

Sigal 2003 Introduction .pdf

In this introduction Pete Sigal presents the homosexual desire in Colonial Latin America in relation to identity, sexual desire and gender and power, as interpreted by him and other contributing authors of the book. Sigal claims that the three things that most terrified the Spanish and the Portuguese colonizers of Latin America “were human sacrifice, cannibalism, and sodomy.” (Sigal 2003:1) Sodomy had a large spectrum of definition covering the range of “bestiality, and intercourse between man and a woman, and/or sexual activity between two women, and sometimes…exclusively…anal intercourse between two men.” (Sigal 2003:5) The last one was the most disturbing one to the colonizers. Many indigenous Latin American societies harbored transvestites and putos (Sigal 2003:8), effeminate men who were the receivers during anal intercourse, a sort of a pre-colonial “passivo”. Because sodomy was so rampant common within the pre-colonial society, the colonizers used it as a sign of moral degradation of the indigenous people and therefore provided themselves with a reason to colonize them – to save them from their “horrid act and gruesome acts.” (Sigal 2003:1).

In each subsection of identity, sexual desire and gender and power, Sigal explores the connection between desire and power, and sexuality. The task, however is terribly complex because people of the two main pre-colonial societies areas explored, the Mayas and the Andeans, Mesoamerica and the Andes, treated transvestites and other nonheteronormative people very differently. The Mayas had the berdache (Sigal 2003:12) actually Sigal argues something different and writes “this was no place for the berdache” a sort of a male prostitute, acquiring which maintained the status quo and the ritualized transvestite used in religious ceremonies and highly venerated. re-read the relevant section and rework this. Andean societies, however tended to “value femininity” (Sigal 2003:12) and viewed the third gender in a generally more positive light. And so while Mayans used berdache same sex contact (especially rape) as a symbol of power and control, they still maintained the idea of an honorable religious transvestism for nobles (Sigal is vague here but in other works he has argued that male nobles crossdressed to access concepts of feminine creative power) ; on the other hand Andean society completely lacked the berdache (the term berdache is just muddying the waters here as it has in the literature generally… Sigal writes specifically about intermediate gendered people, cross-dressers, and sodomites), and glorified transvestism as an “in-between position.” (Sigal 2003:12) At the same time, berdache wasn’t degraded and was often respected, just not glorified like the transvestism used in Maya religious ceremonies. This means that homosexuality very much existed in pre-colonial Latin America and that transvestism, homosexuality and sodomy were interpreted differently not only between different indigenous groups, but also within the groups themselves.

It is debated whether or not there was a homosexual identity – identity based on sexual preference. Putos did create communities that were known to other men (Sigal 2003:8) and so the concept of sexual identity definitely existed since people were grouped and chose to associate based on it. That identity however, is not the same as the homosexual identity right now. While gay is a political, social and cultural identity as well as sexual in contemporary world, in pre-colonial Latin America it seems to have been only sexual. I see your point but it is such a thorny issue… if there are communities can it have been only sexual? What makes discourse about homosexuality all the more difficult is that there is evidence that some berdaches “were forced to transvest themselves.” (Sigal 2003:11) Many indigenous societies, much like the Spanish of the Inquisition and many European societies, despised femininity in men and so to counter that they made them cross-dress. What this means is that there might have been transvestites who didn’t want to assume that role and were heterosexual. Many transvestites today are heterosexual so why should that surprise us? In the face of this argument it is difficult to talk about the homosexual identity or the homosexual desire from the perspective of the berdaches, since there is no evidence of just how many berdaches were forced into cross-dressing. While there is substantial evidence about homosexual activity in the pre-colonial Latin America there still remains the question whether or not it was more about the power dynamics or sexual desire, but for now it appears that both were equally as important.