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Surgery and Salvation: The Roots of Reproductive Injustice in Mexico, 1770–1940

ELIZABETH O BRIEN, 2023

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, \$32.95 ISBN: 978-1-4696-7587-9

In March 2013, a 32-year-old doctor from Oaxaca named Anahí went into hospital for an elective caesarean section. Her baby was born safely, but Anahí died six days after the operation due to complications following a botched administration of anaesthesia. GIRE, Mexico's more important reproductive rights advocacy organisation, notes that the delay in providing necessary medical care at the rural state hospital stemmed from the decision of staff to airlift Anahí to another hospital, seemingly to avoid responsibility for their inadequate treatment—the National Human Rights Commission later classifying this failure of care as an example of obstetric violence against Anahí. Obstetric violence refers to situations where women experience mistreatment, disrespect, abuse, or neglect during pregnancy, childbirth, or postpartum care. Although reliable figures on obstetric violence in Mexico are often challenging to obtain due to underreporting, lack of standardised data collection methods, and varying definitions of obstetric violence, studies such as those carried out by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and by GIRE indicate its widespread prevalence. Obstetric violence is just one way that harm is done to human lives through the underlying norms and prejudices of reproductive healthcare systems.

Elizabeth O' Brien's nuanced and meticulously researched book brings such contemporary struggles to name and resist obstetric violence, as well as other forms of reproductive injustice, into dialogue with her detailed history of reproductive surgery in Mexico. Beginning at the close of colonial rule, during a boom of exploratory surgery, and extending into postrevolutionary 1930s, this book chronicles the ways that experiments into reproductive surgery (including caesarean section, vaginal bifurcation, abortion, hysterectomy and sterilisation procedures) intersected with shifting Catholic definitions of unborn life and overarching political ideologies of the modern nation. The book represents years of expert

work in the archives, drawing on an impressively comprehensive corpus of dissertations and other types of medical literature from a span of over 200 years.

The 'surgery' and 'salvation' referenced in the title comprise the conceptual frame of O' Brien's analysis. At different points in the histories covered by the book, salvation was mobilised as a driving force behind reproductive surgeries. Part One details how colonial prioritisation of medical knowledge diminished the agency and took the lives of pregnant women. Catholic authorities' influence converted caesarian surgery into a redemptive practice in order to baptise foetuses. Later, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, doctors following eugenic rationales who conducted reproductive surgeries, such as sterilisations, viewed their practice as a means of protecting the nation from the burden of supporting an inferior population. Such transformation of medical practice into a form of medical violence was partly influenced by the structural violences of its surrounding social systems. Examples cited from O' Brien's sources reveal with startling realism the patriarchal, racist and eugenic notions which were widespread within medical practice and society beyond it.

As O' Brien makes clear, reproductive surgery has been and remains 'philosophically, medically and socially distinct from other kinds of surgery'; reproductive politics always reveal complex ideological and political dynamics. And yet, O' Brien's original monograph highlights that gendered, (post)colonial approaches are less common in histories of medicine. This book thus makes a significant contribution to the sub-discipline's Mexico-specific scholarship, established by scholars such as Nora Jaffary, Gabriela Soto-Laveaga, Alexandra Minna Stern and R. Sánchez Rivera. Its originality and value also lie in O' Brien's attempts to bring 'silenced' perspectives of patients into the quoted narratives of the attending doctors. Each chapter strikes an effective balance between the broad strokes of prevailing belief systems and the intimacy of the personal stories cited. While occasionally extended discussion would have enhanced the analysis - I would have

been fascinated by longer contextualisation of the overlaps between religious and medical professions in Part 1, for example - it is a necessary consequence of the ambitiously expansive historical view taken.

Academic and non-academic readers alike will find *Surgery and Salvation* a compelling and accessible book with clear contemporary relevance. As long as obstacles to bodily autonomy, dignity and consent remain common, in part due to the continued entanglement of religious and political interests with reproductive freedoms, it is essential that we understand the historical roots of reproductive violence and control, and the broader conditions in which they are embedded.

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