

La virginidad de Maria:
Mexican Immigrant Women and the Social Construction of Virginity

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Abstract

This paper is a portion of my doctoral dissertation work in progress. Based on a qualitative sociological study with 40 Mexican immigrant women living in the city of Los Angeles, in my dissertation I examine the impact of immigration and life in the United States on the sexuality and/or sex lives of this group of women.¹ In my presentation, I will discuss one of the sections of my dissertation chapter on virginity. The chapter examines the social meaning of virginity in the sex lives of this group of Mexican women. This section describes how virginity and loss of virginity through their socially constructed visible symbolism (i.e., pregnancy out of wedlock, the white dress, the orange blossom, the white coffin, etc.) transform what is intimate and private into a public, family, and social affair.

Preserving virginity

Beyond the cult of virginity

The literature on Mexican women and sexuality consistently discusses how the two sources of Mexican religiosity (Spanish Catholicism and multiple pre-Columbian indigenous religious practices) have blended over the course of almost 500 years (i.e., Lavrin, 1989; Amuchastegui, 1994; and, Rubio, 1997). This unique *mestizo* mixture of religious beliefs has molded Mexican society's values and morality with regard to women's sexuality.² Virginity in particular, has been at the center of examinations conducted by scholars from different disciplines analyzing this sophisticated interaction between Mexican women's sexuality and Catholic religion. Consistently, these scholars discuss how a "cult of virginity" has been historically worshiped in Mexican society. This cult of virginity is associated with Catholic religion in two ways: 1) by the strong role hold by the Catholic church and its life-pressure on women toward virginity at marriage (Guerrero-Pavich, 1986); and, 2) by a deeply rooted ethic of virginity promoted by the Catholic church and utilized by a patriarchal society to measure a woman's honorability by lowering the moral status of women who cannot or will not maintain virginity (Espin, 1986; Twinam, 1989; Tostado Gutierrez, 1991).³

Interestingly, the role played by important pre-Hispanic indigenous groups living in Mexican territory has been disregarded as an influential factor on Mexican women's cult of virginity. It is well-documented that virginity was valued, ritualized, and promoted by some indigenous groups (Domecq, 1992).⁴ The painful consolidation of a "cult of virginity" through the Catholic Church in Mexican colonial society is perhaps the reason for overlooking such an important evidence. Latin American scholars have examined the Catholic Church's intense desire to annihilate any previous sexual practices and regulations existent in Native Mexican indigenous groups through the aggressive imposition of its sexual morality characterized by guilt and punishment (Marcos, 1989; Tostado Gutierrez, 1991).⁵

Finally, this ethic of virginity has been translated into a bipolar paradigm to explain Mexican women's sexuality, that is: passive/active [*pasiva/activa*], good/bad [*buena/mala*], or virgin/whore [*la virgen/la puta*] (i.e., Paz, 1987; Almaguer, 1993). Based on this perspective, the woman with an intact hymen represents "sexual purity, honor and decency," and the one with a ruptured one represents "dishonor, profanation, and lack of virtue."⁶ Octavio Paz's controversial *El laberinto de la soledad* (first published in 1950) is perhaps the most widely known and examined perspective on Mexican women's sexuality to explain this bipolar paradigm. In his masculinist approach, Paz associates women's body and her sexuality with an essentialist perspective that stems from Mexican culture and its popular interpretations of masculinity and manhood. For Mexicans, Paz affirms, *abrirse* or "opening up" implies frailty and treachery: "*El ideal de la hombría consiste en no 'rajarse' nunca. Los que se 'abren' son cobardes* [The ideal of manhood consist in never having to 'crack/split.' Those who 'open up' are coward]" (*El laberinto de la soledad*, 1987 edition, pp. 27). Based on this paradigm, Paz associates women's inferiority with the penetrable nature of her sexualized body. Opening up to be penetrated means being weak, treacherous, and non trustworthy. Accordingly, for a Mexican woman, losing virginity would imply *rajarse* [being cracked or split], and therefore being inferior and possessing an everlasting wound. As he states:

"Las mujeres son seres inferiores porque, al entregarse, se abren. Su inferioridad es constitucional y radica en su sexo, en su 'rajada', herida que jamas cicatriza." (pp. 27)

[“Women are inferior beings because, when they give themselves, they open up. Their inferiority is constitutional and is rooted in their sex, in their ‘crack/split/rupture’, a wound that never heals.”]

Paz continues with his *abrir/activo-cerrar/pasivo* [open/active-close/passive] paradigm in connection with a psychoanalytical perspective to explain what could be the first and most painful and symbolic *rajada* or virginal rupture in Mexican history. The indigenous woman Malinalli Tenepal, best known as *La Malinche*, gave herself by "opening up" to *el conquistador* Hernan Cortes which resulted in the metaphorical birth of *el mestizaje* in Mexico in the early 1500s.⁷ According to Paz's analysis, La Malinche not only became the ultimate symbol of *la chingada* [fucked, raped, ruptured], she opened up to the invader in more than one way. From a masculinist perspective, La Malinche was also responsible for the overthrow of Mexico: she served as an interpreter who spoke Mayan, Nahuatl and later on Spanish— another way of opening up and betraying her people.

For Paz, la Malinche embodies *la chingada* or the devalued feminine condition present in the sex lives of Mexican women who open up, women who rupture themselves through the sex act and whose feeling of inferiority, betrayal, and dishonor are unavoidable by essence. Accordingly, the antithesis of la Malinche is *la Virgen de Guadalupe*: the sacred, pure, and immaculate *madre de los mexicanos* whose presence is central in the life of the Mexican Catholic Church after her controversially miraculous

appearances in the early 1530s in Mexico City. *La Virgen* never experienced sexual pleasure, she gave birth to her son while preserving her intact sexual integrity. Accordingly, she symbolically represents the woman who through motherhood may gain honorability and social respect.⁸ Octavio Paz's obsession with the multiple conjugations of the verb *chingar* [to fuck] and his masculinist analysis of La Malinche within the context of the conquest of Mexico, have been passionately examined and convincingly criticized by leading Chicana feminist scholars.⁹

In sum, defining virginity while exploring theoretical perspectives on Mexican women's sexuality exposes many complex dynamics. Octavio Paz's concept of "*rajada*," for example, implies that virginity is represented by an intact hymen that is ruptured by penetration the first time a woman has intercourse. From this essentialist perspective, bleeding after the rupture of the hymen would be the most reliable way for a man "to prove" a woman's virginity. Beyond theoretical paradigms on the social construction of sexuality, this argument may result in a very reductionist and dangerous view of virginity due to the countless non-sexual circumstances in which a hymen could be ruptured and/or the sophisticated anatomical differences among women. However, there is strong evidence of the overwhelming social value "an intact hymen" has as a valid proof of virginity in most Mexican geographical regions. For instance, in Northern Mexico, a physician advertises her professional services *para reparar la virginidad* [to "repair" the virginity]. *Himenoplastia*— plastic surgery to restore a ruptured hymen— has been conducted by Dr. Guadalupe I. Solis to Latina women (90% of them rape survivors) for 30 years. Women from Mexico, South Texas, Spain, Central and South America have requested *himenoplastia* services from Dr. Solis (Solis, 1998). According to Dr. Solis, after being "repaired" with *himenoplastia*, women are guaranteed to bleed after the hymen is ruptured.

Beyond a cult of virginity, the virgin/whore dichotomy, masculinist ideologies, and *himenoplastia*, what sexual stories are told by this group of Mexican immigrant women with regard to virginity? Based upon the history of how the Catholic Church has influenced Mexican women's values and morality, one might expect a high "virginity until marriage" incidence: 39 out of the 40 women in this study were educated in the Catholic faith.¹⁰ However, 70% of these women were not virgins when they got married. Only 12 out of the 40 women in the study kept their virginity intact until marriage.¹¹

In general, the Catholic religion does not seem to be a significant nor a direct influence on a need for this group of women to preserve their virginity until marriage.¹² Instead, family politics in regard to sexuality play a more determinant role in worshipping a daughter's virginity. In this chapter I examine how, beyond the cult of virginity, two processes lead to pressure to preserve virginity: 1) a sophisticated ethic of *respeto a la familia* [family respect] which links family honorability with a daughter's virginity; and, 2) women's deeply rooted ideology that men want to marry a virgin and their fear of its negative consequences on marriage if there is non-compliance.¹³ Within the first dynamic, the social symbolism linked to virginity and loss of virginity is a persistent theme always flowing in many sophisticated ways through the sex lives of the immigrant women in this study.

The cult of virginity and social symbolism: vestida de blanco

*Yo voy a casarme
vestida de blanco
va a dolerte tanto
te arrepentiras*

I will get married
wearing white
it will hurt you so much
you will regret it

Vestida de blanco, a popular Spanish song

Marriage is the moral passport Mexican society endorses to women in order for them to become sexually active; *el vestido blanco* is the official stamp on that passport. Accordingly, *el vestido blanco* is the most important symbol representing what a patriarchal society expects from a woman on her wedding day. *El vestido blanco* (a highly valued piece of cloth usually worn by a woman only once) carries in itself a social burden and a moral responsibility: a solid white expectation of lack of sexual experience in a woman and therefore virginity. Wearing *el vestido blanco* was unthinkable for some of the women in the study who associated premarital sexual relations with fear of parents and family disloyalty; their total awareness of the morally charged social expectation made it impossible. Cecilia Duarte articulated the reason why she did not “deserve” to wear a white dress on her wedding day and ultimately was not entitled to be married by the Church:

I felt like I was fooling myself because for me... ir al altar de blanco [to walk down the aisle wearing a white dress] the woman should be a virgin, clean, pure, white...just like it is represented by the dress. But since I was not... well..., I decided that I should not do it. That is the reason why I did not marry by the Church.

Similarly, Yadira Velez, after various conversations with a priest, allowed herself to be married by the Church after cohabitating with her husband for more than 14 years. Yadira explained the reasons for wearing a beige dress instead of a white one:

When you shine on a white dress, los azahares [orange blossom] represent the purity of the bride but when there is no virginity you cannot get married wearing white... I decided to have los azahares, but I decided to wear a beige dress because I already had my children and everything.

Even though Yadira had to make some intrapersonal accommodations to carry *los azahares* or her orange blossom bouquet, she had it clear that wearing a white dress was unachievable: she had already conceived children after transgressing many morals and therefore did not possess the virginal purity that could entitle her to wear a white dress.

For other women, family politics became part of the decision to have a religious ceremony and to wear a white dress. For Emilia Falcon, wearing a white dress was a decision made to satisfy a mother's need to follow a social tradition: when a daughter gets married and therefore walks out of the family home she must be wearing *el vestido blanco*. Emilia recounted her conversation with her mother:

I told her (mother) that we were planning on getting married but that I was going to get married only by el civil [legal marriage], but you know..., for the very same reason that she has those ideas of her religion, you know, that you have to walk out your home wearing blanco and all that. But anyway..., she was the only reason why I married by the Church... only because of her... just to satisfy her need.

As mentioned earlier, Emilia was not a virgin at marriage and has kept a secret to this day in order to avoid an aggressive reaction from her mother. Emilia decided to wear her white dress to give her mother a social honor of special moral significance while protecting herself from potential negative consequences if she were completely honest. She was keenly aware of the symbolism hidden behind the white dress she would wear: *el vestido blanco* is a "well-deserved" moral honor not only for the bride but for her mother. *El vestido blanco* also symbolized her mother's ability to appear as the morally and socially competent mother who was successful at overseeing and securing her daughter's appropriate moral behavior.

Being dressed up in white does not only honor virginity when a virgin woman leaves her family home to get married, it goes far beyond: virginity is also honored and worshiped when an adult virgin woman is no longer alive. Tomasita Uribe, a woman from a small town in Jalisco, described how two of her adult relatives (cousin and aunt) were buried in *ataudes blancos* (white coffins) after passing away. Paloma, Tomasita's cousin, had died from a serious hemorrhage consequence of being raped by a neighbor who broke into her house late one night. Her family was informed by the physician conducting the autopsy that Paloma had been raped. As Tomasita recalled for me:

They put her inside an ataud blanco because she was not responsible for it...when they did all the investigations and the doctor looked at her, they found out that she had been raped. I looked at her in one of those pictures, because in those pueblos [small towns] they take pictures of the dead, and I remember she had a lot of flowers around her head.

Paloma's story exposes revealing dynamics. Paloma had not voluntarily agreed to have sex, she had been raped; morally speaking she was still a virgin when she died. With regard to personal agency, a woman becomes a sexual Subject (versus sexual object) only if her virginity is lost in a voluntary sex act. In other words, a woman loses her virginity only if she consents to have sex. This way, rape or any type of sexual violence against a virgin woman does not deprive her of possessing her virginity because the sex act was done against her will. A virgin woman who was forced to have

sex may not have the tangible or physical evidence to prove her virginity (especially if she has been vaginally penetrated) but more importantly, spiritually and morally she has one: her sexual autonomy was subjugated and controlled. In the case of Paloma, her honorability and decency was recognized and celebrated by her family beyond death—preserving virginity was being praised while becoming a family affair.

A similar experience happened to Tomasita's aunt Carolina. When Carolina died she was 50, but her honeymoon tragedy had been well known by her family: she could not have sex with her husband on her wedding night. Tomasita described how her extremely religious aunt Carolina had not received any sexual education and therefore had no information on what she was expected to do as a woman on her wedding night. While expressing her sadness for her aunt Carolina's tragic experience, Tomasita explained:

She was from Guadalajara and she was a señorita when she got married. But how could you ever imagine that the next day after her wedding, the husband woke up in one home and she did in a different one?! Then, when we talked with her, she said it like this: that she had been afraid of el instrumento del esposo [the husband's instrument] because when she looked at it, she got scared and she was afraid and then she ran away. He also left. He must have believed that she was crazy.

Tomasita recalled when her aunt Carolina went back to live with her family and spent the rest of her life committed to religious activities. On her deathbed at age 50, Carolina called her husband to ask for his forgiveness because she had not been able to have sex with him. Tomasita said he did not forgive her. Carolina's family knew about her life story and, when she died, they honored her virginity by burying her in an *ataud blanco* similar to Paloma's.

In sum, the authentic meaning of virginity is socially constructed. The true significance of virginity does not happen in a social vacuum nor is divorced from society. Losing or preserving virginity goes beyond the bedroom and the bed sheets to become part of social processes linked to powerful and conspicuously evident social and moral symbolism. Pregnancy out of wedlock, having children, wearing *el vestido blanco* and/or carrying *los azahares* on the wedding day, and finally being buried in a white coffin after death, are important indicators of the social nature and meaning of virginity. From a woman's active participation in the creation of a new life to the end of her own existence, each one of these symbols reveals a woman's sexuality and sex life to her family and society. Each symbol makes visible to families and society what is personal and intimate; each one of them makes public what is private. Each symbol associates a woman's virginity with specific objects connected with particular scenarios and circumstances of social and moral significance. A woman's loss of virginity does not become a family affair if she does not get pregnant, the issue may remain intimate and silent. In contrast, pregnancy makes sexual activity evident and then a woman is often exposed to a coercive marriage by her family. A woman who does not wear *el vestido blanco* may put in jeopardy her own moral integrity and decency; a woman who

wears it, honors herself and her own family. And finally, after death, *el vestido blanco* is replaced by *el ataúd blanco* to honor and make public what was personal and painful. All these visible symbols have made public what is private, they have revealed to society what a woman has lived in her intimate moments. They link a Mexican woman's virginity, as part of her sexuality, to important processes of social significance and control.

Conclusion

In this section, I have discussed one of the ways in which virginity is socially constructed by Mexican immigrant women. The true meaning of virginity is social. Important visible symbols of virginity and non-virginity (e.g., pregnancy, children, the white dress, orange blossom, the white coffin) reflect the social nature and significance of virginity and sexuality. These symbols make public what is a woman's private and intimate affair. This powerful social symbolism and an idolatrous reverence associated to virginity offer an invitation to conduct in-depth exploration of social circumstances under which Mexican women may contest these and many other moral and social prescriptions oppressing their personal and sexual lives.

Notes

My dissertation project has been conducted with the financial support provided by the Social Science Research Council through its Sexuality Research Fellowship Program. The Sexuality Research Fellowship Program is funded by the Ford Foundation and seeks to contribute to a more thorough understanding of human sexuality, help ensure the influx of new researchers to this field, and promote and expand research agenda that allows for both a wider range of topics and new approaches to current social and health issues.

My research project was conducted in accordance with human subjects protocol; I obtained research approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern California. I utilize pseudonyms in order to assure the confidentiality and privacy of my respondents.

- 1 My sex research study included in-depth, open-ended question individual interviews lasting from 2 to 3 hours on the sex lives and/or sexual histories of these women. The criteria for participation included: 1) heterosexual immigrant woman of Mexican origin born and raised in the state of Jalisco [20] and from Mexico City [20]; 2) with 5 to 15 years of permanent residency in the USA; 3) 20 years old or older when migrated to the United States; 4) between 25 and 45 years old; and, 5) living in the Los Angeles County area.
- 2 Historical examinations of archives on colonial social life have analyzed how male supremacy in both indigenous and Hispanic cultures reinforced women's subordinate position in colonial Mexican societies. See *El álbum de la mujer: antología ilustrada de las mexicanas*, volume II, by Marcela Tostado Gutierrez (1991) for a comprehensive historical analysis of Mexican

- women's social life during the colonial years. For discussions of Mexican women's sexuality from social and historical perspectives see entire collection *El album de la mujer* (volumes I to IV). *El album de la mujer: antologia ilustrada de las mexicanas*, was written by Enriqueta Tuñon Pablos (volume I), Marcela Tostado Gutierrez (volume II), Julia Tuñon (volume III), and Martha Eva Rocha (volume IV) and published in 1991 by the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (Mexico).
- 3 The Council of Trent (1545-1563) or *El Concilio de Trento* written by Fray Gabino Carta explains the Catholic Church's teachings with regard to sexuality; this document served as the basis to indoctrinate the indigenous population (Rubio, 1997). In the Council of Trent virginity was defined as a state more "perfect" than marriage. Accordingly, virginity was socially defined in Mexico as the best "certificate" a woman had to prove her decency and honorability: "*la virginidad era el estado perfecto* [virginity was the perfect state]." (Tostado Gutierrez, 1991).
 - 4 In *Acechando el Unicornio: La virginidad en la literatura mexicana*, Brianda Domecq (1992) examines how the Aztecs advised women against the loss of virginity. The Tzotzil (a group located in a Mayan region) utilized lack of virginity as a good reason to invalidate marriage if the husband was not aware of it. And, the Zapotecs expected the just-married husband to show to his mother during the wedding night a white silk handkerchief with spots of blood as a way to prove his wife's virginity. Domecq cites Fray Diego de Landa (1959) to state that among Mayans, "little girls were asked 'honesty' and *la falta de recato y pudor* [lack of modesty/honesty and chastity/shyness] was punished by rubbing them with black pepper (because of shyness it cannot be said where) which caused a lot of pain." (pp. 17-21) Translation is mine.
 - 5 In her article "*Curas, diosas y erotismo: el catolicismo frente a los indios*," Sylvia Marcos (1989) offers a compelling analysis of how missionaries and priests who evangelized the indigenous groups in Mexico design very detailed confession guides or *confesionarios* consisting of a questionnaire they utilized in their confessions in order to explore in depth the sexual lives and practices of the indigenous people. As stated by Marcos: "Meticulous questions were required and it was necessary to repeat them hundreds of times during the confessions in order to make sure the Catholic concept of dirty sex had an impact on the consciousness of the indigenous people" (pp. 19). Translation is mine.
 - 6 In my next chapter, I discuss how this bipolar paradigm is closely connected to the different standards of sexual morality socially established for men and women. These social processes become evident as I examine these women's experiences as mothers while they provide a sex education for their daughters and sons.
 - 7 The new *mestizo* nation resulting from the conquest was represented by an Oedipal triangle: La Malinche as the devalued female or *la india* embracing

the raped maternal figure; the Spaniard father, symbolized by the penetrating *conquistador* Hernan Cortes; and, their son or the first “official” *mestizo* called Martin Cortes. La Malinche, as the Mexican version of Eve in the Genesis of *el mestizaje*, betrays her people while giving birth in a painful way to what may symbolize the first Mexican family. As stated by Paz: “*Y del mismo modo que el niño no perdona a su madre que lo abandone para ir en busca de su padre, el pueblo mexicano no perdona su traicion a la Malinche.*” (pp. 78) English translation: “And the same way the little boy does not forgive his mother for her abandonment to go in search of his father, the Mexican people do not forgive la Malinche for her betrayal.”

See Otilia Meza’s book *Malinalli Tenepal: la gran calumniada*, 1988 edition, Mexico: EDAMEX, for a feminist version of la Malinche’s biography.

8 For an examination of the ideal of virginity and the cult of the Virgin Mary, review Marina Warner (1976) *Alone Of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

9 See Emma Perez’s article ‘Speaking from the Margin: Uninvited Discourse on Sexuality and Power in Adela de la Torre and Beatriz M. Pesquera (1993) *Building with Our Hands: New Directions in Chicana Studies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, for a comprehensive analysis on la Malinche from a Chicana feminist perspective.

10 3 out of the 39 became Protestant after migrating to the United States. Only one woman in the study said had been raised in Mexico as a Protestant Evangelical.

11 Important: of the 70%, two thirds voluntarily agreed to have premarital sexual relations, and one third had their first sexual experiences while being sexually victimized (i.e., incest, rape). I analyze these sexual patterns in my chapter. Leading researchers in sexuality studies in Mexico, Ivonne Szasz and Guillermo Figueroa (1997), have found that premarital intercourse is experienced, on the average, for the first time by women immediately before their first marriage. According to Szasz and Figueroa this dynamic has not changed over four generations. Seemingly, the reasons responsible for this pattern of sexual behavior in Mexican women have not been examined yet. In addition, a study conducted by De la Peña and Toledo (1991) with adults living in Baja California found that 54% of the females in their study had experienced premarital intercourse.

The only 2 women in the present study who have never cohabitated or being married (and who are still waiting until marriage to have intercourse for the first time) are preserving their virginity for different reasons other than religion.

12 Religion plays a role as a source of guilt for some of the women who lost their virginity before marriage. “Religious guilt” seems to be more likely to be experienced *a posteriori* than as an antecedent or an *a priori* factor. Interestingly, religion is rarely referred to by these women as an isolated or exclusive factor controlling a woman’s sexuality. Instead, it is always

examined in conjunction with other circumstances such as family education in regard to sexuality and virginity in particular. In my next chapter, I discuss the mother-daughter relationship with regard to promoting virginity. Of those mothers who expect for their daughters to preserve virginity until marriage, only 3 of them do it based on their religious values. Interestingly, 2 of these 3 mothers promote virginity based on their Protestant religion, and only 1 does it based on her Catholic faith.

- 13 My analysis of these two dynamics is still in progress, it is not included in this paper for LASA. Consistent with my findings and proposed argument, Oliva M. Espin (1986) has examined Latina women's sexuality while following parallel paradigms. She has expressed: "the honor of Latin families is strongly tied to the sexual purity of women" (pp. 277). In addition, while examining the interconnections between Latino men, masculinity, machismo, and virginity, Espin has stated: "Sexually, machismo is expressed through an emphasis on multiple, uncommitted sexual contacts which start in adolescence." Later on, she concludes, "Somehow, a man is more 'macho' if he manages to have sexual relations with a virgin" (pp. 280).

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