

**UCSF**

**UC San Francisco Previously Published Works**

**Title**

Book Review: Lawful Sins: Abortion Rights and Reproductive Governance in Mexico by Elyse Ona Singer

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fb8m9zt>

**Journal**

Gender & Society, 37(2)

**ISSN**

0891-2432

**Author**

Becker, Andréa

**Publication Date**

2023-04-01

**DOI**

10.1177/08912432221143338

Peer reviewed

are preferred, these arrangements are buttressed by social norms that restrict their freedom of movement and civic participation. On a related note, the author of this book also finds the ability of brides to negotiate and resist excessive demands from the conjugal homes to be linked to the presence of support networks, especially natal kin. It is interesting then to note the common challenges faced by migrant brides across different regions of India such as intra-household bargaining, limits to mobility outside the house, and lack of social networks.

This impressive book is a must read for all those interested in strong contextualization of sociological research, intersectional analysis, and literature at the intersection of gender, caste, migration, and marriage.

NATASHA CHHABRA  
University of Maryland, USA

## REFERENCE

Chatterjee, Esha, and Sonalde Desai. 2020. "Physical versus imagined communities: migration and women's autonomy in India." *Journal of ethnic and migration studies* 46 (14): 2977–996.

*Lawful Sins: Abortion Rights and Reproductive Governance in Mexico.* By Elyse Ona Singer. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022, 272 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover); \$28.00 (paper).

DOI: 10.1177/08912432221143338

Abortion discourse in the United States is highly constrained by binaries, and the ability to discuss and understand abortion and pregnancies is limited to polarizing frameworks. For instance, ideologies tend to be framed as either "pro-choice" or "pro-life," and discussions of pregnancies are restricted to "baby vs. clump of cells." Even within groups mobilized around expanding abortion access, providers, patients, and activists alike are expected to adhere to national messaging. Anything else falls under what Lisa Martin and colleagues refer to in *Social Science and Medicine* (2017) as "danger talk." In *Lawful Sins*, anthropologist Elyse Ona Singer provides an antidote to rigid U.S. abortion discourse by inviting the reader to delve into Mexico's abortion climate—characterized as it is by its endless shades of gray and nuance.

This book is an ethnographic account of Mexico's abortion care seven years after the historic 2007 legalization of "voluntary abortion" in the nation's capital. Singer chose this site for its significance both within Latin America and on a global stage, as this reform made Mexico City one of only three places in the region where abortion was legally permitted, and Latin America is widely regarded as the home to some of the most hostile abortion climates in the world. The reform was met with vigorous push-back, however, and 16 out of 32 states modified their constitutions within two years to prevent replication of the reform. Amid this polarized socio-political context, Singer conducted participant observation and interviews across various abortion clinics, gathering data from patients, public health personnel, and activist networks mobilized to expand abortion access.

As Singer astutely writes in her book, "At the heart of this fierce dispute is the very definition of Mexico and what it means to be Mexican today" (p. 9), thus necessitating particular sensitivity from an ethnographer. Yet despite being an "outsider" in her research, Singer paints a vivid and moving account that indicates a deep respect for and desire to understand both Mexico and its people. She intersperses discussions of anthropological theory with vibrant observational accounts both big and small: from descriptions of Mexico City's bustling streets and widespread Catholic iconography to minute details such as the rosary beads around the neck of a woman who sold hot *atole* outside an abortion clinic—beads that encased tiny plastic fetuses as "a gesture of atonement, perhaps, for her complicity in the profane work of the clinic" (p. 33).

The book succeeds in its central aim of examining how patients and health care providers understand abortion and how they reconcile its legalization with wider morality frameworks and personal misgivings. What Singer finds will deepen extant frameworks for and knowledge of abortion and the people who have them. Singer talked with people confidently choosing and providing abortion who held beliefs that the typical U.S. reader would consider contradictory—beliefs that an abortion ends a life or that abortions should be rare, for instance. In this way, *Lawful Sins* demonstrates the ability for abortion patients, providers, and advocates to hold simultaneous and often complex beliefs about abortion while unwaveringly believing in its provision as a right and public health issue. Singer also illuminates the contradictions of the state's abortion infrastructure; on face value, abortion should be very accessible, given it is free of cost at the public abortion clinics up to 12 weeks of gestation. However, Singer finds a central paradox whereby women have more agency and choice while the state simultaneously has widened ability to regulate their bodies.

Singer explains this paradox as a “softening” of injustice by inequitable legal systems which themselves are ill equipped to fully vanquish reproductive stratification. For instance, these state-run clinics very rigidly adhere to the 12-week mark, forcing patients to navigate tricky bureaucratic obstacles or spend thousands of pesos at a private clinic—the latter an option that providers at the public clinics are barred from disclosing. It is in this contradiction that U.S. readers will find common ground, as abortion has always been relatively inaccessible across the country—particularly based on socioeconomic status—even when *Roe v Wade* was law of the land. In both a pre-Dobbs United States and a post-2007 Mexico City, abortion was deemed—on face value—as accessible, and state actors were celebrated for their commitment to reproductive rights. As *Lawful Sins* aptly reminds its readers, a rights framework alone in world gripped with inequality is insufficient for guaranteeing reproductive rights and justice for all citizens. With its engaging prose, this book is appropriate for both advanced undergraduate students and graduate students alike, and is an excellent text for those hoping to further their understanding of the politics of reproduction and health care.

ANDRÉA BECKER

*University of California, San Francisco*

*Queer Nightlife*. Edited by Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021, 306 pp., \$95.00 (cloth); \$39.95 (paper).

DOI: 10.1177/08912432221140316

What is queer nightlife? How does one map out the possibilities, limitations, and surveillance embedded in its politics? What methods are used to explore, experience, and remember it? How are bodies, genders, and sexualities negotiated in this realm? These are some of the many questions put forth by the editors and contributors in *Queer Nightlife*. For people in the West, queer nightlife is sonorous with nightclubs, bathhouses, or circuit parties, but this volume challenges readers to expand their understanding of queer nightlife to street corners, living rooms, sidewalks, and police stations. Furthermore, the essays that make up this volume explore the diversity of nighttime experiences, highlighting the challenges of indigenous, migrant, activist, and displaced queer people, allowing the reader to understand the ways in which macropolitical and global agendas