

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

Spotlight Gender Overview

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1bf9z67g>

Author

Arrizón, A

Publication Date

2023-12-10

Peer reviewed

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LATINO CULTURE

FROM CALAVERAS TO QUINCEAÑERAS

VOLUME ONE

Charles M. Tatum, Editor

Cultures of the American Mosaic



AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

 **Spotlight Gender Overview**

Gender relations are a fundamental feature of all societies and cultures. Similar to that of Latin America, gender relations in the Latino/a culture of the United States are reinforced by the power of heterosexuality, patriarchy, and religion. These institutions represent a system of cultural values that not only define the ways in which men and women should function but also have perpetuated the devaluation of women and femininity. Deeply rooted in the gender relations of the Americas' colonial histories is the duality of *marianismo* and machismo, which represent a gender role phenomenon based on traditional cultural norms and the impact of Catholicism.

Modeled after the Virgin Mary, *marianismo* created a feminine ideal of purity and passivity by which women are expected to live. Derived from Catholic beliefs of the Virgin Mary (La Virgen María), who, after giving birth to Jesus, became the Mother of God and a role model for women, *marianismo* perpetuates the gender roles in which women should be self-sacrificing while following the ideal of the Virgin Mary. And like her, women were expected to be eternally immaculate and giving. They were expected to be pure and if they had sexual relations, it should only be with their husband and for the sole purpose of procreation. Several decades ago, anthropologist Evelyn P. Stevens in "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America" (1973) wrote that *marianismo* is also a force that makes women morally and spiritually superior to men. This force, according to Stevens, stems from the female ability to reproduce. This value system equating motherhood with power and nature is often supported by some feminists who emphasize differences between men and women based on biological, reproductive capacity. However, a woman without children or the dismissal of motherhood is not necessarily an unnatural act. It may be unconventional and transgressive in some cultural contexts, but like the desire for motherhood, its rejection is about women's choice. Thus being able to have alternatives and choices is an empowering act for women in any sociocultural context.

On the other hand, *marianismo's* counterpart, machismo, can be understood as a prominently exhibited or excessive form of masculinity. While some scholars believe that the term *machismo* has historical roots common in all Latin cultures since Roman times, others would argue that it is an ideology that originated in Spain and was implemented in the Americas during the Spanish conquest. In the United States, the term has been more broadly used than in Latin America or in other Spanish-speaking cultures. Folklorist Américo Paredes characterized the macho as "the superman of the multitude," a "national type" by which Mexico, as a nation, is often classified. In his study of machismo, Paredes discusses its folkloric origins and its stereotypical aspects. In his examination of the concept, Paredes asserts that if machismo sprung from the rape of some Indian women by some Spaniards during the Spanish conquest, then it is an ancient term.

The gendered system embedded in *marianismo* and machismo explains in part the meaning of the virgin/whore dichotomy that affects not only Latinas but women collectively. First presented by Sigmund Freud in 1915, this dichotomy describes the polarization of women into two categories: good girls versus bad girls. The good girls become wives and mothers and bad girls become the object of male sexuality and desire. The view of women as either virgins/Madonna or whores has proved to limit women's sexual expression in patriarchal cultures. Patriarchy is the basis for the servile role of women in heterosexual relationships. The transgressor or the one who does not accept the traditional designation of these gender roles has generated considerable debate among Chicanas and Latinas. At the center of this debate is La Malinche or Malintzin Tenepal, who served as Hernán Cortés's interpreter and mistress, and became the mother of their *mestizo* son. La Malinche, as she was branded by the Indians, has become a symbol of the cultural tyranny embedded in the process of colonization. If one joins her legacy with the narrative of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the virgin/Madonna/whore dichotomy can be captured in the context of conquest, colonization, and Christianity. Author Cherríe Moraga sums up the importance of La Malinche by suggesting that her sexual legacy, as it has been popularly known in Mexican/Chicana culture, is the legacy of betrayal. La Malinche/Malintzin not only served as translator to the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernán Cortez, but she became a mediator between the Aztecs and the Spanish cultures.

Since the late 1970s, however, Chicana and Latina feminists have developed significant theories in order to reconceptualize gender relations and gendered bodies outside the boundaries of binary thinking and heteronormativity. While heteronormativity can be considered a bias knowledge, it implies that human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories, male and female, and that sexual relations are normal only between two people of different genders. Therefore, the effects of heteronormativity and homophobia have been contested for stigmatizing alternative concepts of both sexuality and gender, and for making certain types of self-expression more difficult. By considering the social structures that preclude gendered/sexualized identities—such as gay and lesbian—and the sexual politics that separate men and women, the emergence of self-identified “queer” identities has contributed to transform a new understanding of Latina/o gendered bodies and spaces.

While the term “queer” is problematic and its own history must be considered elsewhere, when thinking of Latina/o gendered relations and gender theory, the commonly used Spanish-language queer words such as *joto* (male homosexual) or *jotería* (gay community) and others such as *maricón* (gay man), *loca* (literal for crazy female but also referring to gay man female attributes) or *marimacha* (lesbian), to mention a few, have expanded and transformed the Latina/o theories of gender.

In the 21st century, Latinas and Latinos continue to experience conflicting emotions related to machismo and *marianismo*. Although young Latinas and Latinos acknowledge the existence of cultural norms embedded in the power relations of this gender phenomenon, the question regarding how both *marianismo* and machismo influence men and women remains complex. One must

be careful not to generalize, as not all Latinas in the 21st century accept the traditional role of *marianismo*, nor do all Latinos accept machismo. However, for some, machismo is acceptable and even expected.

Gender relations and expectations are the product of many factors, including cultural expectations, class, identity politics, religious practices, as well as processes of cultural adaptation (acculturation) and socialization. Latina/o gender roles and sexual identities, like U.S. Latino/a culture in general, are far more fluidly and heterogeneous than generally assumed.

Alicia Arrizón

See Also Latina Feminisms

Further Reading

Alarcón, Norma. "Chicanas' Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzín, Or, Malintzín Putting Flesh Back on the Object." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. New York: Kitchen Table, 1981. 182–190.

Anzaldúa, Gloria Evangelina. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987.

Arrizón, Alicia. *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: William Morrow, 1970.

Moraga, Cherríe. *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*. Boston: South End Press, 1983.

Moraga, Cherríe. *The Last Generation*. Boston: South End Press, 1993.

Paredes, Américo. *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexico Border*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

Stevens, Evelyn P. "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America." In Ann Pescatello, ed., *Female and Male in Latin America*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1973. 89–102.

The ongoing debates about immigration in the United States prompt many feminists to continue to emphasize the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppressions. Gender-specific studies about immigrant women's experiences are adding an important angle to the larger field of immigration studies. Artists, activists, and educators have united to bring attention to the human rights violations in Juarez, Mexico, involving mostly young, migrant Mexican factory workers. Feminist filmmaker Lourdes Portillo has raised awareness about *Las Mujeres de Juárez* (The Women of Juarez), in her film *Señorita Extraviada* (Missing Young Woman) and memorialized the many women who have lived and died in the Juarez–El Paso borderlands.