Historicising Gender and Sexuality

Edited by Kevin P. Murphy and Jennifer M. Spear
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Historicising Gender and Sexuality
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Introduction

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In her influential 1984 essay, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes Toward a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’, Gayle Rubin asserted that ‘although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice’. Building on this insight, and challenging the tendency of feminist theory to treat sexuality as derivative of gender, Rubin declared it ‘essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence’.

Over the past two decades, historians writing across period and region have taken up Rubin’s call to produce delineated analyses of ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’. Yet, these efforts have produced anything but a stable or coherent sense of how ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ have functioned throughout human history. Indeed, many scholars – especially those focusing on the pre-modern and non-western worlds – have productively questioned the conceptualisation of and distinction between these categories, some demonstrating that sexual desire and practices have intersected with gendered identities and norms in complicated, sometimes inextricable, ways.

Likewise, scholarship on the history of homosexuality in the modern west has shown that identity categories such as ‘homosexual’ and ‘lesbian’ have been defined not only in relation to sexual object choice and sexual role, but also in relation to gender performance.

The scholarship in this book takes up anew the question of the intersections between gender and sexuality. Many of the authors conclude that the constructions, practices and experiences of gender and sexuality are far more entangled and mutually constitutive than the formulation in ‘Thinking Sex’ intimates. Yet we would argue that it was precisely Rubin’s call to refuse to subordinate sexuality under the rubric of gender that has enabled the explorations that these chapters engage in. Covering a wide range of contexts – from sixteenth-century New Spain to late twentieth-century Miami, Chinese sexology to American nudist magazines, free women of colour in the British Caribbean to Egyptian reformers – these chapters demonstrate the particularities not just of specific formulations of gender and sexuality in different historical contexts, but also of the very nature of the relationship between the categories themselves.

The volume begins with three chapters set in the colonial Americas that highlight the productivity of rethinking these issues in contexts that were profoundly shaped by cross-cultural encounters, which often highlighted the very contingency of conceptions of gender and sexuality and also led to their transformation. Pete Sigal’s contribution is an examination of Cihuacoatl and other Nahua deities who combined masculine and feminine attributes, demonstrating the historical and cultural specificity of
configurations of gender and sexuality. In pre-conquest Nahua culture, Cihuacoatl was simultaneously ‘a feared deity, a defeated woman, and a cross-dressed man’. Spanish priests were confused by this ‘jumble of attributes, skins that could be taken off or placed on at will’, and sought to make sense of Cihuacoatl by reducing her to what they considered her essential self: ‘only the feared goddess’. Unable to comprehend a deity who combined masculine and feminine attributes, who could both kill and heal, the priests’ binary concepts of male and female, death and curing, overwhelmed the complex multiplicities of deities like Cihuacoatl, stripping them of contradictory attributes into simplistically coded figures comprehensible within a European Catholic worldview.

Priests are not the only ones to have been challenged by Cihuacoatl’s combination of masculine and feminine attributes. Scholars have struggled to make sense of her place in pre-conquest Nahua society (seen as organised around a strict gender division and hierarchy). It was not just the boundary between male and female that Cihuacoatl blurred; she also traversed the boundaries between the human and the divine, the secular and the religious, the chaste and the sexual. Yet the transgressions that Cihuacoatl and other Nahua deities were capable of, as well as those of the humans operating within a ritual sphere, were not acceptable practices of everyday life but were restricted to the divine and ritual realms. Rather than seeking Cihuacoatl’s ‘true sex’, Sigal uses Cihuacoatl’s ‘jumble of attributes’ to rethink Rubin’s emphasis on the need to treat gender and sexuality as analytically distinct categories requiring their own tools of analysis. Sigal demonstrates that it is impossible to treat these as conceptually distinct categories for non-western peoples (and by extension pre-modern ones) without imposing western conceptions of sexuality and gender upon them.

Nahua ‘categories of the intimate’ (a rubric that Sigal contends better encapsulates their cultural conceptions than ‘sexual’) grouped together a wide range of activities – from vaginal and anal intercourse to burning maize – that we might not see as related and certainly not all as sexual or erotic. What linked these activities in the Nahua worldview was their relationship to fertility, a vital concern for these agriculturalists. Just as Rubin rejected the incorporation of ‘sexuality’ as a subset of ‘gender’, Sigal asks us to think carefully about presuming that fertility rituals and reproductive sex are necessarily a subset of ‘sexual’ categories. The Nahua, he argues, posited the reverse: they ‘envisioned sexual relations as elements of a larger set of ritual practices designed to promote fertility: of gods, humans, animals and the earth’.

If fertility is the context for making sense of Nahua sexual practices, the next two chapters, by Marisa J. Fuentes and Brooke N. Newman, argue that sex in the Anglophone Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be understood apart from the racialised and gender power formations of colonial slave societies. Fuentes analyses the life and ‘troubled archive’ of Rachael Pringle Polgreen, ‘a woman of colour, a former slave turned slave-owner’ and owner of a brothel in the Barbadian capital of Bridgetown, while Newman centres on the articulation of a white Creole identity, its denigration by metropolitan observers, and the role of ‘intimacy across the colour line’ in both. For both Fuentes and Newman, Anglophone Caribbean slave societies cannot be explicated without attention to the ways in which both gender and sexuality were mobilised to define subjectivity, enable or constrain opportunity and legitimate colonial power regimes. For black women, whether enslaved, free or freed, their subjectivity as women was in great part defined by their sexual availability
to white men whose masculinity was partially defined by their considerable sexual freedom and, in the sanctimonious opinion of metropolitan observers, their ‘voracious appetite’ for women of colour. These contributions demonstrate how colonial identities and the relations of power that defined colonial societies were constructed along the ‘entangled axes of gender, sexuality and race’.

Given such power relations, enslaved and formerly enslaved women like Rachael Pringle Polgreen rarely make it into the archives and, when they do, it is most often as the object of the white male colonial gaze. In these respects, Polgreen was unusual. In addition to journalistic, editorial and fictional depictions of her life, she also left a will and newspaper advertisements, probably composed (if not actually penned) by herself, as well as documentation of her property ownership in an inventoried estate and tax records. As one of the few women of colour whose presence is discernable in the colonial archives, Polgreen has often stood in for the experience of enslaved and formerly enslaved women in Caribbean history. Yet it is precisely the same exceptionalism that renders her so visible to historians as a relatively wealthy, slave-owning, brothel-managing, former slave that leads Fuentes rightly to caution us against understanding her as representative of women of colour in slave societies, let alone those who spent their entire lives in slavery. Even so, as Fuentes’s reading of Thomas Rowlandson’s caricature of Polgreen reveals, Polgreen was, like all those women of colour, subjected to a colonial gaze that was simultaneously raced, gendered and sexualised.

As Newman demonstrates, it was not just enslaved and formerly enslaved women of African descent who were objects of this gaze. British observers of white Caribbean society were equally attentive to the racialised, gendered and sexualised differences they saw between themselves and their colonial counterparts. In particular, ‘cross-racial unions, lineages and inheritance practices’ as well as the admittedly rare inclusion of free people of African descent into the legal category of ‘whiteness’ were read by metropolitan observers as evidence of sexual excesses and ‘physical and moral degeneration’ from a metropolitan ideal of Britishness. In texts such as John Singleton’s 1767 poem, *A General Description of the West Indian Islands*, white colonial men were depicted as ‘overcome by dangerous passions’ while their infidelities were blamed on their ‘impetuous’ and ‘jealous’ white wives. Newman profitably explores the contradictions between metropolitan and colonial gender norms through the private diary of Jonathan Troup, a Scottish physician who resided in Dominica between 1789 and 1791. Although Troup participated in the ‘explicitly debauched, creolised version of British manhood’ that included sexual access to women of colour, he ultimately committed himself ‘to the stability and superiority of his own identity as a white metropolitan Briton’.

As these two contributions illustrate, at the heart of the particular racial and gendered relations that sustained Caribbean slave societies was white masculine access to the bodies of women of colour. The agency of those women has been a vexed question in the historiography of slave societies, one that both Fuentes and Newman tackle, although they reach different conclusions. For Newman, the possibility that some women of colour could wrest some advantages from such a disadvantaged position is embodied in the story of Susanna Augier, who successfully mobilised her relationships with white men – her father and two white consorts – to gain freedom, property and eventually legally inscribed whiteness for herself and her children. Newman carefully stresses how rare such incidents were, but these stories do reveal how such prospects
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were premised on the very social order that so disadvantaged women and subjected them to sexual exploitation in the first place. Fuentes is much more cautious in rendering actions like Augier’s as expressions of agency and counsels us against seeing enslaved or free(d) women’s agency in their sexual acquiescence to white men’s sexual demands. Not only does such an interpretation downplay if not ignore the power dynamics that left enslaved black women wholly vulnerable in a racialised, patriarchal, slave society, it is also particularly difficult to reconcile the sense of heroic agency and resistance to slavery that has often been attributed to Polgreen with the narrative of her life since her wealth and security came from ‘buying into a system of slavery’, one that depended upon these ‘hierarchies based on race and gender’ and one that in Polgreen’s case was based on the sexual exploitation of other black women.

These first chapters also highlight the interaction between systems of gender and sexuality that often took place in colonial or imperial contexts, as well as the reception and contestation of western concepts of gender and sexuality throughout the world. While Newman’s Troup ultimately rejected a creolised British masculinity in favour of its metropolitan counterpart, Sigal’s priests struggled, and eventually failed, to impose their European sexual mores onto a Nahua system that revolved around poles of moderation and excess rather than sin and salvation. Such metropolitan or western ideas were not always imposed from the outside, nor (as Sigal argues) were they always successful. The next chapter, by Leon Antonio Rocha, the first of two focused on modern China, examines the transnational flow of ideas about gender and sexuality in the twentieth century. Rocha reminds us that it is equally important to pay attention to the historical specificities and contestation of cultural exchange within modern regimes of globalisation. He asserts that we should never assume ‘that people in the Third World merely copied, parroted, were “interpellated” by or inflicted with the discourse of the colonising Other’. Instead, he argues, ‘globalisation [was] always already accompanied by localisation and indigenisation’.

Rocha’s contribution provides just this kind of nuanced analysis of the globalisation of sexual knowledge through a tightly focused etymological analysis of *xing*, a character that meant ‘human nature’ in Classical Chinese but, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, came to denote both sex and human nature. This transformation was brought about by cosmopolitan Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth New Culture period (c.1915–37), who consumed and translated the work of European, American and Japanese sexologists and sex education reformers, including the American birth control reformer Margaret Sanger and the German physician and homosexual rights advocate Magnus Hirschfeld. Rocha argues that radical Chinese intellectuals embraced the western notion of ‘sex as fundamental property of humanity’, a modern ideological development analysed by Foucault, as part of a broader project of Chinese nation-building in a period of massive upheaval. According to Rocha, ‘[s]ex became a panacea to China’s weakness and degeneracy, and a revolution of the relationships between men and women, the reformulation of love and desire, the adoption of eugenics and birth control practices, were perceived as ways to enable the Chinese nation to “catch up” with the west and to become ready to participate in a global modernity’.

Howard Chiang also analyses the profound transformative impact of western sexual science in modern China. His chapter examines the careers of two influential figures who shaped the field of Republican Chinese sexology, Zhang Jingsheng and Pan Guangdan, with the goal of illuminating ‘the broader epistemic context in which
the concept of homosexuality emerged as a meaningful point of referencing human difference and cultural identity in twentieth-century China’. Chiang argues that the engagement of Chinese intellectuals with western sexual scientific knowledge points to a broader transformation in the conceptualisation of ‘personhood, subjectivity and identity’. Breaking with other historians, Chiang shows that homosexuality circulated in modern Chinese discourse not only as a signifier of social disorder, but as the marker of a new mode of subjectivity. He notes that although same-sex desire was discussed and regulated in imperial China, before the twentieth century ‘the question of sexual identity did not even fall within the possible parameters of Chinese thinking’. Moreover, by closely examining the ways in which Zhang and Pan laid claim to sexuality as a legitimate field of empirical inquiry and debate, Chiang identifies the development of a modern epistemological regime, ‘a public of truth, in which the authority of truth could be contested, translated across culture and reinforced through new organisational efforts’.

Like Rocha, Chiang examines the ways in which this new form of sexual science became embedded within discourses of Chinese nationalism. By the mid-1930s, Chinese sexual experts, influenced by psychological models that pathologised same-sex desire, interpreted the prevalence of male homosexuality as evidence of national backwardness and therefore invoked the prevention of homosexuality as a pressing policy concern. Same-sex desire was now reconceived as antithetical to heterosexual relations, and some experts asserted that homosexuality could be cured through heterosexual marriage. Chiang calls attention to the gendered dimensions of these developments, demonstrating that women’s maintenance of sexual hygiene played an important part in discouraging male homosexuality. He cites as an example Zhang’s assertion that ‘[a]s long as women took good care of their vaginas and used them properly for sex...the “perverted”, “malodorous”, “meaningless” and “inhumane” behaviour of anal intercourse among men could be ultimately eliminated’.

While Chiang’s analysis focuses on the work of sexological experts, he also demonstrates that claims to expertise depended on a broader incitement to discourse, manifested in the collection of sexual narratives solicited from public audiences. Zhang, who issued a ‘call for stories’ that provided the material for his influential 1926 publication *Sex Histories*, also edited the popular magazine *New Culture*, which published the responses of Chinese urbanites to controversial articles on sexuality-related subjects and in which Zhang – who earned the moniker ‘Dr Sex’ – dispensed expertise to readers who shared their experiences and concerns. Wilson Chacko Jacob’s contribution focuses on a similar history of the collaborative production of knowledge about sexuality and gender in modern Egypt. He offers a close reading of *Physical Culture*, a Cairo-based publication whose run extended from 1929 until the early 1950s. Jacob describes *Physical Culture* as ‘an artefact of colonial modernity’ that ‘contributed to the vibrant public culture of the interwar period a forum in which the fantasy of the modern sovereign subject could be expressed in myriad ways that most frequently centred on a proper conception of sex and masculinity’. While readers’ letters reflect a wide range of sexual concerns and practices, the primary educative function of the publication was to ‘demonstrate the harms of sexual activity outside the legitimate bonds of marriage’. Expertise was marshalled to demonstrate the dangers of masturbation and venereal disease to the normative masculine body and a universalised model of heterosexuality, but Jacob shows that the production of ‘an ostensibly seamless
normative sphere of heterosocial and heterosexual life’ developed gradually and unevenly through a process of ‘creative adaptation’. Jacob suggests that this process ultimately involved rendering deviant and marginal figures like the khawal, cross-dressing male performers who had traditionally appeared at Egyptian wedding parties.

The contribution by Hanan Kholoussy examines a very different response to the same problem highlighted by Jacob. As Egypt moved towards independence from British colonialism, some Egyptian nationalists blamed their subjugation on ‘the weak and sick bodies of Egyptian men’. While Jacob’s protagonists, the publishers and readers of Physical Culture magazine, relied upon self-regulation and the ‘cultivation of properly disciplined subjects’, Kholoussy’s reformers relied upon regulating male sexuality, so that husbands would not infect their wives and by extension their families. Both these solutions, however, were centred on constructing a normative, healthy and heterosexual male body.

Kholoussy’s chapter, as well as the subsequent contribution by Sandra Eder, examine how gender and sexuality were inscribed on the body through constructions of what is healthy and normative, or diseased and in need of treatment. In their efforts to create a modern, post-colonial state, Egyptian reformers granted women the right to divorce husbands with venereal or other incurable diseases, thus medicalising marriage in the pursuit of ‘creating a nationalist, nuclear, physically fit and “modern” family’. While such a pro-family strategy was part and parcel of a global eugenics project at the turn of the twentieth century, Kholoussy argues that Egyptian uses of these strategies relied upon local inspiration for their legitimacy, especially since granting women a right to divorce was itself a challenge to Islamic patriarchy. Reformers pointed to a twelfth-century religious text which decreed that women could divorce husbands who suffered from maladies such as insanity, leprosy and ‘disease of the sex organ’, thus ‘ingeniously borrow[ing] and combin[ing] principles from... Islamic law in an eclectic and unprecedented manner’.

Kholoussy also shows how the Egyptian semi-colonial state both echoed and was distinct from its British colonial predecessor, especially in its interest in regulating male as well as female sexuality. Between 1882 and 1922, in their efforts ‘to protect the health of their military troops’, British authorities focused their interventions on Egyptian prostitutes, subjecting them to registration requirements and weekly health inspections, while exempting their own soldiers from any regulations or inspections. Egyptian authorities, however, both before and after British occupation, demonstrated a willingness to expand the scope of their public health campaigns to monitor male and female heterosexuality. While the concern of the Ottoman Egyptian state was the production of ‘industrious, physically fit bodies that would both increase agricultural production and strengthen military prowess’, the semi-colonial state of the 1910s and 1920s focused its attention on the encouragement of healthy families, which in turn would produce healthy citizens.

The production of healthy citizens through medicalisation is also a central concern of Sandra Eder’s contribution on the treatment of children with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) at the Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland in the mid-twentieth century. Caused by disorders in the adrenal glands, CAH often results in children experiencing premature signs of puberty: girls might have ambiguous, and boys ‘precocious’, genitalia. In diagnosing children with CAH, physicians and psychiatrists often emphasised sexual traits
such as these as well as sexual behaviours. But the treatments they developed, while not ignoring the body, emphasised efforts to impose a gender identity that contained ambiguously sexed bodies and which were in great part about ensuring future heterosexual desires and practices. This was a disease whose identification depended upon the particularities of a sexed body, and whose treatment relied upon the cultivation of a normative gender role towards which the body’s sex would be reshaped, all in the service of creating normatively gendered and sexualised citizens.

The diagnosis and treatment of CAH at Johns Hopkins is but one phase in the medicalisation of gender and sexuality in the modern west. Yet, as Eder’s reading of these patient case records shows, it was one in which medical professionals were not always the most authoritative voices. As they struggled to assign a matching sex and gender to bodies that blurred the boundaries between male and female, man and woman, physicians could lose out to parents’ insistence that their children’s sex confirm the gender that they, the parents, had already determined and assigned. Her attention to the production of knowledge in the context of clinical practice – one that involved interactions among medical professionals, parents and children themselves – leads Eder to conclude that the contentious and protracted efforts to assign a ‘true’ or ‘best’ sex often resulted in the view that it was ‘easier to fix ambiguous bodies than rigid gender roles’ in the service of creating ‘clearly gendered men and women’, who were, in the eyes of their doctors, ‘psychologically well-adjusted and functional’ and who ‘could “live a normal life”’.

Gender and sexuality are also revealed to be entangled and mutually constituted in the final section of this book, which comprises three chapters that focus on political and social activism in the twentieth century. Brian Hoffman’s contribution examines the mid-century campaign by nudist movement leaders to challenge the ‘modern obscenity regime’ in the US. This campaign was spearheaded by the International Nudist Conference (INC), founded in 1933, which sought to position the nude body as healthy, natural and respectable, and asserted that the social experience of nakedness led to the promotion of more ‘wholesome’ relations between the sexes. INC’s efforts to disseminate its beliefs through the publication of a monthly magazine, *Sunshine and Health (S&H)*, which contained images of ‘naked men, women and children of all body shapes and sizes’, fell foul of federal obscenity law. In the series of legal challenges it mounted with the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union in the 1940s and 1950s, INC chose not to attack obscenity law at its root, but rather to define its publication, and by extension the nudist movement, as distinct from and superior to commercialised representations of sexuality. To this end, Hoffman argues, INC promulgated a brand of sexual liberalism he defines as heteronormative. Although some consumers certainly found *S&H* to be an outlet for homoerotic fantasy, the magazine (with some exceptions) situated the respectable nude body within the context of the heterosexual reproductive family.

Hoffman’s chapter demonstrates that the heteronormative ethos of the American nudist movement was produced through legal contestation between nudist movement activists, their legal representatives and the judiciary. This ethos was structured by categories of race and gender. For example, INC activists, the majority of whom were white, claimed that censorship of *S&H* amounted to anti-white discrimination, given that *National Geographic* and similar publications presented images of nude non-white bodies without legal censure. Hoffman shows that while nudist activists espoused racial
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liberalism, advocating ‘integrated’ nudist camps for example, some judges continued
to insist on the legality of representing the ‘primitive’ non-white nude body as an ap-
propriate anthropological subject. American judges also articulated distinctions among
white gendered bodies, asserting that women’s bodies that conformed to conventions of
European female beauty might be read as respectable, whereas those that strayed from
these conventions were to be considered obscene. Judges also made distinctions be-
tween the representation of men’s and women’s bodies, proving obstinately resistant to
publishing images of male genitalia, for example. These gendered conventions regard-
ing representations of the nude body have proven remarkably persistent (in material
not marked as pornographic).

The historical production of heteronormativity also functions as an important
theme in Jocelyn Olcott’s contribution, which examines sexual politics at the 1975
United Nations International Women’s Year (IWY) Conference in Mexico City, a
‘watershed moment in transnational feminism’. Olcott’s revelatory chapter focuses
on the controversial discussions of sexual issues – namely prostitution, lesbianism
and population control – at the conference and at the associated tribunal attended by
representatives of non-governmental organisations from throughout the world. Olcott
argues that many Latin American participants – notably the Ecuadorean labour activist
Domitila Barrios de Chungara – viewed the focus on sexual rights as a preoccupation
of western feminists unconcerned with the materialist and anti-imperialist priorities
of women from the global south. As Olcott notes, Barrios de Chungara and others
who shared her views saw the concern with sexual rights as challenging traditional
family structures and ideals, and responded with a ‘definitive reassertion of gender
complementarity and conventional heteronormative nuclear families’. The Mexican
press also espoused this position; columnists asserted that North American radical
lesbians and prostitutes’ rights proponents pushed their agendas to the detriment of
those advocating legitimate women’s issues.

Yet, Olcott cautions the reader to reject a characterisation of these conflicts –
espoused in many contemporary and retrospective accounts by participants and ob-
servers – as representing a clear-cut division between the sexual liberation agendas of
western feminists who sought to challenge gender essentialism, and the economic and
anti-colonialist imperatives of Marxist feminists who insisted on traditional norms of
gender complementarity. To this end, she makes two important arguments. First, she
shows that empowered North American feminists, notably Betty Friedan, the iconic
leader of the National Organisation for Women, also proved resistant to the incursion
of sexual causes at the IWY conference. As Olcott points out, Friedan, who saw herself
as ‘a broker and a model for feminists around the world’, believed that these issues
distracted from the important women’s causes, such as equality in education and em-
ployment, that she prioritised. Indeed, Olcott’s analytic focus on sexuality and sexual
rights reveals that Friedan and Barrios de Chungara were in no way the antithetical
figures that they have been imagined to be: ‘Both expressed open homophobia and little
patience with prostitutes’ rights campaigns; both insisted that men and women collab-
orate rather than work against one another; and both blamed transnational corporations
for women’s continued oppression’.

Second, Olcott shows that, if Friedan and Barrios de Chungara ‘stood in for
the dominant official themes of equality and development’ that animated the IWY
conference, some non-western activists aggressively challenged such attempts to
exclude sexuality and sexual rights from ‘core’ women’s issues. She illuminates this second major argument by analysing the performance of Mexican theatre director Nancy Cárdenas, who led a participant-initiated forum on lesbianism, which featured ‘Mexico’s first lesbian manifesto, naming sexual recognition as a critical form of social liberation, tantamount to struggles against imperialism, apartheid and racism’. Olcott describes Cárdenas and other non-western lesbian feminists as embodying a form of ‘cosmopolitan lesbianism’ that countered nationalist maternalism and resisted ‘assumptions of a zero-sum rivalry between sexual rights and human rights’. Olcott, in turn, cautions us not to map this oppositional structure onto our historical narratives of international feminist activism. Even if, as she suggests, ‘a homophobic posture and antagonism toward sexual rights’ continues in more recent iterations of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics, she cautions us to pay attention to the political foundations of attempts to extract sexuality from women’s rights and human rights causes, rather than to see this distinction as resulting from ‘traditionalism, provincialism, or the conservative influence of the Catholic Church or the Communist Party – or even to a visceral or subconscious repugnance’.

The final contribution to this volume, Susana Peña’s ‘Gender and Sexuality in Latina/o Miami: Documenting Latina Transsexual Activists’, also emphasises the importance of historical specificity in analysing the relationship between gender and sexuality within activist movements. In this insightful and careful chapter, Peña grapples with a thorny question faced by historians more broadly: what are the implications of imposing contemporary analytical categories on historical actors in the past? This question has proven particularly challenging to historians studying the relationship between non-normative gender and sexuality, given the hegemony of western conceptions of homosexuality that fuse together in complicated ways a range of attributes and behaviours including gender performance, sexual object choice and sexual role. As Pete Sigal elucidates in the first chapter in this book, this problem is especially vexatious for scholars who do not focus on the modern western world, given vast differences in the organisation of gender and sexuality across time and place.

Peña confronts this question in a chapter that ‘explores the borderlands between the concept of “homosexual” and “transgender” with a particular focus on Latina/o communities in Miami, Florida’ in the late twentieth century. Citing scholars Susan Stryker and David Valentine, Peña notes that ‘transgender’ is a relatively recent invention, gaining widespread usage only in the 1990s. While ‘transgender’ has often been invoked as a capacious and flexible category in the intervening years, its usage as a ‘collective category of identity’, according to Valentine, has been defined as ‘explicitly and fundamentally different in origin and being from homosexual identification’. Responding to a critique of her previous work that focused on Cuban American gay male cultures in Miami after the Mariel Boatlift of 1980, Peña argues that to define the gender transgressive Cuban migrants as ‘transgender’ – a category that did not exist at the time – obscures the complexities of the interrelationship of gender and sexuality, even if some of the individuals involved have since come to define themselves as such. Indeed, Peña argues that many Marielitas (Cubans who arrived on the Mariel Boatlift) understood – and continue to understand – expressions of gender nonconformity as playing ‘a central role in structuring homosexual/queer self-identifications’.
Peña extends this analysis by examining the publications associated with the Transsexual Action Organisation (TAO), founded in Los Angeles in 1970 but based in Miami from 1972. TAO activists included a significant number of Latinas, whose experiences are recorded in a number of publications associated with the organisation. The active participation of Latinas in TAO occurred despite the racist narratives produced by its eccentric founder and leader, Angela Douglas, who, Peña argues, viewed ‘Cubans and Latinas with both a desiring and despising gaze’. Peña’s analysis yields a number of important insights with regard to the historical contingencies of sexuality and gender. First, she shows that, in one sense, TAO activists might be understood to be progenitors of the transgender movement, given that they made ‘clear distinctions between gender identity and sexual orientation’. Although TAO leaders expressed solidarity with the gay and lesbian movements, they did not claim gender nonconforming individuals – including Marielitas – as transsexual. Peña also notes that TAO participants proved distinct from transgender activists in that they did not ‘embrace a continuum of gender expressions’. Indeed, for most of its history, full membership was limited to pre- and post-operative transsexuals, and organisation leaders took care to distinguish between transsexuals and transvestites. Peña concludes by offering a useful caution to historians seeking to understand the relationship among gender expression, sexual orientation and sexual desire. Rather than mapping our categories onto historical actors, we should ask ‘how they saw themselves, what communities they participated in, and what social meanings were available to them in their socio-historical context’.

The diverse scholarship in this book offers ample evidence that careful and contextualised analysis of the shifting relationship of gender and sexuality across space and time illuminates broader historical processes, from the workings of European colonialism to more recent regimes of globalisation. In recent years, scholars working in a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary locations have demonstrated that the kind of analysis collected in these pages holds real implications for our own historical moment. For example, new work in the field of transgender studies has shown that subsuming categories of gender difference within an analysis of sexuality is problematic because it figures a western conception of homosexuality as normative. As Susan Stryker argues, this practice reinforces a politics of homonormativity, which she defines as ‘a privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms, and an antipathy (or at least an unthinking blindness) toward other modes of queer difference’. Others have argued that the promotion of a politics of homonormativity based on a western model of homosexuality — described by Jasbir Puar as ‘homonationalism’ — often has the effect of othering non-western cultures as ‘backwards’ and ‘homophobic’, and therefore in need of reconstruction in the mode of the United States and its liberal western allies. This book helps to historicise these recent developments; the work collected here sheds new light on the ways in which gender and sexuality have functioned in relation to one another, as they have intersected with broader relations of power in a range of sites and contexts.

Notes


1 Imagining Cihuacoatl: Masculine Rituals, Nahua Goddesses and the Texts of the Tlacuilos

Pete Sigal

Cihuacoatl: The savage serpent woman, ill-omened and dreadful, brought men misery. For it was said: ‘She gives men the hoe and the tumpline. Thus she forces men [to work]’. This description, written in Nahuatl in a late sixteenth-century text, the *Florentine Codex*, authored by a Franciscan friar and his indigenous aides, speaks of an important Nahua goddess, conceptualised in the pre-conquest Nahua universe alternately and concurrently as a feared deity, a defeated woman and a cross-dressed man. Here, in her post-conquest iteration, she becomes only the feared goddess, the one forcing men to work (elsewhere the same text describes sacrifices performed to satisfy her voracious appetite for human hearts). Indeed, pre-conquest images of Cihuacoatl suggest that Nahua, the indigenous peoples of central Mexico, greatly feared her. Cihuacoatl, the dreaded serpent woman, presented Nahua men with a challenge: she forced them into a life of drudgery. She also could take their lives away; she could present them with certain death as she feasted upon their hearts, for ‘she had a huge, open mouth and ferocious teeth. The hair on her head was long and bulky’. Thus she devoured men. But still ‘she was clad in womanly garb – skirt, blouse and mantle – all white’.

In Nahua gender ideology, Cihuacoatl’s nature as a feared individual who could kill upon a whim and who forced individuals to work signified a powerful masculine individual. Yet her attire signified femininity. Cihuacoatl’s aesthetics seem to us, as they seemed to the Catholic priests and friars who noted her appearance, confusing: a jumble of the masculine and the feminine – coming from a society that we believe rigorously separated masculine from feminine roles. We will see that the relationship between sixteenth-century Nahua notions of gender and sexuality allowed, and even required, Cihuacoatl and other Nahua goddesses to manifest themselves as bundles of attributes that in daily life could never connect to an individual woman, no matter how powerful that woman may be. These goddesses thus transgress our imagined boundaries, not just between gender and sexuality but also between human and divine.

Need we know if Cihuacoatl and the other fertility goddesses discussed in this chapter are goddesses rather than gods? Is it important to recall that the term *teotl* (‘god’) had no gender, or that Nahua does not contain gendered pronouns? This
certainly begs an answer to a different question: how did the Nahuas understand gender and sexuality? I argue here that Nahuas related sexuality to fertility, a binary division between moderation and excess, and a concept of ritual that suspended daily rules on sexual activity. One wonders too if, while in everyday affairs a strict gender division was usually imposed, in ritual life this may not have been true. The gods and goddesses, who appear as a result of and within ritual, would never have to follow those rules, so the fertility goddesses did not follow the strict gender divisions often applied in daily life. Nahuas viewed Cihuacoatl as a warrior deity, but one who would be likely to play a major role in particular rituals and in childbirth; and they imagined another fertility goddess, Tlazolteotl (the teotl of tlazolli, ‘trash’), as a highly sexual deity who also consistently engaged in battle with her enemies. This connection between gender and sexuality, in which the god(desse)s, beings that exceed our grammatical markers, do not adhere to quotidian principles, speaks to the problem of accepting Gayle Rubin’s battle call for separating gender from sexuality as a given. Instead, in this chapter I argue for using Rubin’s formulation as a starting point for reconsidering the ways in which we understand concepts of gender and sexuality as organising principles.

The imagining and reimagining of Cihuacoatl relates to religiosity, colonialism, gender and sexuality in the early colonial period in Mexico. Cihuacoatl complicates the modern notions in which we separate human from god, man from woman and religious from secular. In this chapter, I will discuss the importance of Cihuacoatl and other related god(desse)s to the maintenance of Nahua politics and culture both before and after the Spanish conquest. In order to understand the roles that these god(desse)s played in Nahua society, we need to develop theoretical and methodological tools that go beyond Rubin’s call for a theory of sexuality.

Separating gender from sexuality: the Nahua case

Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice . . . It is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to more accurately reflect their separate social existence.

Gayle Rubin

The call sent out for chapters for the current volume intrigued me as it harkened back to an article I had first read as an undergraduate, cited repeatedly as a graduate student, and that I now assign to my undergraduates. In ‘Thinking Sex’, Gayle Rubin provocatively argues that we must delineate gender from sexuality, and in particular that we must not assume that the theoretical tools feminism uses to analyse gender will be sufficient for the task of analysing sexuality. Such a critique at the time I read it seemed to me fair enough, and since Rubin’s article came out twenty-seven years ago, many theorists, particularly those involved in queer theory, have answered her call.

Still, when I began my research into indigenous concepts of sexuality from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, I became troubled by part of Rubin’s assertion. While sex and gender are not identical, and the Nahuas would not have conflated the analytical terrain that these two concepts represent, the boundaries between the two, in this pre-modern, non-western culture, need significantly more analysis than Rubin’s argument allows. How can the Nahua situation speak to Rubin’s theorising
of a separation between gender and sexuality? I suggest that Rubin’s formulation can only be a provocative starting point, full of contradictions, when applied to the Nahuas. Cihuacoatl presents one example: was she a god or a goddess? Was she human or divine? Was she chaste or sexual? As we will see, neither Cihuacoatl nor any of the other Nahua god(desse)s can be defined easily based on these binary divisions.

As many scholars have shown, Nahua notions of gender at the time of the conquest incorporated both ‘gender complementarity’ and ‘gender hierarchy’. In the complementary realm, we find symbolic equivalences (women who died in childbirth were equated the same high status as men who died in battle), quotidian senses of purpose (consent of both husband and wife generally was required to make all major household decisions) and material realities (networks of commoner families teamed together to make sure all could survive economically, with men generally engaging in farming activities and women generally controlling the markets to sell the produce from the land). Regarding gender hierarchy, we find that men controlled the bulk of the political system, the highest levels of religious office and the esteemed title of ‘warrior’. The gender system of course changed after the Spanish conquest but, as many recent commentators have noted, these changes were not nearly as radical as earlier scholars had presumed.

Nahuas connected these concepts of gender with related notions of sexuality, even if they did not term these things ‘sexuality’. Nahua nobles and commoners before the Spanish conquest related their sexual lives with rituals of fertility and warfare. Still, Nahua did not have a discreet category they called ‘sex’. Instead, they constituted a variety of relations as ‘categories of the intimate’ in which the human couple engaged in bodily activities related to fertility. These activities included categories that we would invest with sexual meaning: vaginal and anal intercourse, manual and oral stimulation of male and female genitals, imaginary conditions designed to allude to these activities and stimulate a genital response, and the use of non-bodily objects in these actions. The Nahua also had concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex and rape and other forms of sexual violence. Yet these things that I have called ‘categories of the intimate’ also included activities that we would not consider sexual: the ritual killing of humans and animals, burning of maize, incense and other items, letting of blood and sweeping houses, streets and other areas. Nahua categories linked all of these activities together and suggested that they formed a part of the matrix of sacrifice. Much Nahua thought at the time of the Spanish conquest envisioned sexual relations as elements of a larger set of ritual practices designed to promote fertility: of gods, humans, animals and the earth. A cultural history of these rituals also shows that Nahua closely linked the maintenance and expansion of the political system and the structures of governance with fertility rites.

Two main principles organised Nahua thoughts about the sexual. First, sexual behaviour related directly to the fertility rituals, ceremonies large and small, in the many realms described above, promoting the notion that everything and everybody must exude fertility in order for the community to survive. Second, an individual’s sexual possibilities divided between those acts determined moderate and those deemed excessive. Nahua thought considered moderation in sexual activity to be a virtue, excess a vice. Ceremonial performances from those of the household to the grand state rites, as well as ritual and quotidian discourse, marked both the encouragement of fertility and the distinction between moderation and excess.
Representatives of the Catholic Church who encountered the Nahuas deemed their views of sexual behaviour problematic, and they debated how to change those views and behaviours. The result of that debate was the attempt to link sex with sin, often using particular indigenous concepts (dirt, dust, damage and excess being the most common) as signifiers of sinful behaviour. The means for such a linkage was the discourse of confession, whether through the actual confessional or through advancing such an analysis in the broader social field. The attempt at a sexual conquest through the confessional largely failed, instead eventually producing a hybrid sexual system that still survives today in many indigenous Mesoamerican societies.

The Tlacuilo’s text

Before the Spanish conquest, the Nahuas produced an extensive array of writings, though few have survived to this day. Here I focus on using pictorial manuscripts, produced both before and after the conquest, to analyse the relationship between gender, sexuality and the Nahua fertility god(desses). In conjunction with alphabetic texts, these pictorial manuscripts tell us stories about the ways in which our writer/painters, called in Nahuatl tlacuilos, conceptualised particular approaches to sexual topics: those linked to religion, ritual and fertility. The authors of the pictorial manuscripts focused much of their attention on the gods and rituals that I relate to sexuality, but they paid less attention to the daily lives of the people.

Our methods for reading such images cannot be facile, and we must engage in as much criticism of the images as we do of the alphabetic texts. Thus, we must note that the Nahuas before the conquest did not intend their texts to be read as transparent assertions of a witnessed reality. Nor did they produce texts that we can read as complete narratives. Nahua society had an oral culture, so the tlacuilos produced texts in interaction with other people, and they, along with various other textual experts, ‘read’ these documents out loud in public and private ceremonies by expanding on the images presented on the page. Thus, for us to read these images, we need some of the ‘back story’, provided by the contexts we find in archaeological and ethnohistorical studies.

Further, we must know something about the tlacuilos, who played such an important role in pre-conquest Nahua society. Before the Spaniards arrived, Nahuas wrote texts in the form of various types of painted images, either on paper made from the bark of a tree or on stone edifices. The person who engaged in such writing was called a tlacuilo, a word that translates roughly as ‘writer’ or ‘painter’. The Nahuas viewed this tlacuilo as a reflective artist, not as one who wrote down precisely what he saw. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the practices of the tlacuilos changed, as many became escribanos, who would write either Nahuatl or Spanish texts in the Roman alphabet. These scribes became intermediaries in the colonial project, and they overwhelmingly produced documents designed in some manner for the Spanish legal system. Moreover, the tlacuilos who continued to paint their images were influenced by European artistic conventions. Still, early tlacuilos were trained not only by friars but also by painters knowledgeable in pre-conquest aesthetics. And the evidence from idolatry investigations, criminal trials and Inquisition cases shows that these artists continued to get their works into the hands of a wide variety of indigenous people. Too much current historical writing either ignores the role of the scribe or considers
his work to be a window onto Nahua reality. I argue that the window is the wrong metaphor; his writings instead signify a prism.

The images themselves require substantial interpretation based on a method for reading Nahua iconography, a method based on comparative studies within particular genres. So, for example, art historians have studied extensively the Borgia group, from which we receive all of the indisputably pre-conquest images I discuss here (from the *Codex Borgia* and the *Codex Laud*); we have found that the artists did not attempt to provide realistic portrayals of the human body – they tended to provide images in profile – and they had specific icons designed to signify such things as movement through space, the progress of time and, more to the point for our purposes, the position of fertility. The Borgia group also comes from outside the basin of Mexico (probably from near Tlaxcala or from Nahua-influenced areas of southern Mexico) and, as the foremost experts on these codices have noted, these texts represent the dominant religious views of the priestly class throughout the region.

The post-conquest manuscripts that I will analyse became hybrid texts, at least in format, with influence from both European and Nahua styles. The first set of texts (the *Codex Borbonicus* and the *Tonalamatl of Aubin*), probably produced soon after the Spanish conquest in the basin of Mexico, appear to have little Spanish influence, though some aesthetic changes and/or Spanish glosses appear. The second set of texts, the Magliabechiano group, betrays the influence of its Franciscan sponsors. Though produced largely in traditional Nahua style, the texts are primarily Spanish alphabetic documents, with images illustrating the narrative. The final text, the twelve-volume *Florentine Codex* written and illustrated by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his indigenous aides, is an extensive ethnographic study, based on interviews with old Nahua nobles from three different communities, produced in Hispanic style and with an agenda of promoting Christian thought, but with an interest in providing great detail – in the Nahuatl language, even if in the Roman alphabet – about Nahua religious practice.

These texts together tell us a story: one in which war, fertility and sacrifice relate to emerging and always changing concepts of gender and sexuality. As we will see, these concepts not only exceeded the Spanish conceptualisation that equated sex with sin, but also exceed a theory of sexuality that maintains a division between sex and gender.

The god(dess) Cihuacoatl

In the *Codex Borbonicus*, authored in the basin of Mexico at around the time of the Spanish conquest, we witness Cihuacoatl in a description of the Toxcatl ceremony, a festival to celebrate the warriors of the city-state of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the ruling empire immediately before the Spanish conquest (see Figure 1). This early sixteenth-century pictorial codex, written in traditional Nahua style (though with some Spanish glosses), focuses on an individual called the cihuacoatl, the second-highest ranking person in a Nahua city-state. We see few figures in Nahua pictorial manuscripts that we know are cross-dressed individuals, but the cihuacoatl is one, and he runs the Toxcatl ceremony, a festival designed to promote masculine valour in warfare. His image in the centre of the ceremony shows him wearing a blouse and a skirt, both decorated in the manner of the god(dess), and carrying a well-decorated shield,
Figure 1: Cihuacoatl. Reprinted from Codex Borbonicus (facsimile) (Madrid, Vienna, Mexico City: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991), p. 34.

Masculine Rituals, Nahua Goddesses and the Texts of the Tlacuilos

a symbol of masculinity, and a weaving batten, a symbol of femininity. Why did this cross-dressing individual play such a powerful role in an important Nahua ceremony (and in wider Nahua politics)? Did Cihuacoatl, ostensibly a mother god(dess), come to symbolise warfare?

Dominican friar Diego Durán describes fearsome sacrifices dedicated to Cihuacoatl, and he says that the Nahuas killed more for her than for any other deity.25 Indeed, Cihuacoatl was a powerful warrior god(dess) often associated with the Mexica.26

Much of the Codex Borbonicus focuses on her as a central god(dess), largely because this codex is dedicated to warrior rituals. Yet the Borbonicus focuses not simply on the god(dess), but rather on her priest: a male priest dressed in her garb.27 In addition to his shield and his weaving batten, he, if we can call him that, wears a dress decorated with skulls at the bottom, and he has all of the standard markings of the god(dess). He also stands upon a platform decorated with a skull. This individual is the cihuacoatl of Tenochtitlan, a person, seemingly always male, the second-in-command of the community after the tlatoani. This powerful position for a cross-dressing individual belies the fact that Nahua society strongly ingrained a highly masculine image in young men in which they avoided all activity, including dress, associated with women’s roles.28 Yet, Nahua leaders viewed the cihuacoatl as necessary for the effective functioning of society and, in the Toxcatl ceremony, for effective leadership in ritual warfare.

Importantly, such cross-dressing in no way challenged the masculinity of the priest. He stands in the image across from and alongside well-decorated priests and warriors. In another image, he stands directly below Huitzilopochtli, the god of war.29 Just as the priest of Cihuacoatl wears the attire of the god(dess) (her figurative skin), the warriors wear the skins of animals and the priest of Huitzilopochtli wears the accoutrements of the god he signifies. In each case, the act of placing upon one’s body the skin of another transforms the self. Huitzilopochtli’s priest becomes the powerful warrior god – no longer simply human, he enters a space in which he remains the priest but also becomes the divine. The warriors become the powerful animals (coyotes,