

Gender and the Negotiation of Daily Life in Mexico, 1750 – 1856. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780803238336

Sonya Lipsett-Rivera opens *Gender and the Negotiation of Daily Life in Mexico* with the assertion that “on a day-to-day basis the aspects of life that most preoccupied people were not the political machinations of generals or politicians but whether they could make a living, whether others accorded them the respect that they deserved, whether they were safe from an abusive husband, whether their wives and children would obey them; in short, the minutiae of daily life” (4). Though this minutiae is often neglected by historians, history is not, Lipsett-Rivera contends, merely the chronicle of the great deeds of great men; it is also the story of the masses of people whose names do not feature prominently in the historical record and whose lives are often passed over by scholars. Through painstaking analysis of court cases, ecclesiastical divorce cases, and etiquette manuals, Lipsett-Rivera skillfully illuminates, for Mexico City and Puebla de los Angeles, in the period 1750-1856, a world in which ideas about honor and morality passed from one social class to another, and a world marked by honor systems and grammars of violence.

Over the past few decades, Lipsett-Rivera observes, historians have become more adept at linking violent acts and culture, as well as understanding that honor systems applied equally to the elite and the lower class in Latin America. Lipsett-Rivera employs a concept called “scenarios of violence” in order to demonstrate that plebeian violence was not disorganized, random, and senseless, but, rather, that it reveals “plebeian codes of conduct—the kind of etiquette that was equivalent to elite notions but never written down in manuals and rulebooks” (9). One of Lipsett-Rivera’s contributions comes from her inclusion of women. Lipsett-Rivera does not follow the traditional perspective that defending the honor of women and the household

was a male prerogative, but rather, asserts that women frequently did so as well. Lipsett-Rivera contends that honor was a central value in the lives of both elite and lower class Mexicans, and takes, as one of the central themes of the book, the connections between honor, space, and body.

Lipsett-Rivera begins by analyzing Mexican cities and focuses not only on what Mexican houses looked like, but also how space could take on gendered meanings. If houses were seen as feminine areas in contrast to the masculine streets and countryside, these spaces were permeable as “Mexican housing did not provide a stark separation between public and private spaces” (38). Lipsett-Rivera observes that Mexican cities were organized on a grid around a central plaza and argues that Mexicans “attached moral values to the spaces,” (24). According to the Mexican view of cities, the center was occupied by honest and moral people; peripheries by people of questionable morality, and the countryside was dangerous and sexualized. Just as Mexicans associated morality with space on a horizontal grid, they also placed importance and social symbolism on the vertical axis, and considered higher spaces more important and desirable. Thus, concludes Lipsett-Rivera, a house was not merely a place to live, but also “a space that defined who you were and how you were allowed to function socially” (66).

Lipsett-Rivera devotes chapter three to an expanded discussion of the public/private dichotomy. Building on her analysis in the preceding chapter, Lipsett-Rivera begins by observing that the division between public and private was not yet clear-cut and uses, as an illustration, doors. Mexicans usually kept their doors open during the day so that passersby could look into the house and see that nothing untoward was happening. At night, Mexicans closed their doors, a sign of respectability. A closed door during the daytime looked suspicious, Lipsett-Rivera notes,

and an open door at night could signal immorality. If doors began to embody morality and if the interior of the house was supposed to be a safe space, especially in contrast to the dangerous and sexualized streets, theory did not match reality. Therefore, the interior of the house was, in some ways, just as dangerous as the exterior. Lipsett-Rivera continues the discussion of space in the following chapter by continuing to think about interior and exterior spaces. Lipsett-Rivera observes that “to push someone from one space to another was a potent message for Mexicans in this period” (108). Furthermore, Mexicans did not only have to eject people from their homes to make sure that their domestic space remained honorable and respected, but they also had to think carefully about who should be allowed into their homes. Because areas outside the city limits were masculine and sexualized, women frequently suffered sexual and physical violence in these areas, but, this violence could also occur in the home. Thus, Lipsett-Rivera asserts that the ways Mexicans defined spaces as moral and immoral often did not make sense, because women could be, and often were, in just as great danger in the home as in the countryside.

In the next three chapters Lipsett-Rivera discusses bodies and the linkages between body, space, and honor. Lipsett-Rivera opens chapter five with the contention that “Middle-period Mexicans used their bodies and those of their neighbors to place themselves within the social order; bodies conveyed many messages about rank and hierarchy” (137). For example, people attacked the head because the head was traditionally associated with kings and was “the core of honor for the body” (147). Lipsett-Rivera pursues these themes in greater detail in chapter six, which details patterns of attack on the body. Lipsett-Rivera poses a simple question “How many people in middle-period Mexico read civility manuals?” and concludes that “the vast majority of the population was neither literate nor had access to books” (171). So, how did a largely illiterate

lower class become familiar with elite ideas about politeness and the body? Lipsett-Rivera answers her question by contending that “there was an unwritten code that people learned by living rather than by reading a manual” (172). After discussing attacks against parts of the body (the head, the face, the eyes and the mouth, and the genitals), Lipsett-Rivera offers a fascinating discussion of attacks against clothing and hair, actions that were part of a strategy of humiliation. Lipsett-Rivera concludes that “when Mexicans pulled at another person’s hair or clothes, they were following a strategy that was not usually as drastic as hitting the head or other parts of the body” (247), but an attack no less important, because hair and clothes were central to a person’s identity.

History, Lipsett-Rivera contends, “is not just about great men, wars, and revolutions: it is also about the subtle aspects of more ordinary matters. But the mundane and the grand are also related” (3). Lipsett-Rivera’s book does a wonderful job of illuminating honor cultures and scenarios of violence among the lower class, but this reviewer wondered if Lipsett-Rivera might have considered integrating this story with larger political developments in Mexican history during the Middle Period. At times, the lower class seems too apolitical and it might be useful to think about how elite politicians responded to the honor cultures of the lower class. Furthermore, how did elite honor cultures and grammars of violence compare with their lower class counterparts? Criticism aside, this thought-provoking book will appeal to anyone interested in Latin America, gender, honor, and the body, and will prove useful in graduate seminars.

Evan C. Rothera, The Pennsylvania State University