

### **Migrations, Sexualities and Transnational Imaginaries. Peruvian Women in Buenos Aires and Mexican Men in Chicago**

#### **Migraciones, sexualidades e imaginarios transnacionales. Mujeres peruanas en Buenos Aires y varones mexicanos en Chicago**

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#### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes imaginaries and rumors about the sexual life of migrants that circulate in transnational communities, through a qualitative approach on Mexican men in Chicago (United States) and Peruvian women in Buenos Aires (Argentina). The findings suggest that in contemporary Latin American mobilities, transnational imaginaries and rumors are the product of tensions between social transformation and control. They express concerns about the possibility of transgressing the limits imposed by the heteropatriarchal organization of sexuality and gender, and by racial constructs and class structure.

*Keywords:* 1. migration, 2. sexuality, 3. transnational imaginaries and rumors, 4. Latin America.

#### RESUMEN

Se analizan imaginarios y rumores sobre la vida sexual de los migrantes que circulan en las comunidades transnacionales, con base en estudios cualitativos con varones mexicanos en Chicago, Estados Unidos, y mujeres peruanas en Buenos Aires, Argentina. Los hallazgos sugieren que en los movimientos latinoamericanos contemporáneos los imaginarios y rumores transnacionales son producto de las tensiones entre la transformación y el control social. Expresan las inquietudes que surgen ante la posibilidad de que, durante el proceso migratorio, se cuestionen las fronteras normativas impuestas por la organización heteropatriarcal de la sexualidad y del género, y por las construcciones raciales y la estructura de clases.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migraciones, 2. sexualidades, 3. Imaginarios y rumores transnacionales, 4. Latinoamérica.

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## INTRODUCTION

In transnational communities there are rumors based on imaginaries that constitute themselves into frames of reference providing different meanings to migration and endowing it with different attributes. For example, it is known that among migrants and their families there are underlying positive imaginaries about the job opportunities provided by the countries that host them and the social climbing derived from them, with relative disregard for actual evidence of such. Now, in addition to exhibiting economic-labor keys, the imaginaries associated with migratory processes also offer keys of other types, such as sexual ones. As a matter of fact, communities disseminate images and assumptions about the sexual life of migrants and the ways in which sexuality is experienced in host societies. It is not an irrelevant issue for transnational communities, since time is devoted to contemplating the matter, and feelings and emotional ties are disturbed, causing disorders in both those who leave and those who stay.

The aim of this article is to analyze the contents of the imaginaries that circulate in transnational communities, referring to the sexual practices of heterosexual adult migrants, both men and women located in North America and South America. We are particularly interested in exploring the eroticized features of the figure of the migrant, its diffusion in the form of transnational rumors and the tension between regulation and social transformation that they express. We also reflect on the role of these imaginaries and rumors, aimed at both revealing and preventing the practices that question hegemonic morals associated with the family and sexual exclusivity, domination over women and productive work, among others.

It is worth mentioning that social imaginaries can be understood as “multiple and varied, socially shared mental constructs (ideations) of practical significance for the world; broadly speaking, intended for the granting of existential sense” (Baeza, 2011, p. 33).<sup>3</sup> They are a set of repertoires with which a society or group systematizes and regulates its image, which also involves the ways in which that society projects itself towards the different (García Canclini, 1997). That is, they are symbolic constructs used by people to interpret and give meaning to what happens, to others and to themselves. According to Escobar Villegas (2000):

[...] an imaginary is a real and complex set of mental images, independent from scientific criteria of truth and produced in a society from relatively conscious inheritances, creations and transfers; which works in different ways at a given time and that transforms into a multiplicity of rhythms. It is a set of mental images that makes use of aesthetic, literary, moral, political, scientific and other productions, as well as of different forms of collective memory and

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<sup>3</sup>Translator’s note: citation in English exclusive to this article.

social practices in order to survive and be transmitted (Escobar Villegas, 2000, p. 113).

These are several imaginaries that we talk about here, since they refer to a specific historical time; in addition, they are of a social and collective nature. They are also real to the extent that they can intervene on behaviors, regardless of the reality of their contents (Escobar Villegas, 2000). In this sense, according to Fressard (2006), social imaginaries are a “magma” of social meanings embodied in family, educational, religious, political, State institutions, etc. However, every society contains a power of otherness, because it combines a relative stabilization of a set of institutions with a dynamic that drives its transformation. Thus, Escobar Villegas (2000) points out that images come from different sources of the past or are generated by present conditions and are transmitted in everyday life; in addition, they can be transformed and have different functions, either justifying societies or questioning them, an element that is fundamental.

Rumors are one of the communicative repertoires of imaginaries. They refer to the secret, to the unspoken and to collective fears, as well as to utopias, hopes, to what is believable in a given era and a particular cultural context, social thinking and social imaginary (Zires, 2009). Rumors can be understood as “statements in circulation about instrumentally relevant and unverified information that emerge in a context of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, which help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, pp.1-2).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, rumors should not be understood in terms of truth or falsehood, as with imaginaries. Instead, Rouquette (2009) states that the pragmatic value of the rumor lies in the “warnings” that it can generate.

In this article we have devoted special attention to the rumors that arise at the borders of national states, which reflect the imaginaries built within the framework of migration processes. We prioritized those of the impersonal type that refer to groups (migrant men or women) rather than specific events or individuals, and that usually open (explicitly or implicitly) with the expression “people say that” or synonyms.<sup>5</sup>

To meet our objectives, we continue with the results of the qualitative research conducted on two groups of Latin American migrants: a) Mexicans living in Chicago, United States; and b) Peruvians living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It should be noted that the United States is the main recipient of Latin American migrants, whereas Argentina is the third.

For the first research, 48 in-depth interviews were conducted between 2001 and 2002 (27 men and 21 women) in the home country (municipality of Naolinco, Veracruz,

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<sup>4</sup>TN: citation in English exclusive to this article.

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that rumors are different from gossip. The latter refers to private matters of specific individuals. Although our article deal with rumors, we will refer to gossip when specific studies on it are cited.

Mexico) and in the host country (Chicago, Illinois, United States). On the other hand, for Peruvian migrants in Buenos Aires, 45 in-depth interviews (19 men and 26 women) were conducted between 2005 and 2007, and, subsequently, five interviews were conducted with Peruvian women during 2013 and 2014. For this article, we selected women and men who were in conjugal union (whether civil, religious or *de facto*) at the time of their migration or that of their spouse. The research shared theoretical perspectives, thematic interests and methodological instruments, which were adapted to each context. In all cases, biographical interviews were conducted,<sup>6</sup> which allowed retrospectively reconstructing the interviewees' past.

The two migratory flows studied arose during the last decade of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, when the field work was carried out, both were relatively recent and had networks in the process of consolidation. For Mexicans, the migration of rural men prevailed; while for Peruvians, urban women's migration predominated. In both cases, labor and economic reasons stood out. Both were constituted by young population (in working ages), of intermediate school level, who were inserted in the host countries in unskilled occupations. However, the contexts presented extremely different migration conditions. Unlike Mexicans, Peruvians found in the South the same language, less guarded borders and could transit within a regional market (MERCOSUR) that allowed a relatively free mobility of citizens of member and associated states. Likewise, people who migrate to Argentina do not find the restrictions or dangers that affect mobilities towards the United States. These aspects, in addition to the different opportunities offered by labor markets to men and women, contribute to understanding why the Mexican is a masculinized flow and the Peruvian is a feminized one.

Regarding the structure of this article, the following section presents studies that have addressed sexuality in the Latin American migratory field, without claiming exhaustiveness. Next, the imaginaries built around the host scenarios are analyzed, regarding the customs and practices associated with sexuality. Then we point out the rumors that circulate in relation to the sexual life of migrants, as well as the imagined characteristics of the people with whom they would supposedly relate. We also dedicate a

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<sup>6</sup>The biographical interview focuses in the stories and experiences of people's daily lives (Bron & Thunborg, 2015). The interviewees build their own stories by telling their past life as they remember it and how they want others to know it, based on guidelines given by the interviewer (Atkinson, 1998).

<sup>7</sup>In the case of Veracruz, migration grew due to the crisis in coffee and sugarcane prices. Many small owners, *ejido* holders and pawns who could not work on the crops migrated from there. On the other hand, the migration of Peruvians to Argentina was mainly driven by the effects of the implementation of neoliberal policies in Peru, that raised labor precariousness and unemployment, as well as due to a generalized institutional crisis. For more information consult Rosas (2008 and 2010).

section to the particularities of the imaginaries about migrant women. Finally, a discussion about the role of the imaginaries and transnational rumors is presented.<sup>8</sup>

## BACKGROUND IN THE STUDY OF SEXUALITY AND MIGRATION OF LATIN AMERICANS

Both sexuality and migration are social processes, and as such include acts, relationships and meanings. For the first, “society is the main instance of the production of human sexuality” (Bozon, 2009, p. 7),<sup>9</sup> that is, human beings do not behave sexually by instinct, but rather we learn to behave sexually; moreover, being a cultural construct, human sexuality implies the coordination of a mental activity, a social interaction and a bodily activity (Bozon, 2009). Sexuality is built in specific social and cultural contexts. In general terms, it can be said that in both societies of origin, Mexican and Peruvian, it is characterized by the emphasis on heteropatriarchal norms and sexual exclusivity, as in host societies, Argentina and the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The dimension of sexuality was relatively invisible in the field of migration studies. It was in recent times when the link between sexuality and migration became a growing field of study (Manalansan, 2006; Hernández-Hernández, 2015). Following the trend from around the world, the first links between sexuality and Latin American migrations were prepared by specialists concerned about the spread of the HIV epidemic.

Many of these studies were done from the perspective of public health; although, over time, other perspectives –where gender stands out– were incorporated and the sexual behaviors of migrants in the United States were addressed, as well as prevention strategies and consequences on the wives of migrants, etc. (Bronfman & Minello, 1999; Salgado de Snyder, 1998; Hirsch, 1999; Gayet, Magis & Bronfman, 2000; Magis-Rodríguez, Gayet, Negroni, Leyva, Bravo-García, Uribe & Bronfman, 2004; Caballero, Leyva-Flores, Ochoa-Marín, Zarco & Guerrero, 2008; Hidalgo, García, Flores, Castañeda, Lemp & Ruiz, 2008; Martínez-Donate, Hovell, Rangel, Zhang, Sipan, Magis-Rodríguez & González-Fagoaga, 2015; etc.).

The strengthening of the gender perspective in the migratory field has led to studies that, outside the epidemiological approach, included analyzes of different dimensions of the migrants’ sexual life. Along these lines, the characteristics of sexual relations maintained in host countries, female sexuality long-distance control practices, and the

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<sup>8</sup>The names of the interviewees have been modified to protect their anonymity. On the other hand, the textual words of our interviewees are in italics to distinguish them from the rest of the text.

<sup>9</sup>TN: citation in English exclusive to this article.

<sup>10</sup>For more information on heteropatriarchy, see Hoagland (2002).

effects on the lives of women who remain in their countries of origin, etc. (D'Aubeterre Buznego, 2000; Hirsch, 1999; Pedone, 2003; Rosas, 2008; Caballero, *et al.*, 2008; González-López, 2009; Ochoa-Marín, Cristancho-Marulanda & González-López, 2011; Rivera-Heredia, Obregón Velasco & Cervantes Pacheco, 2013, etc.).

Among the studies dedicated to analyzing the subjective processes associated with sexuality is that of Skolnik, De La Vega and Steigenga (2012), in which the transnational gossiping having different consequences in the Guatemalan wives of migrants is analyzed, as well as the factors that intensify the circulation of said gossiping. It should be noted that gossiping and transnational rumors belong to an interesting and rich field of study seldomly addressed by migration studies, and so our analysis also aims at contributing to this area.

Processes of change in the sexual life of migrant women have also been evidenced: Mexican in the United States (González-López, 2009), Peruvian in Buenos Aires (Rosas, 2010) and Colombian in Spain (González, 2014), etc. Other approaches have tried to find the link between migration, sexuality and violence (Pérez Oseguera, Coppe Gorozope, Pérez Petrone & Trujillo Viruega, 2008; Delgadillo Guzmán, Vargas Cortez, Nievar, Argüello Zepeda & González Villanueva, 2013).

Studies on masculinity (Rosas, 2008; Quispe-Lázaro & Muñoz-Laboy, 2008; Cohen, 2015) have emphasized the emotions and affective-sexual relationships of migrant men in the United States, as well as the ways in which they explain them and try to reduce their impact on their wives and families, among other aspects. On the other hand, Quispe-Lázaro and Muñoz-Laboy (2008) showed that sometimes men are forced to have sex in exchange for money due to economic reasons, but also as a mechanism to fight loneliness.

Another aspect with relative visibility is the link between migration processes and the so-called "sex industry." For example, the paths followed by Brazilian sex workers who joined Italian men have been analyzed (Piscitelli, 2008), as well as the migratory projects and situation of Peruvian and Colombian women working in the sex industry in a borderland location in Ecuador (Ruiz, 2008).

More recently, the link between the migration field and LGBTQ studies has allowed questioning some assumptions about the family, heterosexual reproduction and marriage in the bibliography on migration and gender (Stang, 2015), which tend to perceive sexuality in a heteronormative sense. For Manalansan (2006), sexuality has been relegated in migration research to the analysis of reproduction, forced abstinence caused by migration and sexual abuse or rape. There have been very limited discussions about sexuality and pleasure. This author invites us to go beyond the worker migrant agent and to highlight the desire and pleasure sought by migrants. Similarly, González-López (2009) points out the need to focus on the uses and meanings of the body in eroticism and desire.

In line with the above, many studies advocate for the recognition of sexual identities and practices as main factors in migratory projects (Pichardo Galán, 2003; Córdova Quero, 2014; García & Oñate Martínez, 2008; Cribari, Pandolfi & Torre, 2012; etc.) and some of them emphasize the need to incorporate an intersectional perspective when addressing the migrant experience (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005; Manalansan, 2006), which we will do in the following pages.

It should be noted that intersectionality is an analytical perspective that considers addressing the interaction between social categories of gender, racial constructs, social class and other socio-cultural principles of classification in people's lives and social practices, which are also visible in institutional conventions and cultural ideologies, as well as the consequences of these interactions (Stolcke, 2010). In fact, Magliano (2015) points out that migratory processes are formed by different axes of inequalities; therefore, they are a relevant field for the theoretical and empirical analysis of intersectionality. In other words, the intersection of gender, class, nationality, race, ethnicity and age, and immigration status classifications, affects the daily lives of male and female migrants; in addition, it influences their access to rights and opportunities, as well as those instances of exclusion or privilege derived from them, and on the possibilities for social transformation.

### IMAGINED DESTINATIONS

Migrations entail the production and reproduction of images about host countries, in which both migrant and family subjects participate. Even before migrating, assumptions about the characteristics of the destination are produced, in which the imaginary ones about sexual practices in that country are not exempt; although, these tend to be visualized and valued as different from the customs of the country of origin.

For those who see migrants leave, destinations are represented as socio-cultural spaces in which there would be more freedom to connect sexually with other people. Blanca is one of the wives interviewed in Mexico, and in her town they say that *men leave because they are tired of their wives and obligations, and seek freedom in other countries*. On the other hand, Alicia's story reveals the intrigue that wives develop about the behaviors of their partners, and the hypotheses about the existence of ample sexual opportunities available to migrant men in the United States.

[I tell my husband] "Lord knows what will you do, because you are men and there are many women..." My husband says that women look for them in their homes... Who knows how that is, do women look for men or do men look for women? (Alicia, Mexican, personal communication.<sup>11</sup> May 9, 2001).

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<sup>11</sup>The expression "personal communication" has been introduced along with the excerpts from the interviews as required by the citation style. As stated in the introduction, this

According to the interviewees, there is not the same freedom in their town as in the United States, much less for women. Lorna, whose husband also migrated to the United States, explains that in her home country: “*we are not free [...] you always walk upright, so people don't talk about you or get the wrong impression.*”

Similar ideas circulate in Peru regarding the host country, Argentina. This is confirmed in the stories of husbands who migrated after their wives, like Paulo: “[before migrating, I thought] *What if she suddenly forgets me? That was my concern. [...] There [in Peru] people say there is much libertinism [in Argentina]*” (personal communication, March 11, 2006). Thus, in the South American context there is also the idea that the host country offers greater sexual possibilities, but in this case, it is women who would gain freedom when migrating.

On the other hand, migrants, who actually know the destinations, seem to reinforce the imaginary through different stories. Although the Mexicans and Peruvians interviewed live with countrymen and relatives, many of them say that they no longer have to take care of their actions the same way they did in their home country. They say they feel relatively anonymous in Argentina and the United States; their concern for *what people will say* diminished, since now *we only live our lives and do not care for what others do*. This is an aspect in which a large part of the studies dedicated to LGBTQ migrations coincide. For example, Cribari *et al.* (2012) point out that their interviewees of Uruguayan origin say that the host cities have modern lifestyles; nobody intervenes in their private life and they feel anonymous.

Peruvians contrast even more the host “society” and its country of origin than Mexicans. Daniel, for example, expresses that [Argentinian] *culture is a bit more liberal* (personal communication, December 6, 2006); Beatriz angrily mentions that *there is no modesty* in Argentina, while Rudy and Emma emphasize that in Peru there is more respect. Some are surprised with the television programs that openly talk about sexuality and show half-naked bodies. It is also often stated that, unlike what happens in Peru, in Argentina men are *less sexist* and *women have the same rights as men*. They are also surprised to note that some women have male friends and their husbands do not prevent it.<sup>12</sup>

These accounts show the existence of stereotypes that dichotomize and substantiate supposed sociocultural differences between host countries and countries of origin. These

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study is the result of research that used the in-depth interview technique within the framework of qualitative methodological designs.

<sup>12</sup>Among Mexicans, there are few stories that talk about *gringos*. That is why everyday exchanges are limited to specific labor issues, while leisure moments are shared with countrymen. Language is an important barrier that can also prevent people from watching English-language television.



last two are associated with antagonistic images related to modesty, freedom, respect and anonymity. Thus, geopolitical borders are large producers of symbolic borders with important consequences in the daily lives of people, both migrants and non-migrants.

Although imaginaries do exist, and their analysis is relevant according to their multiple effects, it is necessary not to ignore their symbolic nature and remember the researches that contradict these antagonistic images. Likewise, without denying the existence of sociocultural contrasts between countries, we partake in questioning those analyzes that hierarchize migratory contexts based on “objective” differences in the ways and meanings of sexuality (Cantú, 2009; Vidal Ortiz, 2013).

Thus, we question the analyzes that, from a gender perspective, conceive the contexts of origin as traditional and oppressive, and those of the destination countries as modern and emancipatory spaces for women, ignoring the heterogeneity that characterizes them and forgetting that in host countries migrants experience a wide range of discrimination and control in different areas of their lives (Rosas, 2010). Likewise, we cannot forget that the imaginaries that emphasize cultural or ethnic contrasts are usually produced and reproduced by academic, political and religious speeches, by the media and the authorities on duty; that is, it is no coincidence that these imaginaries are spread among the interviewees.

### *The Eroticization of the Migrant Image*

In some Latin American countries there is a saying: “At the soap-maker’s house, if you don’t fall, you slip.”<sup>13</sup> Martín, one of the Peruvian interviewees, used it to suggest that people in marital union who migrate to a place with an imagined free sexuality will inevitably have some extramarital sexual relationship (*they will take the bait*), contradicting the monogamous norm.

Here [in Argentina] is “the soap-maker’s house: if you don’t fall, you slip.” My wife has many relatives, cousins. They have all taken the bait; they all have an infidelity problem. Their husbands in Peru don’t know anything. When I travel to Peru, everyone gets scared; they say: “*he is going to spill the beans.*” But I’m a man; I don’t know anything (Martín, Peruvian, personal communication, September 26, 2007).

That is, in addition to the assumption that host countries (United States and Argentina) are more *liberal* in sexual matters than their countries of origin, migrants are also supposed to have the opportunity to have sex outside of normative monogamy. In other words, there is an established imaginary that erotizes the migrant, be it male or female, who seems

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<sup>13</sup>The same in its literal sense indicates that there where soap is manufactured (the soap-maker’s house), the floor is slippery and, therefore, anyone who walks around will surely fall or slip.

sentenced to *slip* or *fall*. In this context, many interviewees predict that migrants will abandon their wives or husbands, who are in the country of origin.

As can be seen, the conception of the host country as a space with modifying powers of the migrant's sexual behavior is an idea shared by Mexican and Peruvian interviewees. Thus, when someone moves to a society that is considered to have fewer social controls, it is generally assumed that they will intensify their sexual activity.

According to Mario, in his Mexican town *people say* that everyone who goes to the United States does so to *look for women*. Blanca adds that “*women whose husbands are there [in the US] or who plan to leave, fear that [they] will not return [...] because many of them have not returned; they get married there*” (personal communication, June 5, 2002).

On the other hand, husbands who are in Peru and whose wives migrated to Argentina experienced similar concerns and were often mocked by the possibility of being abandoned by them (Rosas, 2010). *Do you think your wife is going to take you there, bud? My friends told me that*, said Rudy (personal communication, October 10, 2005). While Sara, a woman who migrated to Argentina before her husband did, had her relatives and friends in Peru telling her: “*How brave you are [you didn't abandon your husband]! Because many of the women who leave, get another husband and forget the children*” (personal communication, May 15, 2006).

While the common discourse of relatives who stayed in the country of origin focuses in the affirmation of this imaginary that supposes an intensification of sexual activity in destination countries, the narratives of actual migrants do not show the same. Their stories fluctuate between those who seem to reinforce the imaginary and those that flatly challenge it, as we will see next.

Beto is an example of those who contribute to affirm the imaginary; he is one of his town's pioneers in migration to the United States, who despite the pains of undertaking the long and dangerous journey, did say goodbye to his friends jokingly: “*I'll give the gringas your greetings!*” Martín is another example; brought up at the beginning of this section, he emphatically generalizes that all migrants females related to his wife have an “infidelity problem” (personal communication, September 26, 2007). Emma is another one who also reinforces the imaginary by arguing that it is not her generation that has taken greater sexual freedoms in Argentina, but *younger women who migrate lately are a mess, they work and then go partying, forgetting their children in Peru*.

Those who say that migrants live with greater sexual freedom in host countries tend to explain it by saying that it is a need of the body, which prevails over their will. “*Here, sex is like... a necessity. 'You just go: my body needs it. [...] You just have to fulfill your need,*” says Beto from Chicago (personal communication, November 26, 2001). It should

be noted that the emphasis on the body-genital aspect seeks to remove the affective element and decrease the offensive one.

In fact, studies on masculinity have shown that the imaginary about sexual desire and the impossibility of “holding from sex” for some time are based on the belief that there is a “nature” in men that forces them to have sex periodically. Less often but still so, among Peruvians we also find stories that acknowledge erotic desire in migrant women and suggest their difficulty in “holding on.” In this sense, Tito, a Peruvian interviewed in Buenos Aires, says that being away from their husbands “[migrant] *women were so eager for sex that they could not resist*” (personal communication, June 6, 2007).

Within the migratory context, the greatest sexual freedom imagined for those who cross borders is highly linked to the mobilities and concerns caused by nomadism. This idea was suggested by Ana, a Peruvian woman, when she said that those who *wander around* tend to be a *womanizer*. In fact, “those who sleep outside” are represented in Mexican historical discourses as those who would be more likely to get sexually transmitted infections (Gayet, 2015). This way, different types of travelers appear that are associated with “risky” sexual behaviors, and migrants, both men and women, are in line with that representation.

Although, as we have seen, some migrants contribute to exalting the imaginary with their stories, others question it by expressing discomfort and indignation towards it. Several Mexican men questioned that argument and argued that it discredits their daily efforts, as well as the dangers they faced when migrating to the United States and the time spent working to support their families.

In this regard, Silvio, sad and helpless, states that “*people who are in Mexico imagine things very different from reality... They do not realize and do not know how we live here [...] [My wife] tells me: You wander around! I say: No! There are times that I don't even step out for a week*” (personal communication, December 5, 2001). Hugo also believes that in Mexico *people just run their mouths*. The way he perceives it, there are no differences in the sexual behavior of men in the United States and in Mexico in terms of having simultaneous partners: *That's not only here [in the US], they also do the same over there [in Mexico]* (personal communication, November 28, 2001).

As a consequence of the imaginary described, Mexican and Peruvian couples who are separated by thousands of kilometers spend many hours arguing and blaming each other over the phone. It is not easy for those who meet in host countries to overcome the suspicions fueled by rumors. In addition, this situation often disturbs children and families alike, as Emma explains: “*my daughters called me [from Peru] and they said: Mom, take dad with you because everyone here makes fun of him [...] [My daughter told me:] My dad cries, people tell him that you have another man, that you won't take him with you there and that you will never come back*” (personal communication, November 16, 2005).

In short, in transnational communities there is a well established erotic imaginary around the figure of the migrant. Especially about those who stay in the countries of origin, the idea that migrants spend a lot of time on their sexual life prevails, which would mean that the likelihood of abandoning their partners and families increases. It is interesting to note that this imaginary repeats in two transnational communities without links; in addition, it applies to both men and women migrants.

As stated in the previous section, analyzing these imaginaries and the effects produced by them does not imply validating their contents or forgetting their symbolic nature. In this sense, although the migratory experience can lead to changes in people's sexual experience, it is not necessarily so. That is to say that although "it is known that some people have a double family life made possible because of distance" (Pedone, 2003, p. 302),<sup>14</sup> the essentialization of the sexual behavior of migrants in the imaginary must be questioned with the same arguments that we use to question the substantiation of the antagonism between the origin and destination contexts.

### *Imaginary Subjects of Desire*

Affective and sexual "markets" to which migrants have access often have relatively homogenous characteristics (Rosas, 2013). Those who have partners in host countries do so mainly under a limited spacial and socio-cultural environment (Quispe-Lázaro & Muñoz-Laboy, 2008; Cohen, 2015). In addition, it is not easy for migrants to connect with people from host societies, where they are discriminated against in different ways.

However, transnational communities imagine other experiences. Mexican wives, who remain in the countries of origin, believe that migrant men have great possibilities to seduce and be seduced by *beautiful, libertine* and available women (*that are always ready and available*).

Similarly, Peruvians have an imaginary with similar characteristics. Some men believe that their migrant wives want Argentinian males because *they are handsome and beautiful*. More specifically, rumors say that Peruvian women want and are desired by young and beautiful Argentinian men with higher economic resources. Similar imaginaries have been found in other migratory contexts (see Pedone (2003) for the case of Ecuadorian women in Spain).

For both Peruvians and Mexicans interviewed, the imaginaries about the subjects of desire are shaped by hegemonic ideas –of gender, nationality and ethnic-racial constructs– that are used to underline their sense of exclusion. Similarly, as Esguerra Muelle (2014) points out, we can say that these imaginaries express subtle forms of racism that affect migrants, their husbands and wives, as well as their transnational communities in general.

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<sup>14</sup>TN: citation in English exclusive to this article.

This author pointed out “both a phenotypic racism and a more complex one linked to ideas about prestige (elegance), beauty, or even civilization and modernity” (2014, p. 148).<sup>15</sup> Thus, following Canessa (2008), we can say that in these imaginaries the sexual desire of migrants is conceived from a sensual aesthetic that is also linked to an eroticism of power.

Finally, it is important to mention that in the case of Peruvian women in Buenos Aires, the figure of other women as possible subjects of desire also appears in the imaginary. Thus, in the imaginary, female migration seems to even question normative heterosexuality. That is reflected in the story of Pablo, a Peruvian migrant. The way in which the interviewee normalizes and amplifies the manifestation of homoerotic relationships of migrant women in public spaces is remarkable. In fact, his words summarize the different topics discussed throughout the previous pages: the society of origin is described as a regulatory space for practices while host countries are interpreted as more permissive with same-sex relationships, and migrant women are represented as breakers of the normative barriers of the society of origin regarding the object of sexual desire.

In recent years, it is a trend that many Peruvian women are lesbians [...] Now it is almost normal to go dancing and find two women dancing and kissing; they do not care about the rest of the people. Here [in Argentina] that barrier has already been overcome, and people overcame it because society also allows it. In Peru, that would be very difficult (Pablo, Peruvian, personal communication, May 8, 2006).

#### *The Imaginaries Are Similar, but not the Same: “Women Look Worse”*

In the previous sections, we presented the main similarities found in the imaginaries about the sexual life of Mexican migrant men in the United States and of Peruvian migrant women in Argentina. Both men and women are imagined as eager for sex, and conjectures develop, which affirm that this will affect their labor role, the sending of remittances and their family ties. In addition, both groups are imagined to be linked to subjects that meet ethnic-racial characteristics represented as hegemonic.

However, there are clear differences between the images that represent them, since women are questioned in more emphatic and hostile ways. Dreby (2009) also found that rumors about women leave great stigma due to the fact that their supposed “transgressions” are moral in nature; instead, according to the author, gossip about men is only serious when their “transgression” threatens their traditional role as economic providers.

Indeed, unlike what happens with women, the extramarital sexual exercise of men is usually justified. In our research, we find that it is common for Mexican migrant wives to explain this imaginary saying “*they are men*”; that is, they are considered victims of their

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<sup>15</sup>TN: citation in English exclusive to this article.

biology (*their body requires them to have sex*) or prisoners of their gender learning (*men do not know how to hold their desire, women do*). These imaginaries about men are not only found in migratory contexts, but they also appear in sex-generic constructs related to heterosexual masculinity and femininity in Latin American societies. In general terms, in these constructs the male (fathers, husbands, brothers, etc.) and female (mothers, wives, daughters, etc.) figures are stereotyped as antagonistic and asymmetrical in terms of power, under the assumption that men have control over women, they enjoy greater freedom to interact and have sex, and they strengthen their domination through economic provision.

These sex-generic constructs are also present in Peru and help to understand the emergence of the questions that Peruvian migrant women receive. As Nyberg Sørensen and Vammen (2016) express, the imaginaries about the close emotional relationships between mothers and their children are affected by the migration of these women, who geographically move away from them. Therefore, migrant mothers try to compensate for their emotional drain and social stigma by sending back as much of their income as possible. Indeed, in interviews conducted in Buenos Aires, it is reported that after working and sending remittances, many Peruvian women go out to have fun to combat loneliness and forget the harshness of their daily work as domestic workers. In fact, some Peruvian men interviewed say they understand that women want to have fun, because they always do the same. However, because working and going out for fun was an experience attributed to men in Peru, they say that women in Buenos Aires “*drink too much and then 'that happens'*” [they have extramarital sex]. They even talk about men who take advantage of migrants, either taking money from them or sexually harassing them: “*Behind a dizzy woman there are two or three men who want to take her anywhere,*” says Pablo (personal communication, May 8, 2006). In other words, in this imaginary the woman is recognized as a subject of desire, but it is also recorded that she would not know how to “properly” manage that desire (as this desire would not be of her own or she would be inexperienced) and would often be subordinated to a male figure taking advantage of her.

In comparative terms, the stories that refer to the sexual activity of Peruvian migrant women are more denigrating and stigmatizing than the evidence related to Mexican men. The interviewees say that some of them (women) get drunk and are represented as *old women* who harass young men, or as *irresponsible* young women who go out to dance and forget their children. For example, Tito does not hesitate to express that these women are *a shame* because “*they spend the little money they have and try to buy love and kisses*” (personal communication, June 6, 2007).

They also argue that they *try to get attention* and that *they look worse than a male*. It is mentioned that *it is different to see a dizzy man than to see a dizzy woman!* [it is worse]; that is, extramarital relations in men are not surprising, as well as seeing them seducing a young woman. Similarly, it is not surprising to see a drunken man. However, surprise and repudiation do appear when a woman is the one doing so. Although, as we said, the

surprise caused by this situation is due to the fact that a heteropatriarchal sex-generic organization operates on women, it also indicates that their actions question what is socially expected in that organization. Women in such contexts bring to light that some of the roles socially assigned to men, such as seduction, are also possible for women to hold.<sup>16</sup>

Similar findings have also been made in other contexts; Pedone (2008) reports that there is also a homogenous and stigmatizing vision of “migrant women” who abandon children in Ecuador. This author even goes on to indicate that the institutions committed to research in the migratory field reaffirm this vision, highlighting the dangers that women face when migrating, the possibility of abandoning their home and children. Marroni (2006) also reports the existence of a similar imaginary associated with Mexican peasant women, which assumes that those who migrate are “out of control” and “are all crazy.”

During the fieldwork with Peruvian women, we did record their concern about these rumors that stigmatize and blame them. Some women even prefer to meet with their violent husbands for fear of being labeled as “bad women” or “bad mothers” by their relatives or children. Skolnik *et al.* (2012) obtained similar results. They found that, compared to men, Guatemalan women take more preventive measures to avoid being “gossiped about” and are more negatively affected by the effects of transnational gossip. The authors emphasize the highly *gendered* nature of transnational gossip, which can potentially reinforce patriarchal relationships. In fact, increasing anxiety, depression and isolation among women can be considered a byproduct of how easy rumors and gossip spread from one country to another.

#### THE ROLE OF IMAGINARY AND TRANSNATIONAL RUMORS

By spreading rumors societies reaffirm instituted imaginaries, project themselves towards the instituting one, and warn on it. Following Canessa (2008), we affirm that these imaginaries and their associated rumors point to a truth; although, it is not a truth that necessarily resides in the sexual behavior of migrants, but in the anxiety that its possibility generates. Then, as we pointed out in the introduction, the truth of the rumors cannot be judged by their content; it is necessary to judge their pragmatic value and the moral that it suggests. Rouquette (2009) indicates that the element of truth in them is to be signs of fright or of a dispossession. In fact, we consider that the rumors analyzed express “the fear” of the possible “transgression” of hegemonic morals, but they also express a “dispossession” of direct control; that is, rumors are the –transnational, in this case– form that assumes control when it cannot be directly exercised.

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<sup>16</sup>By intersectionally identifying different social classifications of inequality, not only certain logics of domination are revealed, but also the resistances that people display are made visible (Magliano, 2015).

According to Fressard (2006), social imaginaries provide direction to words, actions, feelings and desires, as well as ways of thinking. Also the rumors suggest “a rule of action (not going a certain place, not buying a certain product, being cautious in a certain way...). It provides a certain level of dominion by way of preventing” (Rouquette, 2009, pp. 160-161).<sup>17</sup> This also happens with gossip. Skolnik *et al.* (2012) mention that when a group feels threatened, gossip increases. For the authors, speaking negatively about behaviors considered inappropriate is a way to clarify which behaviors are appropriate and thus reaffirm the identity of the group. When stigmatizing certain actions, people seek to avoid them and institute “normalities.” In the two migratory groups analyzed in this paper, we notice that rumors and gossip seek to institute monogamy and control female sexuality; they aim at instituting responsibilities over fun and pleasure, work over desire, as well as at invalidating interetary and inter-ethnic sexual relationship, and those between social classes. Thus, rumors and gossip provide confirmation and reinforce the compass of the dominant collective morality (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Wade (2008, p. 50) mentions that women appear in nationalist discourse as guardians and civilizers, “but they can also be seen as a possible threat to the nation if they do not behave well –especially when it comes to sex–. The idea of ‘behaving well’ often implies keeping to relationships within their social group or category.”<sup>18</sup> In the first place, this allows us to understand that our findings refer not only to a type of control exercised within families or couples. These imaginaries express an anxiety that transcends migrant communities and responds to major socio-cultural, political and economic orders. Secondly, it is understood that migrant men can also be seen as a threat to the nation in relation to their sexuality and, therefore, they are also subject to transnational rumors. Nation-states (host countries and countries of origin) expect that migrant men, like women, will “behave well,” work productively, send remittances, support their family and keep themselves to sexual relationships with those of their same groups. Therefore, rumors warn (denigrating in advance) those who could act otherwise.

In this article, relevance has been acknowledged to the analysis of sexuality control through transnational rumors that come from instituted imaginaries. However, this emphasis should not reflect the impossibility of resisting it or that migrants are prohibited from accessing pleasure and eroticism. We stated that, at different levels, both men and women dispute values and normalizations. In fact, the rumors that are reflected upon in previous pages –which can be conceived as preventive controls– reflect the instability of said control.

It should also be stated that, although migrants are concerned with what is said about them and are bothered by the exaggerations that the imaginaries project on their sexuality,

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<sup>17</sup>TN: citation in English exclusive to this article.

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some of the migrant men do not devalue the rumor, but rather reinforce it. This is explained due to the fact that rumors also help improve self-image. Sometimes, due to the loneliness they feel in the target society, rumors about them being sexually desired and having a lot of sexual activity can help rise –mask-like, as it were– their self-esteem.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In the previous sections, we analyzed the characteristics of the imaginaries that exist in transnational communities about the sexuality of those who migrate. We address the case of Mexican migrant men in the city of Chicago (United States), and Peruvian women in Buenos Aires (Argentina).

The imaginaries analyzed summarize a series of assumptions about host societies (societies supposedly less rigid in sexual matters, with gender equity and greater anonymity and freedom than the societies of origin) and migrants (eroticized, those who seek sexual experiences, leave their families and have access to national, beautiful, white individuals of a higher socioeconomic status). These imaginaries affect Mexican men and Peruvian women. Therefore, as they have also been found in migratory contexts different from those we study, they can be hypothesized as an extended aspect of contemporary Latin American migratory mobilities.

However, the imaginaries analyzed stigmatize more heavily against migrant women, especially those who have migrated without their children, which is consistent with the sex-genderist socialization that prevails in Latin America; that is, imaginaries and rumors are heteropatriarchal; they are also racist and classist. Thus, by identifying how the different inequality classifications present in both the countries of origin and host countries are articulated, we have attempted to regain a transnational and intersectional perspective in relation to the construction and operation of the imaginaries and rumors in the lives of migrants, and in the own configuration of the migratory processes. Although in this article we emphasized the logic of domination, we also provided evidence of the agency and transgression revealed by the mere presence of rumors.

On the other hand, we did show that origin and host societies are heterogeneous in their insides and that imaginaries operate by unifying each one and ignoring their complexities. At the same time, they exaggerate the differences and minimize the similarities between them, fabricating antagonism. Something similar happens with the figure of the migrant. The imaginaries mythicize the figure and make it antagonistic to the figure of the non-migrant. That way, the sexual life of migrant women is represented as different from the one they led before migrating, and the same goes for men.

Taking into account the above, in this article we have insisted on the importance of addressing to the simplifications that shape the imaginaries, on the recognition of their symbolic character and on the need to denaturalize their contents. Indeed, “the tendency to

substantiate cultural difference demands, from a critical approach, a deep analysis nourished by contextual and historical data and based on culture as a framework of social practices, affected by power” (Gregorio Gil, 2009, p. 47).<sup>19</sup> In this sense, this article provides elements that allow questioning the reductionist analyzes that hierarchize the contexts of home and host countries with a gradient of modernity.

Finally, in the previous pages we discussed the role of transnational imaginaries and rumors. We have stated how they express the concerns that arise within the framework of the migration process, in face of the possibility of the transgression of the regulatory boundaries imposed by the heteropatriarchal organization of sexuality and gender, but also of those imposed by racial constructs and class structures, among others. That is, they express a tension between social regulation and transformation, and have the function of controlling sexuality at a distance, based on veiled moral sanctions.

Translator: Fernando Llanas

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