

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED: The Erotic Journeys of Mexican Immigrants

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Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives. By Gloria González-López. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 331 pages. \$21.95 (paper).

In *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives*, Gloria González-López invites the reader to join her on a walk down the road less traveled as she examines the sexual journeys of twenty heterosexual men and forty heterosexual women, most from working-class backgrounds, as they migrate from Mexico to the United States. The book is based on ethnographic field notes and in-depth interviews with participants who were born and raised either in the urban setting of Mexico City or in the rural areas of the state of Jalisco. At the time of the study, all participants were residing in the greater Los Angeles area in the United States. Through her conversations with these men and women, González-López allows the reader to go beyond the bedsheets to understand the transformative influences on sexuality as individuals leave their native country and become integrated into a dramatically different social environment.

Each of the eight chapters in the book highlights a different aspect of the changes the travelers' sex lives undergo because of the migration process. In chapter one, "Twice Forgotten: The Sex Lives of Heterosexual Mexicans in the United States," González-López frames the participants' journey within the emerging research in cultural studies, immigration studies, and gender and sexuality studies. Her theoretical positioning is further highlighted in

chapter two, "Beyond the Hymen: Women, Virginity, and Sex." González-López theorizes the important role of virginity from the perspective of the immigrants. She proposes that the concept of virginity for Mexican women is more complicated than the simplistic "virgin/whore" dichotomy that has been promoted by the Catholic Church. Instead, the importance of preserving a woman's virginity prior to marriage is socially valued as a pathway to improving women's status within Mexican society. The author introduces the concept of *capital femenino*, which refers to the participants' use of virginity as a form of social, economic, and cultural exchange. Capital femenino, for example, is used to obtain a suitable husband who will insure a woman's participation in the proper social and cultural communities and improve her economic opportunities. At the same time, the preservation of virginity is a manifestation of cultural beliefs and an enactment of ethnicity: virginity signifies respect for one's family and culture. Congruently for men, women's chastity until marriage allows them to express the Mexican tenets of manhood. Within these restrictions, however, women acknowledge their sexual desires and take an active role in seeking sexual gratification. This chapter lays the foundation for the essence of the immigrants' erotic journeys: a set of contradictions among transnational identities, gender inequality, patriarchy, sexual agency, and the social construction of virginity within Mexican culture.

The remaining chapters mark the beginning of the immigrants' erotic journeys as the reader is invited to observe the changes that happen behind closed doors. In chapter three, "Pleasurable Dangers, Dangerous Pleasures: Men and Their First Sexual Experience," González-López details the sexual initiations that the men undergo in order to become "hombres." Commonly, in rural areas, older male family members pay for sex workers to introduce younger males to their first sexual experiences. In contrast, in large urban

areas, young men have access to older, sexually experienced women who become the men's sexual initiators. Men's loss of virginity is often coupled with feelings of fear and anxiety because they are not explicitly taught about sex, and their sexual initiators are typically strangers with whom they do not have a meaningful relationship.

The *testimonios* of the men and women interviewed elucidate how education, migration, and social location construct the enactment of premarital virginity. As the participants reveal their own erotic journeys, they share a common path of fear during their first sexual experience. For example, while men are explicitly initiated sexually, women's virginity is highly policed. Men are taught that to enter manhood they must have sex; women are told that their virginity is directly tied to the family's honor. These social rules shape how men and women embark on their distinct sexual journeys.

Chapter four, "Sex is a Family Affair: Nurturing and Regulating Sexuality," addresses the central regulatory role that families, especially mothers, play in reinforcing cultural standards regarding virginity, femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. The loss of virginity becomes a public act for women through the marriage ceremony, as it is directly tied to family respectability and the social importance of being a so-called virtuous woman.

In chapters five through eight, the author illustrates the particular aspects of the immigrants' sexual lives that have been changed as a result of the migration process. Chapter five, "Sex and the Immigrant Communities: Risky Opportunities, Opportune Risks," delineates the inherent risks in the participants' sexual journeys as they are exposed to drugs, violence, alcohol, and the fear of contracting HIV/AIDS. In chapter six, "Sexual Discourses and Cultures in the Barrio: Networking," the focus on the

family of origin's influence over female sexuality begins to shift to the participants' conversations and relationships with other women in immigrant communities. The networking taking place in informal gatherings becomes a resource for women as they begin to question their restricted sexual socialization and start to explore their own sexual desires. This leads into chapter seven, "Sexual Bargains: Work, Money, and Power," which explores the transformation that women and men undergo in their changing views of sexuality created within their new communities. The participants' journeys to the United States allow them to forge their own sexual paths unrestricted by immediate family and community of origin. Immigrants are able to have greater sexual agency, while at the same time, they confront societal dangers such as drugs and violence.

In the final chapter, "Gendered Tapestries: Sexuality Threads of Migrant Sexualities," González-López pauses to reflect on how sexuality and virginity are being contextualized for new generations and to raise some implications for future research. Overall, González-López provides an intersectional analysis to the erotic journeys of the participants, illustrating the dynamics of social context, identity, race, culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, family, and migration. She is in dialogue with other Chicana and Latina scholars who are seeking to explore the complicated paths of sexuality that are being transformed by changing transnational identities.

This book is appropriate for use in undergraduate or graduate courses in Chicana/o and Latina/Latino studies, Latin American studies, gender studies, feminist studies, American studies, cultural psychology, and sociology. A central tenet of the book is that we must move beyond the bedroom to explore sexuality as a contextual phenomenon that is changed as individuals cross borders within communities, families, and nations.

Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives makes many excellent contributions to the scholarly studies of sexuality and immigration. Among the most important are the recognition of the internal diversity of Mexican culture (captured in González-López's concept of regional patriarchies), her description of the fluidity of Mexican culture and social practices as participants confront new and complex environments, and, ultimately, the acknowledgment that immigrants are much more than bodies moved by global capital. As human beings, they too desire, feel, and have passions that go beyond the economic restrictions of their lives.