
Joyce, Rosemary A.


by Samantha Catron

Joyce argues that in precolonial Mesoamerica, gender was a fluid construct that a person grew into and out of: children were considered to have “multiple-gender potential” or “undifferentiated” (177-8), comparable to gender-neutral dwarves of their mythology, and through transformative rituals and work instruction, they were trained to perform the gender to which they had been assigned. In permanente media, inscriptions of citations of correct normative behavior served as a measure for evaluating the discipline of actors, but Joyce seems to agree with Butler's argument that “citational performances are guaranteed to fail in their attempts to match the disciplinary norm” (190). Classic Mayan monuments and Mexico accounts transcribed in the Florentine Codex serve as Mesoamerican examples of citations of the sexed body (190). In contrast to the abject of Euro-American tradition studied by Butler, abjection in Mesoamerican tradition was the domain of the hermaphrodite, the dwarf, and the inter-species hybrid, indicating that the Mesoamericans were preoccupied with sexuality, rather than with sexual behavior. Sexual ambiguity was not only associated with women with spinning and weaving, in every household and across age-status-class lines. Joyce notes that textile production would have involved the work of numerous types of people, unrepresented in inscriptions, who carried out the tasks that provided the women with the materials for spinning and weaving (186). The inscribed association with women was compared to the findings in Clark and Gosser’s study of Early Formative communities in western Guatemala, in which pottery vessels used in rituals and feasts were the subject of competition, and this was associated with the social significance of the objects, and another study of Clark’s in which the production of obsidian blades was similarly valued and competitive (184-5). Joyce argues that “it is the intimacy of association between cloth and the body of the individual that allowed the close association of this form of craft production with embodied, sexed, and gendered person-hood”, and that Post-Classic Mesoamerican societies linked cloth production with heterosexual female sexuality, relating the various stages of textile-making to the various stages of development of sexual being, from public dancing to intercourse and pregnancy, with cloth itself a metaphorical child (185). This is in keeping with the Mesoamerican perception that cloth was a substance of the body as much as flesh and bones, in contrast to the Euro-American separation of cloth and body, one cultural and the other natural. Mesoamericans believed that “the person is composed of multiple substances, more or less material, brought together in a specific time and space through the accumulated actions of other social beings” (185). Maya representations indicate that ancestors and deities had a ritual role in textile production, and that noblewomen especially were expected to be excellent spinners and weavers, as evidenced by elegant tools found in Copán (186).

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Work was typically divided amongst households in precolonial Mesoamerica, such that one house compound would have a work space specifically designed to produce one specialized craft, as at Classic Teotihuacan (184). In seeming contrast to the practice, inscriptions from Maya and Aztec sources associate women with spinning and weaving, in every household and across age-status-class lines. Joyce notes that textile production would have involved the work of numerous types of people, unrepresented in inscriptions, who carried out the tasks that provided the women with the materials for spinning and weaving (186). The inscribed association with women was compared to the findings in Clark and Gosser’s study of Early Formative communities in western Guatemala, in which pottery vessels used in rituals and feasts were the subject of competition, and this was associated with the social significance of the objects, and another study of Clark’s in which the production of obsidian blades was similarly valued and competitive (184-5). Joyce argues that “it is the intimacy of association between cloth and the body of the individual that allowed the close association of this form of craft production with embodied, sexed, and gendered person-hood”, and that Post-Classic Mesoamerican societies linked cloth production with heterosexual female sexuality, relating the various stages of textile-making to the various stages of development of sexual being, from public dancing to intercourse and pregnancy, with cloth itself a metaphorical child (185). This is in keeping with the Mesoamerican perception that cloth was a substance of the body as much as flesh and bones, in contrast to the Euro-American separation of cloth and body, one cultural and the other natural. Mesoamericans believed that “the person is composed of multiple substances, more or less material, brought together in a specific time and space through the accumulated actions of other social beings” (185). Maya representations indicate that ancestors and deities had a ritual role in textile production, and that noblewomen especially were expected to be excellent spinners and weavers, as evidenced by elegant tools found in Copán (186).

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