

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN AMERICAN GENDER RELATIONS

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**Overview** Often considered to possess an often repressive and unalloyed “macho” culture, Latin America has in fact been a place of gender ambiguity and feminist thought. Ideas about gender identity and roles often manifested themselves in the shape and behavior of the gods. Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the expanding role of women resulted in a revisiting of traditional gender roles.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

**Maya:** For the Maya, the earth was created by the wind and sky god, Huracan, who was male. And yet, the male force was transformed into the feminine as the Ceibe Tree of Life knit together the sky and the earth, and positions branches where life could emerge. The tree’s essential energy was female, and the flowering of plant and animal life was considered to be a feminine force. Gender could be complicated, as were all representations of identity. The fact that the Maya deities were shape-shifters and had more than one manifestation (male, female, animal), suggested that all beings possessed attributes of both male and female. An example of this could be found in Chorti, the Maya death god, which was described as both male and female. In addition, the Maya believed in the concept of animal spirits and shamanistic energy transfer. The animals (jaguar, serpent, etc.) were likewise gendered.

### POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Aztecs:** The Nahuas (Aztecs) did not have a category for individuals possessing both genders, but they did acknowledge a continuum of behaviors and attributes, such as the “effeminate men” and “masculine women.” There are no deities that shift from one gender to another, which may explain the distrust and suspicion of gender ambiguity, expressed in cultural history and also in the *Codex Magliabechiano*.

**Inca:** For the Incas, everything in the world of perceivable phenomena was gendered. The Inca gods also had clear genders. For example, the creator god Viracocha was male, as was the destroyer god, Illapa. In general, the sun was considered male, while the moon was female (Mama Kilya). In certain ways, time itself was considered female, because Mama Kilya was also the ruler of the calendar. But, given that the Inca believed that they were originated from the stars, and that each city had a star of origin, it’s not too surprising that the movement of the stars would be governed by a female mother goddess.

### EARLY MODERN (COLONIAL) PERIOD

**Mexico:** The appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1531 to a poor indigenous man, Juan Diego, demonstrates the willingness of the populace to embrace a female deity, as well as the persistence of female deities in the culture. Although the Spanish culture was deeply patriarchal, it encountered one that possessed multiple deities, many of which were female. The Catholic Church was uniquely equipped to accommodate the matriarchal elements of the indigenous culture since it had its own female deities (the Virgin Mary and various female saints).

**Guatemala:** The Quiche Maya believe that the Moon goddess produced the Maya people, and thus, by extension, the roles of women were important, particularly in the home and also in the care of domesticated deer (used for food). However, not everything had a gender, although everything (animate or inanimate) had a spirit. The spirits were invoked by means of incantations and song, which channeled the energy to help with daily life in what we could consider to be a spell, or magic. Thus, great areas of Quiche Maya life were considered to be gender-neutral, with an emphasis on transformative potential.

**Latin America:** The colonial legal and social structure are European and they create the framework that is administered by colonial governments and the Catholic church. Women could not own property, vote, or enter into positions of authority in the government or church. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Mexican nun, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, wrote important essays arguing for the rights of women.

### 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Women at home; men at war:** The traditional roles of women and men were reinforced during the wars of independence throughout Latin America. Women stayed at home to take care of children and other family members. Girls were trained to take care of the home, and at least one of the girls was expected to not marry, but to stay behind in order to take care of aging parents.

**Women's entrepreneurship:** The "Chola" market women in Bolivia and Peru who are easily recognizable with their bowler hats, bright shawls, and long skirts. In the altiplano of Bolivia and Peru, men tended to work in the mines, while women worked at home and in raising children. However, roles expanded and women organized small businesses; often fruit stands, vegetable stands, handcrafted items, woven goods, and more at the local "mercado" (market). The roles were well described in costumbrista fiction. One such work, "La Nina de Sus Ojos" (The Apple of Her Eye), by Bolivian author Antonio Diaz Villamil, revolved around the dreams of social mobility of one such "chola" marketwoman and her desire that her daughter be considered of high social class.

**Women in the arts and education:** Women reformers such as the educator and poet Gabriela Mistral (Chile) worked tirelessly to reform the educational system to expand the rural school system and to provide more opportunities for girls to obtain an education and for women to become teachers and professors.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Frida Kahlo:** Artist, writer, and cultural icon, Frida Kahlo embraced the indigenous cultures and made their artisan items a subject of formal art. She painted many self-portraits in which she explored the complex and often conflicting identities found within the Mexican culture. She painted herself as a blend of cultures and genders, many times with a Mexican rebozo (shawl), traditional hairstyle, flowers, earrings, and a small moustache and thick eyebrows. Living a life marked by harrowing pain due to childhood polio and then a vertebrae-shattering bus accident, Kahlo painted in a remarkable "outsider" style that brought together all the paradoxes of her life: joy, pain, masculinity, femininity, self-taught art, repression and extreme self-expression, Mexican traditional dress, and western men's suits.

**Manuel Puig:** Kiss of the Spider Woman: Argentine fiction of the mid-twentieth century began to incorporate coded homosexuality, and to bring a taboo subject into the open. Perhaps the most well-known example is Manuel Puig's *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* that dealt with not only repressive dictatorships, but also the fact that homosexuality was deeply hidden and considered shameful in a typically macho Latino culture.

**"Travesti" Culture:** The taboo against homosexuality resulted in a great deal of repression and an underground culture of cross-dressing and gender ambiguity. Men who assumed ultra-feminine roles were generally shunned by society, resulting in deep poverty and a sub-culture that involved prostitution and sexual violence. Works of art and cinema began to include the "travesti" culture in the 1990s. They include the Mexican film, *Danzon* (1991) as well as Argentine writer Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976) and Brazilian writer Adolfo Caminha's *Bom-Crioulo*.

## Discussion/Questions

1. In the ancient civilizations of the Andes, everything had a gender, either male or female. Each gender was ascribed attributes as well, which carried into the beliefs about the essence of the things. Ironically, some of the preHispanic Tiwanku and Inca gods were sometimes male and sometimes female. The overall focus was that of divine procreation and continuity. What are the implications of such a worldview? How might they translate into beliefs and attitudes about human behavior?
2. Women's roles were shaped by class as well as gender. The female descendants of Europeans had a dramatically different set of experiences than that of indigenous or mestizo, largely because of rank, wealth, and access to education. If you were a woman during Colonial times in Latin America, how would being female give you unexpected privileges if you were a Mexican-born daughter of parents born in Europe? How might you have unexpected privileges as a mestiza?

3. Women started assuming the role of educator for individuals outside the immediate family in the nineteenth century. Women such as Gabriela Mistral fought hard for the right of girls to have an education and to become teachers, school administrators, and more. What are some of the advantages of having educated girls and women?

4. In Latin American literature, film, and art helped express the previously taboo areas of gender identity. For example, Frida Kahlo appears in photographs dressed in men's clothing, and in her self-portraits, she gives her attributes of both the male and the female. Later in the century, author Manuel Puig incorporated gender-ambiguous men, and directors explored the underground culture of transvestites. What has the overall impact been? Is the depiction of gender ambiguity truly a recognition of essential truths about human nature, or does it more align with a tendency to produce spectacles in order to commodify "difference" with the result that human beings are further objectified? Take a position and provide examples to support your points.

#### Reading

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