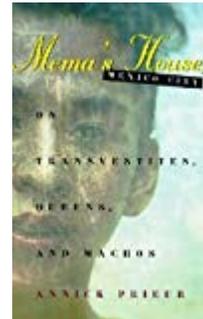




**Annick Prieur.** *Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xv + 293 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-68257-0; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-68256-3.



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## Cross-dressing Queens in Working-Class Mexico

The 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York City sparked a mass-based politicized movement in the United States and encouraged innovative and positive studies about gay men and lesbians. At colleges and universities, professors began to offer individual courses about lesbian and gay issues, and by the late 1980s students and faculty initiated the process of organizing programs or centers in scattered institutions throughout the country. In the 1990s queer studies emerged in literature departments and spread throughout other disciplines. Currently, anyone perusing the shelves of a large urban book and espresso superstore can now find hundreds of academic titles addressing a myriad of questions related to same-sex eroticism in an array of fields. In-depth anthropological, sociological, and historical research on homosexuality in Latin America has had a much briefer life. Over the last decade, however, Latin American, European, and North American academics have begun to examine gender systems in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin America and their relationship to various forms of same-sex eroticism.

Among those leading the way in this new area of re-

search was anthropologist Peter Fry, a long-term resident and professor in Brazil who mapped out in the mid-1970s the hierarchical nature of Brazilian same-sex gender systems based on his study of effeminate men in Belem, a city situated at the mouth of the Amazon River.[1] Fry pointed to the binary nature of constructed performances among men having sexual relations with each other. He observed that their assumed sexual and social roles mirrored dominant social patterns in which men were seen as “active” sexual partners and women as “passive” participants in erotic activities. Fry, and others who followed him, argued that effeminate men sought out their masculine opposite for sexual liaisons and engaged in receptive anal intercourse with them, reflecting hegemonic bi-polar social norms. In these relationships, Fry noted, the effeminate *bicha* (fairy/faggot) was socially stigmatized while his partner, in assuming the active inserter role in anal sex, maintained his masculinity. He also posited the argument that new “egalitarian” relationships developed among some urban middle-class Brazilian men in the 1960s, reflecting general shifts in notions of gender. These men assumed an identity somewhat similar to U.S. and Western European gay identities where sexual

object choice predominated over sexual roles that were imitative of heterosexual norms. Fry noted that while both systems operated among middle-class men engaged in same-sex erotic activities in urban areas, the active-passive, masculine-effeminate model still predominated among rural and urban working-class Brazilian men.

Concurrently with Fry's pioneering work in Brazil in the mid-1970s, Clark Louis Taylor conducted similar research in Mexico City, and Joseph Carrier did the same in Guadalajara, Mexico.[2] Since the late 1980s there has been a mini-boom in anthropological studies of male homosexuality in Latin America, of which *Mema's House* is one of the most recent contributions.[3] This engagingly-written study of cross-dressing men in the poor and working-class neighborhood Nezahualcoyotl on the outskirts of Mexico City is particularly important because the author, Annick Prier, a Norwegian anthropologist, carried out her field research among a sector of the population, namely marginalized subaltern effeminate men, who had largely been ignored by previous in-depth studies about same-sex eroticism in Latin America. This work, therefore, is both pathbreaking and an important reference point for other anthropologists, sociologists, and historians interested in carrying out similar studies.

As an outsider, both a European and a woman, Prier's entry into the world of complex social interactions of young cross-dressing Mexican men (*vestidas*) from poor family backgrounds would have perhaps been impossible without the assistance of Gerardo Ruben Ortega Zurita, or "Mema," an AIDS educator. Mema was the central figure in a network of effeminate boys who fled or were forced out of their families' homes and took refuge in his house. Prier's contact with Mema through an international AIDS conference gave the anthropologist access to this tight family-like community of young men, many of whom survived as sex workers. Mema's role as father-figure, caretaker, disciplinarian, social worker, and compassionate mother to these young *vestidas* provided Prier access to a group of young *jotas* (fairies/faggots). The anthropologist in turn has provided the reader with a vivid and complex analysis of the way these effeminate young men have constructed their lives and their notions of gender.

Prier does not rely merely on elaborate theories to answer this question, although the author is well-versed in the cutting-edge literature of gender and sexuality, especially in Latin America. Rather, she has carried out a subtle case study that points far beyond the issues of same-sex sexuality to broader discussions about the

mechanisms for the social construction of gender and identity. Furthermore, this meticulously layered and argued empirical study points to important questions of how class intersects with gender construction and shapes the ways in which self-identity and self-presentation manifest themselves.

As many scholars of the history of homosexuality have observed, large urban centers provide both the anonymity and social complexity for the development of same-sex erotic subcultures. Whereas many times this has meant the formation of a semi-visible world, hidden from the uninterested eye, the effeminate men of the sprawling urban suburban community of Nezahualcoyotl remain noticeably visible and public. Indeed, in this poor and working class suburb of Mexico City, the *jotas* face a contradiction. At times they are accepted by their families who allow them to live at home, especially if they provide an important added source of income for the family, and other times they are beaten and ostracized by their relatives. While these effeminate young men may find space in their families, amused indifference from neighbors, and access to social spaces within the community, they are generally excluded from educational and work opportunities. Thus, most end up in jobs traditionally associated with women, such as hairdressers, or end up in "la mala vida" as prostitutes. Ironically, AIDS has brought both added social stigmatization as well as the interest of social workers, international non-governmental organizations, and public health officials who have provided some minimal resources so that people like Mema have been able to also play the role of community organizer within these subcultures throughout Latin America.

Prier's working premise is that the young men who frequent Mema's house develop their identity at an early age when they perceive themselves, or are seen by others, as effeminate. Here the anthropologist poignantly addresses the impact of economics and class on identity formation. Whereas a middle-class boy or young man living in a family with more private social space may be able to hide his sexuality or gender identity and create a more discreet secret life as a gay man who frequents bars or other spaces unbeknownst to his family, the effeminate residents of Nezaahualcoyotl have many fewer options. Overcrowded housing and tightly-knit neighborhood communities contribute to an early collective knowledge of the transgressive actions of the residents of an area. Thus, the girlish boy is soon categorized as a potential *jota* and can easily be conditioned into that role. Prier, however, is quick to insist that like gen-

der and sexual identity, “becoming a *jota* is a complex process where many factors are intertwined—some early occurring feelings, genetically determined or psychologically formed; some childhood experiences; labeling and learning” (p. 138).

This work also goes beyond simple explanations for the apparent widespread manifestations of cross-dressing, bisexuality, and sexual ambiguity that appear to exist in many Latin American societies. The author recognizes that same-sex eroticism may in part be the result of the hierarchical division of gender relations and the relative inaccessibility of many men to women as sexual partners outside the traditional framework of engagement and marriage. However, Prieur argues that post-modern notions of the infinite possibilities of sexual and gender ambiguity fail to describe adequately real-life situations where there are clear patterns in variety. In this book, her task is to explain how the *jotas*, dressed as women, negotiate through a world that emphasizes the conquest of *mayates* (masculine men who enjoy the sexual company of *vestidas*) and other “real men.” The tight social networks that these *jotas* form offer both support and a source of courage for these effeminate men as well as norms for conventional behavior. Because these men are imitating the feminine and are not born into the gendered socialization of biological women, they are able to play with their femininity in a distanced, exaggerated, self-aware manner. They know that they are not women, and they know that eventually others will know that they are not women. To the outside observer, some earnest *vestidas*’ imitation of the feminine borders on kitch, while others assume their persona with an irony that projects camp. Ultimately, their performances merely reinforce traditional notions of gender that they are seemingly attempting to subvert.

One can find little fault with such a carefully constructed anthropological study that combines an engaging description of the everyday lives of these young men and a thoughtful analysis of the significance of their

gendered performance. Similar studies in other urban poor and working class centers in Latin America will, no doubt, provide additional empirical evidence to develop even more our understanding about how gender identity and representation are shaped by economic, social, and cultural influences, but *Mema’s House* offers scholars a solid platform upon which to build future research endeavors.

#### Notes

[1]. Peter Fry, “Da hierarquia a igualdade: a construção histórica da homossexualidade no Brasil,” in *Caminhos Cruzados: linguagem, antropologia e ciencias naturais* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1982), 87-115.

[2]. Clark Louis Taylor, Jr., “El Ambiente: Male homosexual social life in Mexico City.” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1978). Carrier’s two-and-a-half decades of research was published as *De Los Otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality Among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[3]. Other works include Richard Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); Roger N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger and Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Stephen O. Murray, “Machismo, Male Homosexuality, and Latin Culture,” chap. in *Latin American Male Homosexualities* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995) 49-70; and Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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