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Pete Sigal, The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. xvi, 361. ISBN 978082235138 (hb); ISBN 978082235151 (pb).

Studies of early sexuality are always complex, and Nahua sexuality is a particularly challenging topic; not only did the Nahuas (often called 'Aztecs') lack a category for 'sexuality' as we understand it, but our comprehension of the associated concepts is filtered through the intervention of Spanish missionaries, who not only sought to control and classify sexual behaviour, but are also largely responsible (though their work as linguists and ethnographers) for our knowledge of the subject.

In this ambitious book, Pete Sigal places the uncertainty of the sources at the heart of his attempt to trace early indigenous-Mexican sexual experience, examining not just the sexual lives of Nahua people, but also the ways in which 'writers, both indigenous and Hispanic, produced ideas about Nahua sexuality' (p. 11). By focusing on the encoding of sexual behaviours and beliefs, Sigal produces a book which is much more wide-ranging in its significance than a practical study of sexual behaviours. Seeking to deconstruct normative notions of sexuality and sexual identity, Sigal contends that the Nahua derived meaning from sexuality in a much wider range of contexts than modern western conceptions allow.

For Sigal, Nahua ideas of fertility were formed from a 'tlazolli complex' which was rooted in the idea of balance. The concept of tlazolli is an excellent exemplar of the kind of conceptual slippage which sometimes obscures indigenous attitudes in the colonial context. Translated by the Spanish as 'sin', tlazolli might better be rendered as 'trash', and refers to the debris and excess of human life, not only immoderate sexual behaviours, but also garbage, excrement, dirt, blood and semen. Whilst tlazolli was central to fertility, and life was built upon it, an excess of could be dangerous: "The earth always signified life and fertility, but it also signified danger and death: one needed to control the earth." (p. 23).

Contrary to Christian frameworks which mandated a binary model of good/bad in which sex was connected with sin, the tlazolli complex privileged balance, allowing positive sexuality provided it was practised in moderation. Sigal argues that, rather than Christian conceptions of sin gradually being adopted (as has often been argued), when these two conceptual structures met in the colonial world the Nahuas accommodated 'a changed discursive framework in which excess would lead to spiritual condemnation, while moderation remained connected with fertility and fulfilment' (p. 208). In other words, we don't need 'to avoid sex, but rather to make sure that we do not expend ourselves too quickly' (p. 213). Using an impressive array of Spanish, Nahuatl and pictorial documents, The Flower and the Scorpion traces the blending of identities and understandings which is visible in the early sources, and attempts to disentangle some of their multiple meanings.

Sigal is quite rightly tentative in his conclusions, and so it is interesting that the minor quibbles I have with him usually occur in cases where I feel he overstates the certainty of specific points. Class distinctions are occasionally a little over-emphasized; he asserts that the tlacuilo (the painter-writer) was a 'noble male' (p. 40), but there is evidence of female tlacuilos (in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis for example). The Mexica are described as engaging in 'extensive sodomy' (p. 181), a contestable claim reliant entirely on the Spanish sources of which Sigal is elsewhere so cautious. And the term puto is translated thoughout as 'faggot', a translation which I recognise Sigal has supported in his work elsewhere, but which

is a surprising modernism in a book which is remarkable for the nuance and sensitivity of its translations (the originals of which are provided in the extensive and helpful notes).

There are points at which I might challenge Sigal's reading, but this is inevitable in such a contested field, and I found this to be a fascinating and thought-provoking book. At the heart of The Flower and the Scorpion are questions of identity, and in the final chapter Sigal turns his attention to the Nahua concept of the self, which he describes as 'a bundle of attributes unbundled and rebundled during ritual activity' (p. 247). The sophisticated construction and understanding of self which he begins to elaborate in this concluding section has important ramifications for our understanding not only of gender and sexuality, but also of human sacrifice, religion and identity, and ought to be extensively considered by scholars of the Nahua world.

This is not an easy read – Sigal deals in detail with complex conceptual and linguistic issues, and The Flower and the Scorpion is likely to be hard going for students and general readers. I venture to suggest that, if you haven't already heard of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, then this may not be the book for you. That said, this is an important and provocative book, which deserves to be widely read by both Nahua specialists and gender historians. This is challenging territory, but those brave enough to venture there will find ideas which encourage us not only to rethink Nahua ideas of sexuality, but also to challenge the fixed nature of individual and collective identity.

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