Societal Constructions of Masculinity in Chicanx and Mexican Literature

From Machismo to Feminist Masculinity

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Series in Literary Studies

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020950207

ISBN: 978-1-64889-046-8

Cover design by Vernon press using elements designed by macrovector / Freepik.

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Preface

Vinodh Venkatesh

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Societal Constructions of Masculinity in Chicanx and Mexican Literature: From Machismo to Feminist Masculinity collects a set of essays that address the production, representation, and mobilization of masculinities amongst Chicanx and Mexican bodies. Parting from the notion that masculinity is socio-culturally dependent and constructed, Kathryn Quinn-Sánchez and Bryan Pearce-Gonzales posit that there is a genetic link between Chicanx and Mexican masculinities. They argue that both bear vestiges from the colonial history of the region and that, even with the establishment of the United States centuries later, the migrations and diasporas of latinidad have ensured that these gender systems and tropes have endured.

This underlying analytic lens is important and central to *Societal Constructions*, thus separating it from previous monographs and anthologies that have tended to sit on only one side of the Southern Border; that is, the book you have in your hands undertakes the original approach of placing Chicanx and Mexican literature in conversation, probing and teasing out their approaches to the representation of masculinities instead of separating both bodies of literature into neat, yet artificial siloes. Across seven content chapters and expertly melding together critical theory, literary analysis, and sociological critique, *Societal Constructions* offers incisive and suggestive analyses of some of the most important literary voices in Mexico and the United States.

In the first chapter, Leigh Johnson examines the representation of domestic violence and how it crafts and perpetuates a specific dynamic of gendered power in works by Américo Paredes, José Antonio Villareal, and Mario Suárez. Johnson skillfully reads these works against the backdrop of the second half of the twentieth century, honing in on the impact of war on the practice of masculinity in public and private spheres. Next, Fernando Hernández Jáuregui studies the poetry of Ricardo Castillo, paying particular attention to voice, style, and aesthetics to highlight how the poet may present a "poetic masculinity" that runs counter to hegemonic and complicit variants. In the subsequent chapter, Alejandro Puga and Patricia Tovar parse through the novels of Juan Villoro, paying particular attention to how Mexican masculinity was reified and

deployed from the nation-building efforts of the post-Revolution period to the contemporary neoliberal state. In the fourth chapter, Quinn-Sánchez traces the intergenerational practices of masculinity and gender systems in the works of Cherrie Moraga, Sandra Cisneros and Margarita Tavera Rivera. The author analyzes performances of masculinity and femininity in children and parents, highlighting how the hegemonic variant of the former is often transmitted through male and female bodies in the nuclear family. In the next essay, Pearce-Gonzales follows his co-editor's lead by reading the transmission of masculine hegemony in the works of Dagoberto Gilb and Domingo Martinez. Pearce-Gonzales focuses specifically on the power of patriarchs within the family unit to set the tone of gender expectations and permissibility. Next, Jess Brocklesby tackles the representation of masculinity in the most consumer-friendly medium analyzed in the anthology—the telenovela. Brocklesby specifically addresses gay bodies in these narrative worlds as a point of inflection in decentering the previously unquestioned role of the macho. In the final content chapter, Joshua D. Martin studies borderland masculinities in the work of Benjamín Alire Sáenz. Looking at how masculine bodies negotiate themselves, their homoaffective and sexual relationship, and their spaces in the interstitial terrain of the border.

In sum, *Societal Constructions of Masculinity in Chicanx and Mexican Literature: From Machismo to Feminist Masculinity* is a timely, rigorous, and original piece of scholarship that is of interest to both scholars of Chicanx and Mexican literary and cultural studies. Importantly, the essays that follow enrich the broader field of gender studies by addressing masculinity through multiple national, racial and sexual matrices, thus providing the reader with a more complete understanding of the stakes of gender today.

Introduction

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Our journey begins in Mexico, keeping in mind the historical implications of a society that has assimilated the cultural tenets that the Spaniards imposed upon most of Latin America for three hundred years of colonialism. One aspect of this cultural imposition specifically underscores the role of masculinity within society and how each institution—the Roman Catholic Church and the State—have reinforced the dominance of what present-day society has deemed appropriate masculine behavior. Indeed, the twentieth-century Mexican poet Octavio Paz deemed Mexico a nation that struggles constantly to grapple with what he determined to be their bastard heritage, due to their indigenous mother being raped by a Spaniard. Culturally, economically, and psychologically, Mexican literature has spoken at times in agreement with Paz and other times against his conclusions for almost a century. This volume studies a continuum of texts to analyze how twentieth and twenty-first-century authors have represented the role of masculinity from the post-revolutionary era of Mexico 1959 to 2020 Chicanx authors living and writing in the United States.

The diaspora of a long-lived patriarchy followed the Spaniards to New Spain and what was to become the Americas. With the onslaught of violence during the ten-year revolution that began in 1910, the Mexican diaspora to the United States furthered the reach of masculine hegemony that arrived with Spain and traveled north with Mexicans who live in the USA and self-define as Hispanic, Chicano, Chicanx and/or Mexican-American. Of course, the national relationship deepened due to the economic opportunities that arose during World War II, as the governments of both nations officially allowed each other's citizens to cross the border in order to work. Such a development occurred during World War II; the bracero program allowed Mexican workers to fill the US' needs while the male citizens of the US were fighting the Nazis

in Europe in the 1940s. Officially as well as unofficially, this welcoming of Mexican workers into the US aided individuals, those who could earn money in the US and take it back to their families in Mexico, as well as the US companies who could find workers when they desperately needed them. However, the power dynamic was unbalanced as the US found ways to deport the Mexican workers when it no longer deemed their contribution necessary. Yet, it is clear that the US economy still relies on the undocumented workers, as capitalism privileges profits over people. That is to say, pay as little as possible to the workers to allow the company to earn the largest capital gains.

Capitalism and gender in the US have always been intertwined. James W. Messerschmidt grounds the term dominant masculinity or hegemonic masculinity through a lens that corroborates heterosexuality, breadwinning and aggressiveness (75). Furthermore, the emphasis on unequal relationships is key to understanding the social dimension of hegemonic masculinity; these relationships take place between men and women, as well as between men and men. Indeed, masculinity is taught, modeled, and reinforced as we see particularly in the pieces written by the editors of this collection that speak to the role of the Chicanx family in furthering the ideal of masculinity. It has taken more than two decades for masculinity studies to emerge; in 1997 Alfredo Mirandé suggested further research was necessary by feminists to include the concept in their research: "the topic of Chicano/Latino masculinity remains neglected and virtually unexplored both within the so-called new men's studies and feminist scholarship" (118). Since then, scholars from both Mexico and the United States have answered Mirandé's call for deeper dives into masculinity and its relationship with feminism. The editors of this volume choose this time to enter the dialogue to continue the unmasking of masculinity, especially for those who have inherited machista ideals from centuries ago. Our volume continues the work of Jennifer Domino Rudolph and her *Embodying Latino Masculinities: Producing Masculatinidad* (2012) as well as Vinodh Venkatesh's *The Body as Capital: Masculinities in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (2015). While Rudolph emphasizes Latinx works, and Venkatesh focuses on Latin America, the current text dialogues with Mexican and US Latinx cultural production.

Specifically, this edited collection, titled *Societal Constructions of Masculinity in Chicanx and Mexican Literature*: *From Machismo to Feminist Masculinity* is to demonstrate the breadth and range of how masculinity is constructed and deconstructed as a challenge or as a reinforcement of patriarchy. Mexicans and Chicanos struggle against the cultural norms to which society dictates they must conform. While the cultural tenet of what is deemed appropriate masculine behavior has changed during the past century, while there is hope that masculinity and feminism can coexist

without friction, the path that we have traversed has not been easy. Indeed, the portrayal of new behaviors as masculine is exposed throughout the chapters that analyze Mexican canonical authors to Chicanx writers as well as a chapter on telenovelas.

For the first chapter, Leigh Johnson shines a light onto the undercurrent of domestic violence that takes place in the works by Américo Paredes *(George Washington Gómez* 1990), José Antonio Villarreal (*Pocho* 1959), and Mario Suárez (Short Story "Las comadres" 1969). Incorporated into Johnson's analysis is the role of World War II by implicating the changing gender roles to the war's influence. Not only does the definition of masculinity come into play, but also 'war-masculinity' and how this type of masculinity impacts the heterosexual male's relationship to his wife. Violence, citizenship, and masculinity become intertwined as patriarchy fights (literally and figuratively) to regain the ground it lost to women's agency during WWII.

Next in our continuum, we move to Fernando G. Hernández' undertaking the charge to demonstrate how Ricardo Castillo's *El pobrecito señor* X (1976) subverts the status quo through imagining a new aesthetic based on poetic masculinity. For Castillo, poetry exists as a unique space with its own ethics based on an intersubjective exchange between poet and reader. Castillo's poetics is presented by Hernández as a counterhegemonic discourse and a practice in which social disenchantment becomes enchantment. Within the aesthetic, within the possibilities it provides for a different way of being in the world, the poetic voice finds an anti-hegemonic subjectivity that he designates as poetic masculinity which highlights new forms of social relations and a validation of new definitions of masculinities, especially those historically perceived as macho or hyper-masculine.

Alejandro Puga and Patricia Tovar delve into nationhood in the third chapter via Juan Villoros's representation of Mexican masculinity as a challenge to the morality of how the nation has idealized hegemonic masculinity during and after the 1910 Revolution. By focusing on such a pivotal and defining event, Puga and Tovar show that by pairing the successes and failures of the nation with masculinity, one can see the parallels between the very definition of what it signifies to be a Mexican male adapting and morphing along with the State's identity, from Dictator Díaz' hyper-masculinity to the Neoliberal State's new and therefore awkward masculinity. Through the application of the work of A. Rolando Andrade to Villoro's novels *El disparo de argón* (1991) and *Materia dispuesta* (1997) this "awkward machismo" may eventually become the new norm for a new century.

We see Kathryn Quinn-Sánchez highlight the family and how gender is modeled by the parent(s) and hence, learned by the children in chapter four. When one and not both parents support a particular goal that the child has in

mind for his/her future the child understands that s/he most likely will have to disappoint one of the parents. Common to the works Quinn-Sánchez studies is the fact that while some of the young protagonists are successful in gaining access to his/her dream, the path is fraught with dangers that spill over from the individual to the entire family, and in one case to the definition of the nation. Specifically, Cherríe Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman* (2001), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and Margarita Tavera Rivera's play *La condición* (1991) focus on how fatherhood has been represented in Chicanx Literature. Attention is drawn to the endurance of hegemonic masculinity which makes the societal change towards feminist masculinity an ongoing enterprise.

For the fifth chapter, Bryan Pearce-Gonzales brings the inheritance of patriarchy to the fore in his analysis of two Chicanx novels that focus on masculine relationships and the difficult path away from hyper-masculine behavior when one's own father refuses to refrain from being ultra-macho even in the event of causing pain to his own family members. Dagoberto Gilb's *The Flowers* (2008) and Domingo Martinez' autobiography *The Boy Kings of Texas* (2012) are presented through Alfredo Mirandé's and R.W. Connell's theoretical perspectives on masculinity within the Chicano family.

In Chapter Six, Jess Brocklesby moves into the realm of the telenovela, as a medium in which directors have begun to slowly challenge hegemonic masculinity in recent decades. As the most-watched television format in Mexico, telenovelas are the disseminators of implicit and explicit messages about diverse identities as represented in these productions. The audience for a telenovela crosses categories of age, sex, race and socio-economic status. By including new forms of masculinity in telenovelas, homosexuality serves as the catalyst for a re-examining and reconfiguring of gender narratives, allowing representations of different types of masculinity to humanize characters, ultimately leading to change and acceptance within Mexican society while providing an unequivocal look into the future of masculinity as it begins to overthrow its historical gender binaries. This chapter posits that post-patriarchy is possible within Mexico, and that Mexico is showing signs of adopting a healthier masculinity as is evidenced through the representation of certain characters within recent telenovelas.

Ultimately in chapter seven, Joshua D. Martin's *On the Border, In the Bar: Approaching Feminist Masculinities through Border Thinking in It All Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, brings us full circle. The protagonists are emphasized through an intersectional lens that highlights the changes in how masculinity is currently being represented in the borderlands. The author challenges hegemonic masculinity by focusing on homosocial and homosexual desire while negotiating racialized antagonisms

and generational points of view all with the backdrop of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez.

In conclusion, it is evident that, as Lourdes Torres states:

> Still today, popular culture reinforces static, homogenizing, and pathologizing notions of Latino men. Quite often both in popular culture and the social sciences, the diversity within the Latino population or transitions in Latino cultures and societies are not acknowledged. Instead, images continue to proliferate of macho men and passive women embedded in strict patriarchal families, and of conservative religious people with undemocratic tendencies and stagnant cultures (462).

And yet there are successful attempts at moving towards a feminist masculinity. The path is clear, Messerschmidt draws our attention to the need for counterhegemonic practices that will destabilize gender hegemony by removing the binary of superior versus inferior and its seemingly inherent nature. These unequal gender relations must be drawn into the light over and over until their ability to hide in plain sight is no longer the norm, but an egregious slight against what must become the norm: equality. The inclusion of men into the feminization of our society continues to evolve thankfully, and consequently we are entering an era of wide discussion on what it means to be a Chicanx or Latinx man in the 21st century. This collection of essays challenges patriarchy's authority by demonstrating the ways in which a hegemonic masculinity has been constructed and deconstructed.

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Chapter 1

Women's Work: A Revision of Gender in Américo Paredes, José Antonio Villarreal, and Mario Suárez's Fiction

Leigh Johnson

Marymount University

Américo Paredes, José Antonio Villarreal, and Mario Suárez are responsible for many of the most influential Mexican American literature written before the Chicano movement, and as such, their work is widely studied and considered a valuable depiction of Chicano masculinity and identity. However, their work contains scenes of domestic violence in which the narrator seems to warn women not to tell cultural outsiders about violence while also implicating women by suggesting that they desire the violent expressions of "love." In this sense, these scenes of domestic violence present in canonical narratives blame women as cultural betrayers who explicitly enjoy erotic violence. Moreover, within these scenes we see an undeniable Chicana presence that belies the narrative of male dominance; specifically, we view how the female protagonist picks herself up and continues her life, creating her own agency in the process. Furthermore, the narrators inadvertently undermine male privilege while attempting to justify male dominance over women in their communities, revealing deep anxiety and ambivalence over the changing social and gender roles of men and women within the Mexican American community.

Two climatic scenes of domestic violence come from revered novels, *George Washington Gómez* (1990) by Américo Paredes and *Pocho* (1959) by José Antonio Villarreal. These two novels contain scenes of domestic violence that police the boundaries of women's sexuality but ultimately create space for women to emerge as empowered Chicanas, controlling their own sexuality and futures. Mario Suárez's "Las comadres" first published in 1969, and set just post-WWII, does not idealize the *barrio* but implicates the war in changing roles for men and women. Moreover, the male protagonists of *George Washington Gómez* and *Pocho* are speechless in the face of domestic

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