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Review/Reseña

Camacho Zambrano, Margarita. *Cuerpos encerrados, cuerpos emancipados: Travestis en el ex penal García Moreno*. Quito: El Conejo, Abya-Yala, 2007.

Gendered Identities and Prison Life: The Case of Ecuadorian Transvestites

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Transvestites face some of the most severe discrimination among discriminated groups. They are little understood, and constantly face negative stereotypes of being hypersexual and perverse. Transvestites have been the focus of few academic studies, and even less attention has been granted them in Latin America. They remain largely invisible and misunderstood.

Margarita Camacho Zambrano provides a fascinating and very rich ethnographic description of transvestites in the ex penal García Moreno,

Quito, Ecuador's main prison. Her central question is how transvestites negotiate their gender identities and sexual practices in prison. The result is a sensitive, sympathetic, and probing examination of their lives, and the challenges that they face.

This ethnography is based on participant observation in the prison from October 2005 to January 2007. The book is packed with transcriptions of interviews Camacho conducted in the prison, which informs and highlights her insights into that world. Camacho describes how she volunteered to teach art classes in the prison as a way to collect material for her master's thesis at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito. She did not begin with the idea of studying transvestites. When she met "Margarita" she decided to make their gendered identities the focus of her study.

Homosexual activities were illegal in Ecuador until 1997, and were punishable by eight years in prison. Although changes in the law ended legal discrimination, sexual minorities still face a good deal of social marginalization. The inequalities that sexual minorities face are, of course, exacerbated in Latin America and then multiplied many times more within the walls of the prison.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first engages a broader literature on transvestites and gender constructions, and applies these ideas to the Ecuadorian context. The second chapter is a rich description of life in the ex penal García Moreno, the prison that is the subject of this book. The final chapter examines transvestite life in the prison. Together, the chapters create a rich ethnography of both gender constructions and Latin American prisons that extends far beyond an examination of imprisoned transvestites as implied in the title.

Camacho provides fascinating insights into daily life in the prison. Despite tight controls, contraband seems to flow freely in and out of the prison—largely thanks to a prevalent culture of corruption. Drugs and alcohol are easily available; seemingly at the proper price anything can be

acquired. Camacho relates a hilarious story of naively bringing a knife into the prison to cut a birthday cake, indicating how malleable those rules and restrictions often are. Although weapons flow through the prison, the most horrifying stories that Camacho relates are of executions by hanging presented in such a way that they appear to be suicides. Similar to death squad hits, these executions are often announced in advance although the prison officials are seemingly unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Perhaps officials are in cahoots with the executions as a system of social control to remove problematic inmates or to keep others in line.

The prison replicates the class divisions of the society outside of its walls. It is divided into five pavilions, each with its own associated costs and controls. Those with money have access to more resources and privileges, whereas those without face miserable and overcrowded conditions. Even with these tensions and divisions, it is surprising how much of the prison is run by the prisoners themselves. This is the theme of Mateo Herrera's 2006 documentary "El Comité: La toma del ex penal García Moreno" that examines the internal organization behind a strike at the prison. Camacho's book provides a complementary and corrective perspective on the visual representations in that documentary.

Running throughout the book are discussions of masculinity, often providing challenges to traditional interpretations of machismo rather similar to how Matthew Gutmann dissects the subject in *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. Camacho describes survival strategies that transvestites engage to survive in the prison. Often alienated from their biological families and the broader society, transvestites create their own family relations. Their representations as females disrupt a heterosexual order, even more so within the walls of a prison that is an exclusively male domain. These transgressions drive and inform this study.

Does the prison annul or exacerbate desire? Camacho introduces the third and final chapter with this question, even though it is a theme that runs throughout the entire book. In their lives outside the prison, Camacho

describes how transvestites struggle to earn money in order to reshape their physical bodies to appear more like their chosen gender. Inside, these desires become even more intense. It would be fascinating to trace out how these desires vary according to class and racial divides within the prison.

Camacho concludes the book with two observations. While Ecuadorian society has generally become more tolerant, this openness has largely not been extended to transvestites. Second, perhaps ironically, transvestites sometimes face more abuse outside the prison than inside. They occupy nebulous spaces in society. Many people do not understand why they would give up their male privileges for the dangers and abuses that transvestites face. Nevertheless, within the walls of the prison the control that the state exercises over that space provides a check on the violence that they might otherwise face outside on the streets. In turn, this allows them more freedom to be who they are. Furthermore, as the only “women” in an exclusively male domain, they provide a welcome break for other inmates who otherwise would not be so welcoming of their female representations.

Cuerpos encerrados, cuerpos emancipados is a remarkable and groundbreaking work that examines how identities are created and bent, but not broken. It examines aspects of Latin American society that few people experience directly, which further underscores its importance and significance.