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Book Review: Marriage Vows and Racial Choices by Jessica Vasquez-Tokos

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Vasquez-Tokos, Jessica. *Marriage Vows and Racial Choices*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2017. xvi + 372 pages. Paperback, \$35.00.

Jessica Vasquez-Tokos's new book, *Marriage Vows and Racial Choices*, grows out of her first work, *Mexican Americans Across Generations*, which looked at cultural assimilation. In that book Vasquez-Tokos found that respondents fell into two categories; some practiced "thinned attachment" and were more likely to marry out, while others practiced "cultural maintenance" and tended to marry in. *Marriage Vows* focuses more closely on the question of marriage, trying to understand how race and class shape marriage choices. Vasquez-Tokos argues that inter-racial marriages are not merely markers of assimilation but an important locus of multidirectional assimilation that destabilize racial boundaries (p.71).

Using 109 interviews from two sites, Kansas and California, Vasquez-Tokos explores both exogamous and endogamous marriages among Latinos, a term the author uses as a racial rather than an ethnic designation (p. 28). Looking at Latino/White, Latino/Minority, Cross National Latino, and Mixed Generation Mexican marriages, the author finds a number of patterns indicating shifting gender norms among Latinos living in the USA. First, she found that many Latina women are motivated by experiences or conceptions of Mexican or Latino machismo to marry out, across racial and national boundaries. Others either left marriages or transformed their partners. For instance, Audrey left her husband after he became angry that his underwear drawer was empty, while Raven challenged her husband to change the cycle of abuse encountered in their youth (p. 244, 257). Many men in the survey had experienced abusive and domineering fathers and re-imagined their own masculinity through marriage and parenthood. The interviews also highlight the way that economic and structural factors shape gender norms and practices. In one example a respondent, Sarah, left her "traditional" Brazilian husband after moving to the United States where the couple could no longer afford a maid (p. 150). In another, Valentina felt as though the laws protecting women in the U.S. allowed her more freedom to disagree with her husband, whereas in Columbia the police would not come out for a domestic abuse case (p.151).

Marriage Vows and Racial Choices also highlights the construction of racial categories and the way individuals creatively reimagine them. Vasquez-Tokos argues that anti-immigrant laws such as California Proposition 187 (1994) and Arizona SB 1070 (2010) shape group identity and structural racism, but frequently have unintended consequences. After the introduction of Prop. 187, which threatened to exclude the undocumented from public health care, education, and other services, one of the respondents, Chico, decided to go ahead and finalize his citizenship process so that he could vote. He noted that Pete Wilson's (R) legislation had a "boomerang effect" as it swelled the ranks of Democrats in California (p.181). Arizona SB1070 required all non-citizens to register with the state and carry documentation at all times. This law encourages "ethnic lumping," causing all Latinos to become suspects as they are unevenly targeted by the police, who do not ask white Arizonans for their documents. Just as Prop. 187 had a galvanizing effect in California, SB1070 has created more solidarity across generations, as being born in the U.S. does not insulate Latinos from being questioned regarding their citizenship. While laws such as these impose racial categories on individuals, many of her respondents were busy reimagining and deconstructing race. One respondent, Inez, noted "I like to think of myself as a human being" (p.102). Travis, a Native American

respondent, lumped Mexicans and Native Americans together as "brown people," seeing a larger historical nexus of conquest and segregation as a unifying agent (p.124).

While examples such as Arizona SB 1070 strengthen Vasquez-Tokos' contention that we should understand Latino as a racial category, her focus on race can sometimes be problematic. For instance, this author was troubled by the whiteness index (1-5) Velasquez-Tokos used to locate her subjects. Likewise, though the author does recognize the importance of factors such as diet and religion in constituting identity and "culture" and what it means to be Latino or Mexican, a better understanding of the Catholic Church could have informed her study. For example, in one section she discusses the difficulty of finding a Mexican American partner in the small towns of Kansas because the families are all interrelated. The author notes that there was a strong incest taboo, without connecting it to the Catholic Church's strict interpretation of consanguinity. Likewise the book could have benefitted from a grounding in historical works looking at similar questions such as Patricia Seed's *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice, 1574-1821* and Ann Twinam's classic *Public Lives, Private Secrets: gender, honor, sexuality and illegitimacy in colonial Spanish America*. Although Vasquez-Tokos does attempt some historical context, her understanding of "tradition" falls a bit flat, and her episodic approach means that readers do not learn about the Mexican American War and the usurpation of Mexican land until page 110. This question of land tenure complicates the question of "immigrants" in California, and should have been part of the discussion of that site in the intro.

Nevertheless, this book represents an important contribution to the literature on race and gender. One of the beauties of the book for me as a historian is that the lives of the people interviewed were enmeshed in interesting historical moments. One respondent's mother pulled a gun from her purse at the standoff at Wounded Knee; another was in-utero when her mother ran from tear gas thrown at protestors during the 1970s Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War (p.191) These details make the book much more than just a discussion of race and marriage, capturing both the everyday and the extraordinary in the lives of her respondents.

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