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The Underside of Colonial New Mexico: A Review Essay

ALBERT L. HURTADO

Students of the Southwest waited anxiously for the publication of Ramón A. Gutiérrez' *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846*.¹ His dissertation, articles, and papers received high praise and whetted the appetites of ethnohistorians, borderlands scholars, and social historians alike.² The grapevine trembled with reports of the book's progress through the publication process. Stanford University Press issued a contract; Gu-

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1. The author thanks the members of his graduate seminar who read and discussed this book. William Carter, a doctoral student at Arizona State University, provided me with an especially helpful critique.

2. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "Marriage, Sex, and Family: Social Change in Colonial New Mexico, 1690–1846" (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1980); "Honor, Witchcraft, and Sexual Inversion in Colonial New Mexico" (Paper delivered at the Twenty-third Annual Conference of the Western History Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 12–15, 1983); "From Honor to Love: Transformations of the Meaning of Sexuality in Colonial New Mexico" in Raymond T. Smith, ed., *Kinship, Ideology, and Practice in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 237–63; and "Honor, Ideology, Marriage Negotiation, and Class-Gender Domination in New Mexico, 1690–1846," *Latin American Perspectives* 44 (Winter 1985), 81–104.



RAMÓN A. GUTIÉRREZ

*When Jesus Came,**the Corn Mothers*

Marriage,

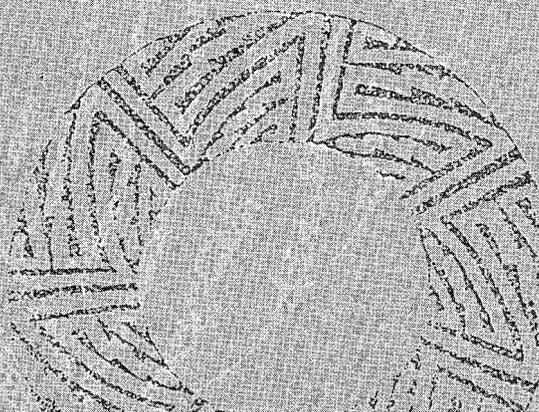
Went Away

Sexuality,

and Power in

New Mexico,

1500–1846



When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846. By Ramón A. Gutiérrez. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991. xxxi + 424 pp. Map, tables, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.50.)

tíerrez was revising the manuscript; the book would be out soon; there were delays; time passed. Still, the professorate waited with uncommonly good humor and unusual faith that Gutiérrez' work would be done in due time and that the finished product would be worth the wait. They were right. Professor Gutiérrez rewarded their confidence with a book that quickly garnered some of the historical profession's major awards. In due time, historical journals printed reviews that confirmed the judgment of prize juries, referees, editors, and others who had patiently waited for the finished product.

So, what is all the excitement about? After a century or so of borderlands scholarship, what new information or interpretation could possibly emerge?³ Does Gutiérrez give us some new ideas that will resonate beyond the Río Grande region? Will his book have enduring significance?

Though Gutiérrez goes over some well-told tales (Spanish exploration and conquest, the Pueblo revolt and its aftermath, for example), he offers some startling new views of these events. His general perspective is that of social history, but he is also well informed about ethnohistory and delves into semiotics, religion, and political theory. Courtship, marriage, the family and its relationship to power and wealth are central themes of the book. Gutiérrez argues that "marriage offers us a window into the social, political, and economic arrangements of a society." Thus an analysis of marriage and all that surrounds it (courtship, betrothal, family formation, dissolution, widowhood, and the like) tell us a good deal about the small communities that evolved in the Río Grande region more than two centuries ago.

Gutiérrez begins with a discussion of Pueblo culture. For centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards, Pueblos had lived in a world of spirits, myth, and ritual. Their rich traditions emphasized the cyclical nature of life, fertility, and the importance of communal bonds. Sexuality played an important role in the Pueblo world. Ritual intercourse served to tame dangerous spirits so that they could be safely incorporated into Pueblo society. When Pueblo warriors brought enemy scalps into the community, women tamed them by having mock intercourse with the trophies. They treated the game that hunters killed in similar fashion. Sex also signified reciprocal relationships between

3. On the development of borderlands studies see David J. Weber, "The Idea of the Spanish Borderlands," in David Hurst Thomas, ed., *Columbian Consequences, Volume 3, The Spanish Borderlands in Pan-American Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 3-20. See also Weber's masterly *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

men, women, and families.⁴ A wife copulated with her husband because of the service he rendered to her mother's household and in return for marriage gifts. If she had intercourse with a man who was not her husband, he was supposed to give her a present in return, an act that symbolized reciprocity rather than a commercial act of prostitution. Like many other American tribes, Pueblos had a place for the berdache—males who took female gender and sex roles.⁵ All in all, Pueblos tolerated a wide range of erotic behavior, and—needless to say—they were far more permissive than Spanish and Catholic norms allowed. This would cause trouble when Spaniards arrived.

Spanish priests and laymen alike attempted to impose their ideas about sex and marriage in the Río Grande region. The Indians were expected to convert to Catholicism and to give up sinful behavior. Catholic priests attacked Pueblo spirituality and attempted to ban the rituals that were the very foundation of Pueblo society and life itself. At the same time, the new order brought poverty as Spanish religious and secular authorities assessed Pueblo society with taxes and work levies. Eventually these conditions brought about the Pueblo revolt of 1680, which expelled Spaniards for a dozen years. The Spanish reconquest established a milder and somewhat more permissive yoke on the Pueblos. Thus, in the wake of the Pueblo revolt there grew up a vigorous syncretic Pueblo society influenced by Spain but retaining the basic features of Pueblo spiritual and communal life.

For the most part Pueblos remained outside the mainstream of New Mexican life, but other Indians lived within Spanish colonial society. Most of them were Apache and Navajo captives who became slaves of the colonists. They were known as *genízaros* and constituted a separate and despised class of workers and servants.⁶ While Church and Crown extended legal protection to Indians, as residents of a distant and isolated region they did not always receive the rights that were due them.⁷ Indians who worked for colonists—especially women

4. Other tribes connected sexuality with power and reciprocity. See James P. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 62–63, 106–107.

5. Scholars of homosexuality disagree over the role of the berdache in Indian societies. Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1986); Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Ramón Gutiérrez, "Must We Deracinate Indians to Find Gay Roots?" *Out/Look* (Winter 1989), 61–67.

6. Robert Archibald, "Acculturation and Assimilation in Colonial New Mexico," *New Mexico Historical Review* 53 (July 1978), 205–17.

7. For a discussion of the protection of Indian legal rights in New Mexico see Charles R. Cutter, *The Protector de Indios in Colonial New Mexico, 1659–1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986).

in domestic service—were subject to abuse of all kinds. Indians provided a source of inexpensive labor to New Mexicans who skirted the law in order to reap financial gain, but there were other reasons to mistreat Indians as well. The existence of a compliant servant class reinforced the superior place of Spaniards in the social order. To dominate a servile class of Indians was to assert one's superior status. Thus, according to Gutiérrez, the stratification of New Mexican society led to abusive as well as deferential conduct.

While elite New Mexicans asserted control over the Indian population they also found ways to dominate Hispanic society. Marriage played a key part in maintaining the established social order. Not surprisingly, aristocratic families sought to consolidate wealth and power through propitious alliances of their children. Thus patriarchs arranged marriages for their offspring, and dutiful children acknowledged their filial obligations by bowing to parental authority. Such matches meant more than influence, money, and land to those involved. Family honor was also served. Much of New Mexico's social life revolved around the cultivation and preservation of honor, a quality that was not directly related to wealth (although we may imagine that most rich folks had it). The concept of honor did not originate in New Mexico but came from the cultures of the Mediterranean basin, through Spain to the New World, and then to northern New Spain. As Gutiérrez put it, honor was "a belief that the image of self, one's reputation, was the basis for pride and precedence." But in order for honor to be real it had to be recognized by others, and that ultimately "depended on brute force" (p. 177). Those with honor expected others to defer to them. This relationship could be established by violent conquest, as with the Indians, or more subtly through the exercise of the prerogatives of status and wealth.

A person's honor was inextricably bound up with the honor of one's family. Individual and family honor rose and fell together, so it was incumbent upon each family member to jealously guard the reputations of themselves and their relatives. This obligation fell on men and women alike, but the genders had different roles, responsibilities, and risks. Women were particularly susceptible to sexual shame. The rules of the honor game and the Catholic religion (which were not always in agreement on such matters) required that women's virtue be preserved. If it became known that a woman had indulged in pre- or extramarital sex, a scandal ensued, and her family lost honor because of her shameful conduct. If she was single, her marriage prospects declined considerably; if married, the honor of her husband was impugned. In all cases, dishonor spread outward through the ties of blood

and marriage, though the stain became fainter as it moved away from those immediately involved.

It will not cause great amazement in most readers to learn that there was a double standard at work. Dishonor did not attach to the men who seduced women, indeed, quite the contrary. Gutiérrez argues that "men enhanced their honor through the conquest of another man's woman" (p. 213). Now here was a contradiction that was bound to nourish a competitive impulse in some New Mexican men. It also led to family feuding, law suits, and ecclesiastical involvement, as the records of the inquisition and courts demonstrate. One can imagine that in the small towns of the colonial era, such an ethic must have led to immense social tension as males struggled to sexually dominate the wives and daughters of others while fighting to maintain the virtue of their own female relatives. This is the dark Darwinian landscape of Gutiérrez' land of enchantment. It will be hard for some readers to imagine that such a society could have long survived the destructive social forces that ideas about honor and shame let loose along the Río Grande.

Under the circumstances, women were especially at risk. A woman who complained that she had been raped, or that her fickle lover had reneged on a promise of marriage, was likely to be accused of being wanton. The man either denied that he had sex with her, or brazenly claimed that she had consented. Men accused in paternity cases almost always claimed that their accusers were known to be loose women who had slept with other men. After all, they were no longer virgins and thus had no physical proof of virtue. In 1705 such an argument worked for Sebastian Luján when Juana Rodríguez claimed that he had taken her virginity with a promise of marriage. The word of a man was not always enough to win the day in court, but the threat of possible defamation likely discouraged some women from pressing charges of sexual misconduct, unless pregnancy made it necessary.

Women took special care to protect their reputations, but they were open to vicious gossip that could dishonor their families even though the claims were baseless. Thus in 1767 Doña María Manuela de la Luz filed suit against Mariano Baca, a low fellow who claimed to have seduced the Albuquerque aristocrat. Evidently he wanted to marry her, but she would not marry beneath her even to save family honor, especially since she adamantly claimed that she was still a virgin. So she took a midwife and a female friend to the home of the town's ecclesiastical notary, Joseph Hurtado de Mendoza—perhaps a distant relative of mine—and asked him to witness a gynecological demonstration of her virginity. This he did, and wrote a report (no doubt

properly notarized) that graphically described the midwife's digital examination and concluded that "it is indisputable that she is a virgin and the slander which has been voiced is false" (p. 224).

My ancestor helped to save Doña María's honor, but not his own. The Justice of Durango, who duly reviewed the case, was outraged that Hurtado had participated in the examination. The notary had "shown himself dishonest, of depraved habits and poor upbringing" (p. 224). Poor uncle, if such he was, had to stand for one hour in the Albuquerque pillory. What a price to pay for vouching for the virtue of an honorable maiden! Perhaps he went to his public humiliation thinking that it was a far better thing than he had ever done. The thoughts of his wife, who also witnessed the examination, would make interesting reading but were not recorded. Baca suffered one hundred lashes and a year in prison for his lies, a stiff penalty that showed what a bad idea it was for a poor man to falsely sully the honor of an elite family.

Gutiérrez takes us a long way from the romantic myth of colonial New Mexico, where sheep dozed upon the mesas. His New Mexicans were ruthless status seekers who were obsessed with family honor; the men were hardhearted seducers who satisfied themselves with little heed for the women who suffered the consequences. Illicit sex seemed almost a spectator sport in the small New Mexico pueblos where there was little solitude and private matters often became public. If ovine flocks were snoozing on the mesas in the Spanish era, the smart little sheep slept with one eye open.

This book will inevitably raise questions. Some readers will wonder if Gutiérrez provides an accurate picture of colonial life. His examples are drawn from inquisition and court records, but are these incidents representative of New Mexican comportment? Perhaps these are extreme cases that came to official notice rather than examples of everyday behavior by common people. What about New Mexicans who did not violate religious or civil law? What do we know of them? If sexual competition was as intense as Gutiérrez claims, what kept society from flying apart? The Pueblo Indians were the principal focus of this study in the period before the Pueblo revolt, but they become less visible after the reconquest. It would be interesting to know more about the social adjustments that Indians made during the eighteenth century and after.⁸ The limitations of sources necessarily restrict our ability to address these issues. Nevertheless, Gutiérrez has pioneered in the use

8. See, for example, Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman*.

of innovative methods that make it possible for us to conceive new studies that will expand our knowledge of the complex—sometimes astonishing—nature of New Mexican social life.

The influence of *When Jesus Came* will extend beyond New Mexico and the Southwest. The methods and issues that Gutiérrez explores are central to current historical inquiry. Historians are already at work in other parts of the American West where disparate peoples, religions, and nations met on contested ground and worked out new terms of personal and community existence.⁹ Gutiérrez challenges them to delve even more deeply into our predecessors' cultural, religious, psychological, and deeply personal lives. Not everyone will like what these close-up views show, but we will gain an intimate knowledge of the West and its people with all of their flaws and virtues. Neither New Mexico nor the West will look quite the same again.

9. There is a growing body of literature that shows how social history, family history, ethnohistory, and other imaginative methods and perspectives can be used to analyze intercultural relations and society in the West. See, for example, Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Albert L. Hurtado, "Sexuality in California's Franciscan Missions: Cultural Perceptions and Sad Realities," *California History* 71 (Fall 1992), 371–85, 451–53; Elliot West, *Growing Up in the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). For general works incorporating some of these views see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).