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Book Review: Tortilleras Negotiating Intimacy: Love, Friendship, and Sex in Queer Mexico City¹

K. Ermelinda García²

Anahi Russo Garrido delves into a topic few have explored in *Tortilleras Negotiating Intimacy: Love, Friendship, and Sex in Queer Mexico City*. While scholars have written about homosexuality in Mexico, the focus has largely been on men. Accordingly, there has been an absence of scholarship on relationships amongst women. As Garrido highlights, literature on queer women has largely concentrated on political organization, while she innovatively examines the relationships of women she describes as being in “*el ambiente*” or queer spaces. With her ethnographic study on the formation of relationships among three generations of queer women in Mexico City, Garrido makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to the growing scholarship on the LGBT+ community within Mexico.

Garrido utilizes three primary research methods: participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis of widely circulated newspapers. Her positionality as a queer Latina allows her to draw upon her networks within Mexico City to access lesbian support groups and organizations. She focuses on a group of thirty-six women from various social classes and age groups. Although her sample of queer women varies in demographics, Garrido primarily focuses on educated, middle-class, cisgender, queer women. The emphasis on this particular demographic shapes her findings about shifts in gendered expectations of women. Garrido acknowledges that the group she interviewed skewed more educated and better off than national averages. *Tortilleras* is split into four chapters, beginning in the realm of polyamory and expanding its definition to include familial love, friendships, sex-stretching and the erotic, eventually concluding with the mapping of *el ambiente*.

“Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Otros Amores de Familia” explores the adoption of lesbian polyamories following the 2010 marriage reform that legalized same-sex marriage in Mexico City. Polyamory, Garrido argues, “offered alternative imaginaries on love, eroticism, relationships, and ultimately the social organization of Latin American societies.” While non-monogamous relations have been detailed in studies of masculine same-sex sexual practices, fewer studies have focused on the sexual relationships of women. As Garrido notes, conversations around polyamory resurfaced after the advocacy for cohabitation laws that imposed and reinforced notions of homonormativity in an appeal to respectability and acceptance within society. She frames polyamory to encompass more than romantic and sexual relationships. Within the conceptual perceptions of Garrido’s interlocutors, those within *el ambiente*, polyamory stretches beyond the romantic realm and includes friendships and familial relationships. Through discussing polyamory, these women expanded their conceptions of what constitutes a relationship.

“On Friendship and the Production of Lesbian Worlds,” the second chapter of the book, the discussion focuses on friendships among women, specifically lesbian friendships, and details queer

¹ Garrido, A. R. (2020). *Tortilleras Negotiating Intimacy: Love, Friendship, and Sex in Queer Mexico City*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, England: Rutgers University Press.

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world-making. Garrido notes the scant attention paid to friendship by ethnographers who prefer to understand social organization through kinship, politics, or ethnic affiliations. The importance placed upon friendship networks differs by generation, as interlocutors who came of age in the 1970s and early 1980s relied on friends and word of mouth to gain access to queer spaces. The most intriguing aspect of this chapter is how the interlocutors describe friendships and place relationships along a gendered hierarchy. For instance, they call their lesbian friends “*compadre*,” the masculine term opposite of the feminine “*comadre*,” equating the masculine term with greater loyalty and as separated from gendered familial obligations. Garrido claims that this very act of creating a network outside of the home challenges the hierarchical valuation of intimate relationships.

“Sex-Stretching the Body” sketches out erogenous zones from women’s narratives of sexual experiences and challenges the traditional notions of sexual practice by redefining what is considered sex. Garrido begins with conversations surrounding sex, inviting the reader to “envision sex as a broad concept of the erotic.” Actively disrupting the perception of women’s sexuality as the suspension of sex through virginity or asexuality, Garrido’s interviewees depict it as a practice that “produce[s] a deep intimate space that was named as...conjunction of selves.” Equally important to physical acts are the emotional dynamic between casual sex and the interlocutors’ feelings toward themselves and others. The chapter provides insight into the relationships and attitudes that women in *el ambiente* hold when engaging in sex, whether through relationships, casually, or in regard to the binary framework discussed within male homosexuality.

The book’s final chapter, “Counter-mapping el Ambiente in Queer Times and Spaces,” describes the construction of lesbian spaces and community within Mexico City. It largely focuses on the Zona Rosa, a traditionally gay neighborhood in Mexico City. Prior research has highlighted the consumerism and class division that pervades this neighborhood. Yet Garrido notes that lesbian spaces come about outside of clubs and bars. Interlocutors tell of spaces outside of clubs when discussing their counter-maps of *el ambiente*, with some identifying basketball leagues, private homes, bedrooms, offices, and women’s cafés as spaces and social networks during the 1970s and 1980s. Still, perhaps the most notable aspect of this chapter is the gender conformity expected within commercialized spaces, with interlocutors often describing as a “spectacle” the other nightclubs that accept gender non-conforming individuals. Gender non-conformity takes on a class aspect in this chapter, with interlocutors within the Zona Rosa noting that nightclubs in other neighborhoods accepting “transvestis” into the club and characterized as working class were also considered to be dangerous. Additionally, the working class bar is associated with sexual licentiousness and theft. Despite the many ways in which interlocutors were challenging traditional aspects of the queer experience, they remained intolerant of gender non-conforming individuals within these spaces. This chapter is the richest, for it brings to light the need for further work on class distinction within the LGBT community in Mexico, an aspect which is lightly explored. The topic calls for further exploration in future research.

Tortilleras is an entertaining and insightful book with an accessible writing style. The chapters flow well, keeping a consistent central theme, yet are distinct enough in focus to adequately explore differing facets of life in *el ambiente*. While limited in scope due to the demographic of her subjects, the author acknowledges this shortcoming, often qualifying the experiences of individuals. Opportunities for further exploration of *el ambiente* in Mexico City

and beyond are abundant and could be an avenue Garrido or other scholars explore in the future. *Tortilleras* is a book with broad appeal for readers interested in the experiences of lesbians within Mexico City; the first-hand experiences invite a wide readership.