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### Politics of Sexuality

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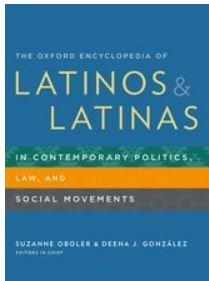
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#### Recommended Citation

Hernández, Ellie D. and González, Deena J., "Politics of Sexuality" (2015). *History Faculty Scholarship*. 10.  
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## Sexuality, Politics of

Source:

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in Contemporary Politics, Law, and Social Movements

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## Sexuality, Politics of.

Gender and sexuality formations among US Latina/o populations encompass a huge array of practices, ideas, and expressions that vary according to historical, cultural, religious, economic, or social conditions. Within these experiences, expressions of gender and sexuality also vary according to culture or ethnicity, by nation, and by time frame across the large expanse of the Americas. The most prevalent and influential historical tenet that influences Latino/a gender and sexuality is the period of the Conquest by Spain and other European nations that sought to triumph over the native populations in their quest for guns, glory, and god.

Such a legacy of conquest and colonization still reverberates in the attitudes and acceptability of sexual mores among Latina/os in the United States. During the period of colonization of the Americas by other countries, including the United States, laws were created and cultural attitudes instilled to establish a European-based, dominant view of gender and sexuality. Gender and sexuality played a key role in the understanding of people who survived the Conquest and among those who as conquerors remained in Mexico as well as in Central and South America because within the racial and cultural as well as religious mixing nations were created across several centuries (from 1521 to 1898 when the last of the Spanish colonies, Cuba, fought for its independence). The population growth required to create nations or countries derived from racial and ethnic mixing. The new nations were founded on patriarchal, largely Roman Catholic principles and ideas, which since the medieval era had cast women as subordinate to men, had viewed women as chattel or property, and had argued that all sexuality derived from adherence to religion, to the Church, and to the state.

The earliest understandings of gender cast women into rigid and defined notions of femaleness and womanhood, servile and dependent on husbands or as widows dependent on older sons or husbands' brothers. This was in marked opposition to native peoples' understandings of gender codes of conduct and of gender assumptions; it was not the case that native communities did not support their own notions or definitions of femininity or masculinity. In fact, they did. The codes of conduct, the understood and implicit assumptions about appropriate behavior, actions, and values for women and men, or for girls and boys, however, were rooted in understandings about the natural world and not entirely in organized religion or in a governed polity. Two systems for organizing gender and sexuality thus coexisted, and eventually, like many other aspects following the Spanish or European Conquest, one would reign.

From the outset, despite the efforts to codify and transplant male and female codes of conduct, contradictions about appropriate or acceptable social behavior for men and women also prevailed. A primary example is Malintzin Tenepal (Malinche, or Doña Marina as the Spanish called her), the mistress and lover of the conqueror, Hernán

Cortés, who had two children with him. From the outset this racial and ethnic mixing of people, the practice known as *mestizaje*, also shaped gender and sexuality because it imbued the outcomes of the unions, many of them violent, with legal, economic, and sexual consequences. Doña Marina, for example, attempted to, and did, persuade the court to “certify” her children with Cortés as “Spaniards” versus of mixed race. Thus, they were able to marry, own property, and bequeath it, whereas indigenous or mixed-race people frequently had no such privileges.

The political lore of Malintzin Tenepal and Hernán Cortés structures the national consciousness of the Mexican and Chicana/o people. Woman, or Malinche in this case, was memorialized as the mother of the first mestizo children of the Americas, which was not true because women in the Caribbean and in Yucatán had born the first mixed-race children already. More to the point, however, is the fact that Malinche was viewed as the supreme betrayer of the Mexicans. Malinche’s sexuality in the form of her relationship to the Spanish conqueror subsequently became a metaphor for loss, among women, and against the more powerful Europeans, or men. Many contemporary theorists argue that the relationship was also a metaphor for rape, immortalized in Mexican lexicons by use of the term for someone who suffers rape, *la chingada*. Instead, she—a woman—became equated with treachery and a loss of trust. In this reflection of a less-than-glorious Mexican past, men are never blamed for the loss to the Spaniards: Cuauhtémoc, the underprepared nephew of the deceased ruler, Moctezuma, actually surrendered the city but is rarely assigned blame or shame. Malinche escapes no such special treatment.

The reality of life for women on continents undergoing war and invasion cannot be denied. The institutional apparatuses of the empire, including the Catholic Church and, later, the nation-state, conspired to sustain a hierarchy driven by fear and terror. Women could not venture far from home or out on their own, even in urban areas. From the powerful Catholic and hierarchical traditions imposing God, disciples, and the pope or priests over parishioners, men, and households, with women and children at the bottom, and far below African-descent peoples and native peoples, the controlling effects of persistent patriarchy and ancient Roman legal codes established the basis upon which an empire was created. Church and state crafted laws that ordered life in relationship to economies of production, work, and an occasional celebration around the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and marriage. There were few opportunities for women’s autonomy in a social or legal sense, and only activities hidden from public scrutiny or juridical sight allowed women to act in their own defense or protection.

In the most basic sense, “gender” refers to the biological identity assigned at birth—usually, boy or girl and depending on the circumstances of birth because some newborns on rare occasions have genitalia that might be male and female at once. Male and female predominate as the primary assigned or prescribed gender categories. An expression of masculinity and femininity can be found across most cultures, but for Latina/os this expression of gender identity is unique. As a cultural facet of every Spanish-speaking nation across the Americas shaped by unique traditions, religious influences, and laws, most gender codes of conduct in the vast Latina/o experience emphasize femininity for women and masculinity for men. Ideally, these gender codes of masculinity and femininity have served as the basis of heterosexuality and support the formation of the family social structure as a central basis for constructing gender and sexual identities.

While many imagine that the world is divided into male and female, masculine and feminine, or men and women, research since the 1960s undermines the supposition that there are only two genders, only two sexes, or that what is normal in one community is normal across all others. The essence of anything (gender, sexuality, masculinity, femininity) is debated and scrutinized, through scientific and humanistic study. Sexual fluidity, we know today, is very much a characteristic of the historical record as it is contemporarily. In the nineteenth-century United States, for example, pink was considered a masculine color and boys as well as girls wore dresses and their hair long until they reached age seven.

## Conquest and Colonialism

From the nascent beginnings of the Americas, the period known as the Conquest followed by the colonial period is normally considered as the origin that led to the formation of Latina/o people. The blending of races through *mestizaje* and miscegenation created regional and national distinctions. Within that landscape, the indigenous and Spanish advanced new bi- and multiracial configurations. In the areas we identify as the US Southwest, the border, Mexico, all of the Central American countries, and the South American continent, as well as the Caribbean, multiple

indigenous and native groups blended racially with European conquistadors. Concomitant with the era of conquest and colonization (1492–1898), the period was distinguished by the force and domination spread under a new cultural, European system distinct from the indigenous. Its outcome was the eventual Spanish and Catholic dominance across two continents—North America and South America.

Some of these aspects of Mexican history, and of the histories of other regions in Central and South America which repeated the pattern after 1521, created obtuse rules and asserted laws about gender and sexuality, some of which are still in existence. Laws dictated or governed the cultural practices of Latina/os; the Catholic sacraments provided codifications about birth, marriage, and death. Within the defined arenas of church and state, women's and men's practices were judged and arbitrated. Courtrooms relied on both secular and religious laws and practices, to the point where it was sometimes difficult to distinguish a court of law from a ruling by a priest or bishop. Even when they were warring, military against the religious or vice versa, the twin institutions of the Catholic Church and the military or royal orders (governors) operated to support a structure pitting European against native or man against woman.

As such, the most recognized figure of the Conquest of Mexico has also become synonymous with the modern nation-state. The public and widely mythologized history of Doña Marina or Malinztin Tenépal or La Malinche situates one of the main elements of historiographical attitudes about the role of women in the New World and as its reviled emblem of domination. The first conquistadors used force in the early encounters with the native Indians.

Within a short amount of time, a matter of years, the Spanish church and state institutionalized their rules of governance through laws and religious codes. Masculinity and femininity were institutionalized as oppositional rather than complementary aspects of gender and sexuality as the Spanish Crown created a division of labor according to gender and this was seen clearly in the adjudication of specific sets of laws. The Laws of Burgos of 1512, or *Las Leyes de Burgos*, for example, established a set of laws (and, in actual practice, guidelines) on the better treatment of the native people on the first island conquered, Hispaniola. The laws constituted the first attempt to outline specifically conduct in matters of marriage and raising children; however, the codes made some attempt to regulate the treatment and conduct of the Spanish settlers and their encounters with the native Indians. The laws specifically created a family (tribal) structure and instructed priests to instill Catholic teachings and convert the natives to Christianity. *Las Leyes de Burgos* were an attempt by the Spanish Crown to attend to the many abuses of the native peoples in the decades after the conquest but failed on many levels because they were disempowered ultimately under their conversion into a system of labor, which was the primary goal of the law, and Catholicism, which was their secondary goal.

Another attempt to create laws for the treatment of the natives came in 1542 with the *Leyes Nuevas* (“New Laws”) under Charles V. Once again, these laws sought to provide for the mistreatment of the native people but only reinforced the *encomienda* system of labor, an assignment often in perpetuity of a person's labor or work which offered little protection for the Indians.

The seventeenth century added to the major legal apparatus with the *Recopilación de las Leyes de los Reinos de Indias*, a copious and pedantic sequence of laws enacted in 1681 to supplant the previous two codifications that were deemed ineffectual on a local level and excluded the many regions overtaken by Spanish rule over the next century. One of the main accomplishments of the *Recopilación* was to standardize the Spanish law over the vast and enormous territories under Spanish occupation, encompassing the areas of the Southwest, including Santa Fe and what later would become Tucson, Los Angeles, Laredo, and Albuquerque, and extending as far as the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

The law's geographic reach established a wide sweep for the legal and religious rules whose influences can be found in today's attitudes and economic trade relationships. The most distinctive of these was girded by a supreme understanding of the division of labor. Men and women became separated in their lived and working experiences and were bound by the separate spheres that divide men and women into private and public existences.

But the order and regulation of sexuality fell under the purview of the dreaded and somewhat arbitrary Spanish Inquisition. Few think or believe that the Spanish Inquisition pertained to Mexico or the New World, but historical excavation supports that the Inquisition did in fact regulate sexual behaviors and served more as a regulatory system in the New World than in Europe. Inquisitional repression also included many offenses that pertained to sexuality such as bestiality, rape, and sodomy (male and female), as well as other forms of stated heresy against the

Church. Phillip II established the Inquisition officially in Mexico in 1569. By 1662, accounts of homosexual behavior led the Duke of Albuquerque to indict over a hundred people and execute a substantial number of them.

Within the colonial period and heritage, the laws and codes of conduct began to shape the codification of proper sexuality, situating it within the domain of heterosexuality and the Church and state as purveyors of the law guiding it. Naturally, people began to assume heterosexuality not only as the “natural” order of things but as the only one. It would become clear through their actions that the Church and state became more interested in regulating behaviors and associating morality with the regulation of sexual behaviors and were far less interested in heresy. The Inquisition in Spain did not actively pursue the persecution of sodomy as it would in the Americas and the New World. Sexual and gender identity were not based on individual rights, pleasure or desires, or even group rights. The role and function of gender and sexual identity pertained to the natural order or biological basis of reproduction and conquest.

## Twentieth Century: Codes of Transformation

Throughout the twentieth century, moral codes about gender and sexuality underwent a tumultuous period of inconsistency and progression. For Latina/os, the triumph of the United States over the Southwest transferred the focus from a Spanish system to an Anglo-European and Protestant perspective or at least created an uneasy coexistence of both. One of the main areas that transformed perspectives on gender and sexuality resides upon prescriptive codes for men and women. With modernization came a new industrialized labor force that brought women out of the confines of the home. This carried over to other American sensibilities that lent new arrangements for identity and self-expression.

One of the enduring influences shaping Latino/a gender and sexuality since the era of the Spanish Conquest is the Catholic Church, which has taken a strong and influential stance on sexual conduct and gender attributes. In the sacrament of marriage, also called matrimony, for example, the covenant describes a partnership to be exclusively between a man and woman; and until just recently, women were asked to assent to a life as “man and wife.” A man thus retained his gender, but a woman’s was filtered through her marital identity as the wife of some man. The requirement of the covenant of marriage in Catholicism requires that the two partners be a man and a woman in fulfillment of the Catholic religion’s holy sacraments and in the only acceptable place, marriage, for sex and procreation.

Currently, in the United States, civil partnerships recognize marriage between a man and a woman, but that part of the law is changing with same-sex marriage initiatives and legislation which reflects new perspectives in many states; the movement for same-sex marriage initiatives and for civil unions has also given rise to a backlash that views them as part of a “liberal agenda” or a conspiracy against heterosexuality. Heterosexual marriage still enjoys a privileged position in the majority of Latina/o communities. Heterosexual privilege signifies a public recognition and support for an intimate relationship between a man and woman and is recognized and supported by different social networks, such as the workplace, governmental bodies, educational institutions, housing, healthcare, and, of course, acceptance and recognition by many religious organizations. It is a privilege that often enjoys the status of a “right,” and only in the past half-century has it been challenged as inaccurately reflecting people’s lives, romantic interests, or the real lived experiences of gays and lesbians as well as bisexuals and transgendered people. A later section of this essay gives examples of specific Latino/a-based challenges to *heteronormativity*, or the belief that everyone is and must be heterosexual.

The expression of a male or female identity thus becomes embedded in institutions that support a *masculine* identity for men and a *feminine* one for women. Another way of making this point is that masculinity and femininity express what it means to be a heterosexual male or female in a court of law, in hospitals, in schools, or in churches—that is, in institutions that sanctify those privileges. In many states, gay and lesbian partners of critically ill patients are not granted the same rights to decision-making as a husband or wife would be. In schools, a gay or lesbian partner of a biological parent might not be allowed to sign any documents related to a child, such as permission slips or medical information. The more obvious Latino expression of heterosexual masculinity is located in the term *macho*, which is defined as a strong, often exaggerated sense of masculine pride. To be macho has mixed meanings in the US context. Its meaning could be both positive and negative in connotation. Male athletes are considered a proper role

model of masculinity. The more negative aspect is that of the stereotype of someone who is aggressive and demonstrates excessive dominance over women through male chauvinism. Most gay men, in traditional Latino/a thinking, would be considered less masculine and not sufficiently *macho*.

The counterpart to the macho or male figure is to be found in the concept of *Marianismo*. *Marianismo* derives from the worship or following of the Virgin Mary (Maria) and her central role in active Catholicism. It is an ideal of true femininity that women are supposed to embody, that is, to be modest, virtuous, and sexually abstinent until marriage and then faithful and subordinate to their husbands. *Marianismo* serves as the female companion to “machismo,” or hypermasculinity, and originated as its counterpoint during the time of the Spanish Conquest. It began as a direct response to the overused *machismo* and was intended to explain a female phenomenon in Latin America in which women were depicted as either saints or whores. Female superiority was at the heart of Marianismo, but its opposite also accounts for how easily, in this dichotomous construction, women could also be seen as overly and overtly sexual, that is, as supersexed. A *mujerista* theology was also a response to male-constructed notions of how women should behave in social and religious contexts; in this case, the message was directed toward the traditional Catholic hierarchy.

Other characteristics of machismo that are often hidden include an ostensibly valorous and chivalrous code of protection that extends into the Spanish- and Latin-derived romantic virtues of sexual potency and prowess. Less obvious is the *mujer passiva* (or *la mujer abnegada*), who negates herself for the love of her husband and children and sacrifices her individualism for the benefit of the family. This traditional role orients women toward home life and religious dedication. Subservience is one of its constituted features, but within that role resides the power to influence household decision-making, if not to make decisions directly. The power of persuasion for and among women, it can be argued, is a dynamic aspect of contemporary Latino/a household making. Gender and sexuality have their own unique expressions within Latina/o communities.

Latinas experience negative stereotyping as frequently as their male counterparts. The virgin/whore complex refers to the way Latinas are situated between two completely opposite views: the virgin and the whore or the martyr and the witch are ideals embedded in cultural practices, religious or spiritual values, and social life; and they require women to behave and position themselves either as celibate (virginal) or as sacrificing themselves for the good of the family, the community, or the collective (martyr). Like the terms suggest, the virgin is the idealized woman in Latina/o culture, while the term “witch” refers to the maligned aspects of a woman who shows too much independence. Sexual promiscuity is central to the virgin/whore or martyr/witch dichotomy. To be “virginal” suggests an attitude of moral refinement and right action, and to be labeled a whore or prostitute is to be described as someone who exhibits sexual autonomy, freedom, and possibly prostitution itself. Mainstream culture exploits this representative notion in advertising and the media, underscoring Latinas’ hypersexuality, or availability for sex. Popular culture focuses on Latinas’ bodies and eroticizes them on the basis of a traditional regard that Latinas had more children (meaning they had more sex) than white women. While attitudes about sexuality have changed since the 1960s, some of these attitudes about Latina/os remain despite efforts to move away from cultural prescriptions and established preconceptions.

Now regarded as a socially constructed set of rules and behaviors, orthodox assumptions about heterosexuality as the only and dominant perspective on gender and sexuality have challenged the view that men were superior and women inferior. The belief that heterosexuality was the only option for sexual behavior no longer dominates Latina/o perspectives. *Heteronormativity*, the belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable way of expressing and enjoying sexuality in the human experience, is further challenged by science, psychology, and religious and cultural mores. The belief that heterosexuality is “normal” and all other forms of sexuality outside of heterosexuality are abnormal, deviant, and disordered has given way to an understanding of the complexity of human sexual expression, including homosexuality, bisexuality, transexuality, and asexuality. Examined by many academics and activist political organizations, the focus on seeing sexuality as complex has expanded because there are more persuasive arguments, including scientific information, that support variety in human expression and behaviors and, to a great extent, among mammals and other animals. These reinforce the idea that sex and sexuality are not simple concepts to be understood simply as uniformly or divinely ordained.

There are some exceptions to traditional or biologically restrictive heterosexual or homosexual notions of gender and sexuality, such as hermaphrodites and intersexed persons (people who have both characteristics and move between genders; “women with beards,” to give one example). Other genders are classified as a third sex, meaning

neither male nor female but a blend of both. Because of religious and cultural doctrine, these gender categories were once erased from history. In the Americas, for example, the *Muxe* (pronounced “Mushay”) Zapotec Indians of Mexico are an example of a third sex gender category because the term describes a biologically born male who self-identifies and lives his life as a woman. *Muxe* are generally accepted by the Zapotec Indian culture and are not viewed negatively as they might be in more modern Western industrialized cultures. It must be emphasized that *Muxe* men are not necessarily “homosexual” and do not fit neatly in the identity categories one may find in the US LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex) communities. Similarly, the *berdache* tradition (the word is thought to be French or Arabic in origin) was reported by anthropologists before the twentieth century among Native American societies, but recently scholars have called for the term to mean “two spirited,” eliding the neat division of masculine and feminine behaviors. Native American or tribal peoples ascribed the gender category to men or warriors who also performed female duties. This gender category does not reveal a given sexual desire or sexual practice but refers instead to a person’s desire to express masculinity and femininity in specific ways; not all alterations of prescribed norms are sexual, but not all sexuality fits into tidy categories either.

In the United States, for example, in transsexual and transgender experiences, a gendered identity, and not necessarily a sexual one, is central to the person’s social and cultural identity. “Transsexuality” refers to an identification with a gender opposite from the one assigned at birth and assumes the process of aligning one’s gender expression or presentation of self with an internal gender identity. In the case of biological women, “FTM” indicates female-to-male reassignment of gender, and “MTF” is used for biologically born males who self-identify as female, or male-to-female. Transsexuals may go through the process of gender reassignment, which varies depending on the economic circumstances and desire to fulfill their gender goals; this may include some medical reassignment therapy such as hormone replacement therapy or sex reassignment surgery. “Transgender” serves more like an umbrella term for numerous gender identity terms that do not fit well under heterosexuality or even homosexuality. Trans-people do not argue for or believe in a third sex category, like the *Muxe*, but rather suggest that a person’s choice of gender may be different from his or her assigned biological identity at birth and may include nonconforming ways of thinking of gender, including the terms “androgynous” and “gender queer.”

Sexuality thus can be defined as the expression of one’s sexual desire and may or may not include a certain object choice or partner. Sexuality today, especially those with different gender variations, has exceeded the conventional terms of marriage and heterosexuality. While the emphasis has been on gender as a category of self-expression, sexual identity involves many variations inside the LGBTQI community as well as beyond it. Sexual identity once signified a reference to heterosexual or homosexual, that is, same-sex desire in object choice. Today, however, sexual identities, sexual expression, and sexual choices have changed dramatically.

The LGBTQI community encompasses a broad spectrum or rainbow of different groups that animates multiple sexual identities. After the 1950s, when, for example, “lesbian” referred to women’s attraction for other women and “gay” referred to men who expressed desire and partnership with each other, the sexual revolution changed the way we describe contemporary sexual identity. The Latina/o LGBTQI communities emerged to claim spaces in the larger queer movements since the 1980s from experiences in the sexual and feminist political debates, including those addressing civil rights and the rights of minorities, including sexual minorities. In sum, they drew from contemporary legacies, especially civil rights, federal and state debates, and student movements that changed how minorities viewed their position in society.

## Latina/o Sexual Politics: History and Activism

Latina/os have been situated at the margins in queer political movements, often overlooked in major historical moments, their political, cultural, social, and sexual activism intertwined with radical economic and demographic changes to underscore gay rights issues. The general influence of queer Latina/os became more prominent during the 1980s and 1990s, and visibility and representation posed less of a challenge. During these decades, the marginalized role queer Latino/as played within some of the larger LGBTQI political movements still permeated every issue and organization.

Several pivotal and historical factors contributed to the emergence and visibility of Latina/o queers. In these early decades, the plight of AIDS and Latina feminism transformed the issue of visibility as Latino/as sought to transform

their cultural “outsider” status, being ethnic and political minorities, often sidelined as contributing leaders and players in the larger spheres of LGBTQI politics. Since the 1950s and even in today’s politics of self-representation, the use of terms such as “Latino,” “Latina,” and “queer” transformed their pejorative meanings into a positive reflection of Latinidad, a label of consciousness about Latin American roots and, in the case of embracing a queer Latinidad, a politicized and political identity.

The historical record provides an exceptional vantage point for looking at the dynamics of a multiplicity of experiences among Latina/o people. From the native traditions, *berdaches*, or two-spirited people, men were feminized into women’s roles and were reported obsessively by the Spanish chroniclers. Women in war were known to have passed their lives as men or soldiers, in the conquest era and late into the twentieth century during the Mexican Revolution. As varied and diverse as the histories of Latino peoples are, so too are their expressions of gender and sexuality in different cultural contexts. Most obvious is the understanding that gender and sexuality share some similarities with the larger human experience and its biological traces; in other words, all people have and express gender and sexuality but, at the same time, not all genders are the same and not all expressions of sexuality and sexual identity share the same qualities of desire.

See also [Gender Politics](#); [Lesbians](#); [LGBT Latino/a Political, Community, and Social Organizing](#); [Masculinities](#); and [Queer Political Movements](#).

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