most interestingly, he invokes the Brazilianist notion of cultural anthropophagy to argue that Brazilian homosexualities do not reproduce Western configurations, but rather transform them into something distinct and entirely Brazilian.

Beneath the Equator is an admirable analysis and a mandatory read for anyone interested in Latin American gender and sexuality. It falls short mainly in that its ethnographic data are not always up to the task of supporting Parker's rather broad conclusions. He and his associates recorded innumerable interviews from diverse people in many Brazilian cities. He attempts to manage this ample data set by focusing on two cities, Rio de Janeiro and Fortaleza. Unfortunately, he does not effectively link these case studies to his primary theoretical arguments. These discussions come across more as diversions than as argumentation. It also seems to me that Parker draws primarily on informant statements that are actually synthetic observations based on second hand knowledge. Although they may agree with his thesis, I am left wondering how the subjects themselves might respond to the same questions. Despite these criticisms, I reaffirm that this is an informative analysis that amply reflects Parker's admirable expertise as a committed researcher.

Touching on many of the same issues, but in a totally different manner, is Kulick's truly engaging ethnographic excursion into the lives of *travestis* in the city of Salvador. In contrast to Parker's expansive reading of Brazilian homosexual cultures, Kulick explores a single, particularly sensational (exotic), one. His approach is not only more localized, but more intimate. His objective is also very different from Parker's. Rather than analyze Brazilian homosexual culture, he seeks to explain it on its own terms and thereby render it intelligible to readers from other cultures. In this he is highly successful. With evenhanded insight, he uncovers the humanity in the seemingly exotic behaviors of *travesti*. He also argues convincingly, albeit in an ancillary manner, that *travesti* identity is inherently linked to dominant Brazilian notions of gender and sexuality. It is here that his and Parker's objectives coincide.

This honest and engaging text is an example of that rare species of topnotch anthropological scholarship that is equally a page-turner. Despite relying on

substantially less time in the field than Parker, the quality of Kulick's data is impressive. It is specific, detailed, and personal. He hurls this first hand data at more esoteric but less substantial theories of *travesti* identity in order to demonstrate the essential humanity of his subjects. Using a rhetorical style that reflects his precarious position as neither insider nor outsider, he achieves a voice that is convincing as it is humble. Although he occasionally overgeneralizes from his localized dataset, Kulick's work exemplifies the idea that there is no substitute for nuanced ethnographic perception.

In all honesty, I am aware that I am making an unfair comparison. Despite their overlapping subject matters, Parker and Kulick attempt very different projects. Whereas Parker approaches analytically a multiplicity of cultural phenomena, Kulick delves ethnographically into a singly localized community. If Parker's text seems somewhat dry, it is because he systematically covers an immense amount of material. If I am tempted to praise Kulick for an enlightening and emotionally engaging text, it is only because he has a literary flair that serves his subject matter well. Nevertheless, each book offers, in its own way, an exceptional clarification of a frequently misunderstood topic.

The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance.
David M. Guss. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. ix + 240 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$18.95 (paper), \$48.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-620-22331-4, 0-520-20289-9. [www.ucpress.edu]

KATHRYN A. HUDEPOHL
Western Kentucky University

In *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism as Cultural Performance*, David Guss examines the changing meaning and organization of cultural performance as it is interpreted and claimed by individuals in the service of local, national, and even global interests. His examples, all drawn from Venezuela, are primarily local festivals that have been variously appropriated and altered by external forces. The one exception is a fascinating description of the role an international tobacco company played in promoting and, ultimately, in defining traditional Venezuelan culture.

Guss deliberately chose examples of festive behavior because he believes they are prone to be sites of contested meaning and thus are constantly in flux. The pluralistic nature of festivals allows for the possibility of a "rearticulation of tradition" and "new dimensions of authenticity." Thus, even when local culture is appropriated by outside forces, new local meanings might actually emerge rather than be completely eradicated by the process.

In the first chapter, Guss establishes his premise and sets the stage, so to