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## Blending the Gender Binary: The Machismo-Marianismo Dyad as a Coping Mechanism

Emma Garcia  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to elucidate the dyadic concepts of machismo and marianismo in Latinx culture, especially Chicano culture. Though most people have an understanding of what it is for someone, especially a man, to “be macho,” the concept of machismo is elusive. Marianismo is lesser known, but to the extent that it is understood, it’s understood as reinforcing the oppressive properties traditionally associated with machismo. Following Audre Lorde’s analysis of the erotic, my analysis of machismo and marianismo will reveal that while these concepts include misogynist subcultures, they also offer empowering modes of being in a racist society that any Latinx can embody regardless of their gender identity. Taken in this latter way, machismo and marianismo can actually be used to dismantle some of the oppressive structures that have held toxic versions of these concepts in place. For example, when Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is challenging her male colleagues in Congress, she is performing machismo in an empowering, patriarchy-disrupting way.

Typically, the machismo-marianismo dyad tracks closely to the masculine-feminine binary, but I reject this notion. The dyadic relationship between machismo and marianismo is characterized by two types of empowering energy. On the one hand, machismo is proud, aggressive, resistant, and status-focused. On the other hand, marianismo is humble, supportive, submissive, and family-focused. Machismo is associated with non-domestic spheres primarily, e.g., business, commerce, and professional achievement. Marianismo is associated with nurturing, soothing, spirituality, and domestic diplomacy. In a patriarchal society, men tend to perform machismo and women tend to perform marianismo, but this dyad is fluid with respect to gender. Women can perform machismo, men can perform marianismo, and individuals across the spectrum can perform both. In this ameliorative project, the machismo-marianismo dyad will be a resource for marginalized groups to tap into in order to overcome systemic oppression. My goal is for machismo and marianismo to be used when needed by all Latinx gender identities to uplift them and give them strength to overcome systemic injustice while also addressing the historical impacts that machismo has had on Latinx feminist movements.

### **Blending the Gender Binary: The Machismo-Marianismo Dyad as a Coping Mechanism**

#### **1. Introduction:**

Within Latinx culture there exists the dyadic concepts of machismo and marianismo. Tracking the masculine-feminine binary, these terms have been used historically to define manhood for Latinos and to suppress Latinas and limit them to their duties as wives and mothers.

Within this dyad is a component that can uplift marginalized members of the Latinx community and provide them with an energy to overcome the oppression that exists within our society. Both machismo and marianismo have a certain strength to them. With machismo, it is more of an outward confidence and with marianismo, it is a moral and spiritual courage. Each of these energies is necessary when working against systemic oppression, but the positive aspects of marianismo must be expanded and both terms should be applicable to all gender identities. Rather than the traditional binary that encourages men to embody machismo and women to embody marianismo, I endorse using these energies in an androgynous setting.

In this essay, I will be creating a secularized and androgynous version of the machismo-marianismo dyad. Modeling after Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," I will be removing the misogynistic aspects of the machismo-marianismo dyad and emphasizing the empowering modes of being that exist within these energies. Lorde's analysis of the erotic reveals it to be deeper than what it is colloquially known as being. It is typically connected to pornography, but according to Lorde, they are actually opposites. Pornography is a denial of the power of the erotic. (Lorde 54) Lorde sees it as an energy that is uniquely feminine and something that can be used by women to resist and overcome oppression (Lorde 53). The power that comes from the erotic has been separated from everything but sex by the patriarchy. This was to prevent women from tapping into that energy and using it to embrace their passions and empower themselves (Lorde 55). Machismo and marianismo have the potential to serve oppressed Latinx individuals similarly to the erotic.

This will be an ameliorative project. Sally Haslanger has distinguished between descriptive, conceptual, and analytical or ameliorative approaches. The goal of an ameliorative approach is to reveal a target concept or the concept that we ought to be using (Haslanger 33).

For the purposes of my own ameliorative project, the energies that Latinx people can gain from the machismo-marianismo dyad would be used to uplift and motivate members of the Latinx community to push through the challenges of an unjust society. By taking the positive aspects of machismo and marianismo, Latinx men and women will be able to tap into the machismo-marianismo dyad and have both energies as an option to overcome systemic oppression. First, we must flesh out the positive aspects of the traditionally aggressive and misogynistic machismo. There needs to be a clear distinction between toxic machismo and acceptable machismo. I think that machismo, when used within reason, is not only beneficial for Latinx men, but it is also applicable to Latinx women. While historically machismo has a negative reputation, I think that it should be used to uplift oppressed groups in order for them to succeed in an unjust world that does not bend to accommodate them. Machismo should not be used to oppress other marginalized groups and should not be used negatively. There are various other qualities to the term, but solely the oppressive qualities are what the ideology is known for colloquially. Marianismo, which has traditionally been used to suppress women and give them expectations to fulfill, also has several positive traits such as morality, tenderness, and spirituality.

Education, work, and life in general are hard for marginalized groups, but the sense of confidence and moral strength that comes with machismo and marianismo would greatly benefit the mental health of oppressed groups. In a perfect world, everyone would have equal access to opportunities. The reality of it is that things are not equal and it would take massive reform to make it so. The machismo and marianismo energies are beneficial to help marginalized groups persevere in the face of adversity and prevent demoralization. I would argue that machismo has already been used as a coping mechanism, but in many cases it has been taken too far whereas

marianismo has not gone far enough to balance it out. Both sides can provide strength, but they can be used interchangeably given the situation and the circumstances.

I will primarily be focusing on the machismo-marianismo dyad and its effect on Mexican Americans. I will be referring to this demographic as Chicanos which is the term for Americans of Mexican origin or descent. In Mexico, women are more accepting of the traditional gender roles that are perpetuated by the machismo and marianismo ideologies. (Stevens 98) The American feminist lens provides a critique of the negative impacts of these gender ideals. By primarily focusing on the United States and Mexican American culture, I will be able to flesh out the opinions of younger generations of Chicanos and the effect that machismo has had on their lives. I want to ensure that in this paper I do not impose my own worldview and experiences on the Mexican culture because traditional machismo is an important aspect, but a modern interpretation and integration of other groups would be beneficial. It would be more feasible and respectful to incorporate my approach into the Chicano community, rather than in Latin America. While my own opinion is to no longer have a gender binary, it is not my position to suggest that for the Mexican American community. I also cannot speak on behalf of Latin American communities or criticize the decisions made by Latinx parents in an attempt to give their children a better life.

## **2. The Machismo-Marianismo Dyad**

### *Conceptual Landscape:*

When conducting an informal survey on how people define machismo, despite different ethnic identities and generations, I found that the answers were roughly the same. I wanted to get a basic understanding of how machismo is viewed in my own community, before researching how scholars have interpreted it. My roommate, a white woman, called it “toxic masculinity

among the Mexican American community.” One of my friends, a Mexican American man, called it “misogyny not only to systematically suppress women, but also to create a box around what being a man is.” My older brother, also a Mexican American man, described machismo as “performative masculinity based on harmful, patriarchal preconceptions of what being a man entails.” My mom who is white, but has spent a significant amount of time in the Chicago Mexican community, said that it is “overexaggerated masculine pride and that men feel, by virtue of being male, that they are better at everything.” Finally, my father who is a second-generation Mexican American, explained that machismo is “an antiquated idea of manhood.” A phrase that my dad has used throughout my life is that machismo is “feo, fuerte, y formal.” This translates to “ugly, strong, and proper.” Defining manhood as something coarse and rough has made machismo antiquated. The term has a negative connotation in both the Latinx community and in general.

On the other side of this ideal of manhood is marianismo. This term has been used to put the traits of women into a box. Marianismo focuses on the purity and morality of women, primarily their chastity and subordination to their husbands (Stevens 94). When I asked the same people that defined machismo to also define marianismo, they had never heard of it. Growing up, I was very familiar with machismo because of my Mexican grandparents and also my father. He wanted to raise his children with the same confidence and emotional strength that his parents had and needed when immigrating to the United States. I had never heard of marianismo and did not know that there was another side to machismo. Based on the responses I received from surveying my family and peers, it has not been commonly used in the same way that machismo has. Machismo and marianismo are typically used in toxic ways and both terms uplift men and suppress women. Having separate words for men and women and separate descriptions of what

makes someone strong restricts people and their sense of identity. This is primarily because men are viewed as being feminine or “gay” if they exhibit traits of marianismo and women are viewed as arrogant and “manly” if they show traits of machismo. This is where the toxicity of machismo has come from. Men fear being viewed as feminine so they attempt to be overly masculine to compensate and women remain submissive in their roles as wives and mothers.

Within the literature and history of machismo, it has a negative connotation. Aida Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha explain the impacts of machismo in their book *Beyond Machismo: Intersectional Latino Masculinity*. They do not deny the inequalities that exist for Latinx males and females, but they also address machismo as being a way to cope with societal injustice and that it can be a detriment to Latinx men. While Latinx women are expected to be modest and conservative, Latinx men are allowed to do the opposite. Women are socialized to get married, have children, and care for the home whereas men are expected to succeed outside the home and make money to provide for their families (Hurtado and Sinha 80). These expectations have led to the perception that men should be strong and make money, while women should be motherly and take care of household chores. This familial dynamic is part of the reason machismo still exists. Machismo protects Latinx men because it gives them the confidence to overcome social inequalities, but that same confidence and “strength” can also be used against them because they are perceived as dangerous (Hurtado and Sinha 79). They must be aggressive and confident to get what they want, especially because it will never be handed to them, but it also subjects them to more altercations with authority figures, also due to systemic racism.

Manuel Pena has a very negative opinion of the machismo ideology in his paper “Class, Gender, and Machismo: The ‘Treacherous-Woman’ Folklore of Mexican Male Workers.” He argues that working class Mexican men either make women the punchline of their jokes or

idolize them (Pena 32). These are both detrimental toward mitigating the cultural oppression of women. These are also the key stereotypes used against women. Women are seen as betraying their lovers and being unfaithful, but they are also idealized as mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Women are reduced to objects used for the amusement and benefit of men. Another key term is “respeto” which means respect and this occurs as long as male supremacy is not challenged (Pena 37). This version of machismo is what continues to sustain the gender hierarchy in Latinx culture.

The historical significance of machismo and marianismo is important in understanding its development. The traditional conception of the terms stem from colonialism. Machismo and its most toxic aspects come from the abuses that Mexicans experienced during European imperialism and expansion (Pena 38). To show their superiority, the Spanish colonizers oppressed and abused Mexicans. In an attempt to reclaim their manhood, Mexican men used machismo to then suppress others, specifically women. Both of these terms originated from European cultures, but ended up in the New World through colonization. Marianismo originally developed because of a woman’s ability to create life and produce a child (Stevens 92). Women are a source of life and were subsequently associated with caring for children and the stereotypical motherly role. It also reflects virginity and the veneration of women such as the Virgin Mary. Marianismo later became secularized despite its roots in Christianity, but it also became a standard for women to follow, the symbol of an ideal woman (Stevens 94).

Nancy Christoph discusses depictions of machismo and marianismo in the poetry of low-income Mexican immigrant women in her article “Mexican Immigrant Women’s Poetry: Voices from a Community Poetry Class.” She explains the two sides of this dyad within Mexican gender roles. In the machismo ideology, men are expected to be stubborn and sure with other



men while being arrogant and aggressive with women (Christoph 225). They are also expected to provide for their families. Women should embody traits of the Virgin Mary and be honored as nurturers and mothers within the marianismo context (225). They are seen as being divine, morally superior to men, and spiritually stronger (225). Christoph explains the restraints that women have on them in terms of autonomy in this gender role dynamic. She found that many immigrant women coming to the United States came because of their connection to a man. In some cases women came because they were leaving with their husbands, some were immigrating to reunite with their husbands that had already left, and some were fleeing abusive fathers or husbands (225). Despite having moral superiority through marianismo, women are still tied to the patriarchy and lack a right to autonomy and freedom from their husbands and fathers.

In “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America,” Evelyn Stevens argues that marianismo is “the cult of feminine spiritual superiority and that Latin American women are conscious beneficiaries of it, not victims” (Stevens 89). She admits that women are meant to be submissive in this ideology, but also explains this at a deeper level. Women are externally submissive, but internally strong. She compares men to little boys that cannot help their behavior, but women have the moral superiority to counteract their immaturity (95). Stevens also talks about the incorporation of machismo in Mexican politics in her article “Mexican Machismo: Politics and Value Orientations.” While I am primarily focusing on machismo in the United States and the cultural aspects, she makes some very important distinctions in terms of how machismo should be defined. Stevens explains that a common misconception with machismo is that it is aggressive. She argues that it is intransigent and that men exhibiting machismo are convinced that their way is the only way to do something (Stevens 848). They do not change their positions or opinions. While this may be the historical intention of machismo, I

think that in the United States, aggression has become a contributing factor in why machismo is considered such a negative trait. The toxicity of machismo has caused men to take it a step too far and further deter it from being used as a coping mechanism.

*Positive vs. Negative Traits:*

The oppressive principles that have traditionally guided the machismo and marianismo energies are not the only aspects of these terms. There are pieces to both that can be used to help marginalized groups cope with trauma, but these positive attributes have to be separated from the pieces that cause further suffering and oppression within cultures. Lorde separates the positive from the negative in her interpretation of the erotic. The erotic has traditionally been confused with pornography, whereas she sees it as a source of power and information. (Lorde 53) Another issue with pornography is that it emphasizes sensation without feeling and the erotic allows women to feel and be empowered by this energy. The erotic has been suppressed and used in ways related to sex because empowered women are considered dangerous. (Lorde 55) By separating the good from the bad within the erotic, Lorde has opened it up to be something useful. I will be following Lorde's example to separate the toxic mentalities within the machismo-marianismo dyad to find productive sources of strength.

Machismo can be used in a positive way because it can give someone acceptable courage and confidence to overcome challenges that they may have no control over. In order for it to truly be machismo, however, these challenges have to stem from oppression. Ending systemic racism and systemic oppression is a long-term goal. People in the Latinx community need something to help them cope with these societal issues now. Machismo crosses the line when it becomes toxic, misogynistic, and overly aggressive for the sake of proving manhood.

Marianismo has some very respectable traits as well. I first want to distance myself from the type of marianismo that is used to keep women chaste and subordinate to their husbands. Without these qualities, marianismo reflects spiritual and moral maturity which can benefit any individual. Oppressed groups have a right to be angry about how their experience differs from those with privilege, but there can be a balance by also valuing peacemaking and the strength of taking a stance without anger. Both machismo and marianismo are necessary, but can be used in different circumstances. You do not always have to be aggressive and confident and sometimes it is necessary to stand up for your beliefs and interests. That is the ideal balance of the machismo-marianismo dyad.

The very origin of marianismo provides an example of how its elements can be used productively. Stemming from the purity and spiritual superiority of the Virgin Mary, marianismo can also offer some insight into parental relationships, not just between a mother and their child, but parents and their children in general. (Stevens 94) Mary's life is that of a mother enduring loss and persecution, but according to many interpretations of her story, she still stays by her son's side despite how violent and traumatizing his torture becomes. Jesus is often seen as the martyr and resistance figure in biblical accounts, but Mary had to continue living after her only son's death. She watched during the 39 lashes and his crucifixion. While many people would have looked away or left because it was unbearable to watch, she stayed to support her son. For some Latinx cultures, Mary's suffering became the inspiration for traditions of mourning. Mourning can include wearing black clothes, showing respect for the deceased, and not showing happiness. (Stevens 95) Their relationship can be compared to parents today who stand up for their children when they are being bullied and mistreated. The "mother bear" mentally can be

seen throughout history, including in Mary's behavior. This mentality is seen specifically in Latinx and Mexican cultures and their interpretation of the Virgin Mary.

Nancy Frey Breuner discusses the cult following behind the Virgin Mary in her article "The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Southern Italy and Spain." She explains that Mary's "... qualities of intercession, purity, and all-encompassing nurturance have made her appeal broad and vast." (Breuner 66) She cites Michael Carroll's *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* in which he incorporates machismo into the dialogue. Carroll says that the "father absent family" puts the familial power in the hands of the mother which then leads to her veneration. Machismo is to blame for this switch in traditional gender roles, primarily toxic machismo.

A distinction that I would like to make clear is that I believe machismo and marianismo both encourage strength, they are just different types of strength. Machismo is more of the outwardly aggressive and "taking what you want" kind of strength, whereas marianismo is a moral and sacred strength. Both are beneficial, but for different purposes and situations. They also balance each other out. Each oppressed individual can possess both qualities within themselves. You could even call them "energies," but tapping into those energies can help to cope and push through unavoidable challenges. While historically the intention of these terms was based on gender, there are numerous examples of how they can be applied together and within reason to bring out a productive result for people that need extra encouragement to succeed in such an unequal world.

Another aspect of this dynamic that I think is antiquated is that men should have machismo and women should have marianismo. This view is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it puts the stereotypical gender roles of men and women into a box and expects people to conform to those ideals. These specific traits require women to be subordinate,

submissive, and pure, while men can be aggressive and controlling. Second, this dynamic is heteronormative and is applied solely to heterosexual couples. The term heteronormative is used to describe instances in which heterosexuality is promoted as being normal or preferred in terms of sexual orientation. Any person or any couple that experiences oppression due to their position in society should be able to use these traits to their advantage. It should not depend on gender and more specifically gender roles that do not apply to many people in our current, more progressive society.

While there are positive aspects of machismo and marianismo, for immigrant parents, specifically Mexican Americans, machismo and marianismo are oftentimes all that they know. This dyad is so deeply incorporated into Mexican culture, but I am promoting a balance between the toxic machismo that is stereotyped in the Chicano community and a parenting style that ignores the injustices that students of color are faced with everyday. It is reasonable for parents to immigrate to the United States and want their children to live a so-called “normal” life, but that is not the reality for second generation Mexican Americans. The other side of this issue is parents that guide their children with a harsh machismo mentality. Somewhere between these two parenting styles is a balance that would have Chicanos and other members of the Latinx community be able to tap into machismo and marianismo in order to succeed in an unjust society.

#### *Case Studies:*

The way that machismo ideologies are portrayed in the media has undoubtedly contributed to how they are perceived today. Oftentimes it is toxic machismo that incorporates the worst aspects of this ideology such as the suppression and controlling of women, aggression, and stubbornness. Only recently have there been more compelling and acceptable interpretations

of machismo in shows and movies. Through these case studies, I will identify some examples of toxic machismo and acceptable machismo.

Bernardo in *West Side Story* is an example of toxic machismo. Bernardo is not Chicano, but his behavior and experiences are very similar to the Chicano community. He controls who his sister Maria is going to date and marry and he is especially concerned with making sure she is with another Puerto Rican. He sets Maria up with Chino, one of his close friends and a member of his gang, the Sharks. Maria, however, falls in love with Tony, a white man and a former member of their rival gang, the Jets. Even though Tony is peaceful and truly cares for Maria, to Bernardo he is no different than the white men that contributed to the marginalization of Puerto Rican immigrants at the time. Bernardo's machismo is understandable given the circumstances of being an immigrant coming to a new country where his people are not accepted and have to work harder to succeed. The way he controls his sister's romantic life and his overly aggressive responses, however, are problematic and the reason that he ends up being killed in the musical. Bernardo is also enforcing the submissive and virgin values of marianismo on Maria. In the end, she shows true marianismo by being the moral superior and realizing the immaturity and foolishness that caused so many of the gang members to be killed. She has an outburst that can also be seen as machismo because she is obviously angry and showing aggression when yelling at the gang members.

The relationship between Mexican American father Abraham Quintanilla and his daughter Selena is a key case study to understand what is acceptable machismo and what is toxic machismo. While it is unclear how Abraham behaved in real life, the Netflix show *Selena: The Series* also provides some key examples of both toxic machismo and acceptable machismo. In the series, Abraham handles the negotiations with record labels. Selena is still a teenager at the

beginning of the show when she is starting to become famous so it is reasonable for her guardian to be taking care of business matters. While the men working at these labels are also Mexican and work with Tejano artists, they still look for something that will sell in their market and to larger audiences. Due to this, they do not think that Selena and Los Dinos, their original band, will be profitable. There is also a difference in class because these Chicano men have already worked their way to the top of their industries and almost think they can take advantage of rising Tejano stars. Something that stands out in Abraham's meetings with these record labels is his confidence in his daughter's talent. Beyond that is his stubbornness when realizing that Selena has the potential to be a big star. A positive aspect of his machismo is that he does not settle in order to get Selena any record deal. He wants her to have the best record deal and can tell when the managers are taking advantage of him and his daughter's music.

There are several moments in this series that highlight Abraham's toxic machismo. One example is when he makes his children go grocery shopping with food stamps because he is too embarrassed and prideful to do it himself. When going to apply for government assistance, he leaves because the employee recognizes Selena. His wife, Marcella, follows after him and says that he does not have to be embarrassed to which he replies "if I wasn't embarrassed, there would be something wrong with me" (Kamata, *Selena: The Series*, 2020). Marcella's response implies the ineffectiveness of toxic machismo. She says "you're proud. I know that. But right now forget about proud. Let's just feed our family, okay?" (Kamata, *Selena: The Series*, 2020). She does not allow her husband to put his own pride above the needs of their family. The dynamic between Marcella and Abraham is atypical in terms of machismo. She has to put her foot down and tell him what to do rather than her going along with his actions to show her submissive side.

There are numerous examples of toxic machismo in the media, but the show *Jane the Virgin* wrote several characters, male and female, that embody an acceptable balance of machismo and marianismo. Two of the biggest examples are Jane's father, Rogelio and her grandmother, Alba.

Alba, Jane's grandmother, begins the series as the prime example of a Latinx grandmother that follows the marianismo ideology. The first scene of the show has a young Jane being told by her grandmother that her virginity is like a flower. She has Jane hold a white flower and tells her to crush it. She then asks her to undo the damage, but Jane cannot. She then says in Spanish, "cuando pierdes tu virginidad, nunca puedes volver atrás" (Silberling, *Jane the Virgin*, 2014). This translates roughly to, "when you lose your virginity, you can never go back." This opening scene sets the stage for the rest of the show and specifically Jane's philosophy that one should wait until marriage to have sex. Unlike stereotypical portrayals of marianismo, Alba grows as a character. She learns to accept her own sexuality throughout the series even though she is adamant about premarital sex being a sin. She begins a sexual relationship with a man later on in the show and at one point in the series she even purchases a vibrator. She does all of this after years of celibacy following the passing of her husband. Within the machismo ideology, men are able to have sexual relationships whereas women have to remain chaste until marriage. The purpose of sex for men can be enjoyment, while the sole purpose for women is to have children. This change of heart is a major step in Alba's character development. Within Latinx culture, valuing virginity and chastity are extremely important, but this example shows how even someone with different generational values can change and move beyond the constraints of machismo and marianismo.



Jane's father, Rogelio, is an example of a man exhibiting marianismo. Rogelio is not a typical Latinx father. He is open when talking about his feelings, he cries in front of his family, and he develops positive and healthy relationships with his daughter's boyfriends. These are not typical traits of the machismo that is most commonly used. Rogelio can admit that he is wrong which goes against the stubbornness of toxic machismo. He is also connected with his faith and focuses on finding peace. His relationship with Jane is very nurturing and caring, rather than controlling. He is a unique contrast to Jane's mother Xiomara who exhibits machismo. Xiomara raised Jane as a single mother and she has a tough exterior because without it, people would take advantage of her because of her ethnicity and gender. She is outwardly aggressive and fights to get what she wants and what is best for her daughter even as an adult. The relationship between Rogelio and Xiomara is atypical for a Latinx couple. I would argue that Xiomara exhibits more masculine traits, while Rogelio exhibits more feminine traits, but overall they both tap into each side of the machismo-marianismo dyad when needed. The balance between these two energies is what makes their relationship so strong.

These energies can exist similarly in other cultures too. Nancy Pelosi is a politician that embodies both machismo and marianismo. As a woman in a top position of power, it seems as though she brings out aspects of each of these ideologies depending on what type of strength she needs. Again, she exhibits a balance. She continues to wear feminine clothes and accessories such as high heels, broaches, and skirts. She also has a motherly disposition to her. She has morals, cares about her colleagues and constituents, but at the same time, she is willing to fight for those values in Congress. I would argue that men in Congress are threatened by her and also intimidated by her. She has power, but does not sacrifice her femininity and identity to maintain

it. She is in a male dominated job and uses these traits when needed to strengthen her position and continue overcoming societal obstacles.

### **3. Machismo and Marianismo Moving Forward**

#### *Blending the Gender Binary:*

Abigail C. Saguy and Juliet A. Williams address the gender binary in their article “Reimagining Gender: Gender Neutrality in the News.” They provide three ways of framing gender neutrality: degendering, androgyny, and gender inclusivity. Androgyny differs from degendering in that it proposes gender nonconformity within a binary gender system whereas degendering promotes a gender free society (Saguy and Williams 468). Gender inclusivity refers to recognizing various gender identities. There is a conflict between degendering and androgyny because degendering is an undoing of gender and androgyny is a redoing of gender (Saguy and Williams 468). For my purposes, androgyny and gender inclusivity are the best options to maintain cultural aspects of the machismo-marianismo dyad, while still keeping it inclusive and fluid. My goal with machismo and marianismo is to make these terms gender neutral.

Based on the definitions provided by Saguy and Williams, I think that making machismo and marianismo androgynous and gender inclusive would best suit the Chicano community without infringing on cultural traditions. It would be something that applies to the masculine and feminine qualities of the machismo-marianismo dyad, but also includes all gender identities. Gendering these terms has led to the oppression of women and more recently the LGBT community (Harris et al 6). Heterosexual men that do not exhibit traditional machismo are also affected by the gendering of the machismo-marianismo dyad. They are not viewed as masculine or manly if they are not outwardly aggressive. If they were to exhibit marianismo or moral

strength, it would be viewed negatively and as being atypical for a man. The gendering of this dyad makes each type of strength exclusive to the gender they are associated with.

Incorporating the admirable traits of both the masculine and feminine sides, while also making both terms adrogynous and open to all gender identities, can help uplift marginalized people, especially given the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. It is a very bold jump to go from a strict gender binary to no binary at all. Disrupting and completely dismantling the traditional ideas of Chicanos would be difficult to achieve especially given the conservative values many Chicanos hold. For that reason, androgyny is a compromise that will benefit members of the Latinx community by having access to the machismo and marianismo energies.

Machismo and marianismo are a dyad, but like the gender binary, they can be fluid. Machismo reflects the social and political power that oftentimes minorities lack and marianismo is the spiritual and familial power. The difficulty in finding this fluidity has traditionally come from the fact that machismo was being used by men to oppress women and marianismo was suppressing women because men held the power. Within this dyad, men and women fit into traditional gender roles. Men work outside of the home and women raise children and take care of duties within the house. Marianismo as a concept is also traditionally lesser known, but its effects blend with these gender roles. The oppression that the Latinx community faces has multiple levels. For Latinx men, they are facing outside racism, but for Latinx women the oppression is both within and outside of their community.

The book *Blending the Binary: Thinking About Sex and Gender* looks into the experiences of women of different races, abilities, and sexualities. Author Shannon Dea explains that her experience as a straight, white woman can be similar to the experience of a woman from a different ethnic background, but it will never be the same. She says “while a Black lesbian and I

are both subject to discrimination because of our gender, she is subject to further discrimination due to her race and sexual orientation. Put simply, there is no common ‘women’s experience’” (Dea 17). This is very similar to the case of Latinx women. A woman of color will always be subjected to more oppression because she is a part of multiple marginalized groups. White women lack privilege by being female, but gain privilege by being white. Women of color lack privilege in both their gender and their race. In the Latinx community specifically, women have faced misogyny due to toxic machismo and sexism, but outside of their community, they are facing oppression for being Latinx and being women. Having access to a coping mechanism to give them internal and external strength and making the machismo-marianismo dyad fluid, would make overcoming these societal obstacles more accessible to Latinx women.

*Secularizing Marianismo:*

One of the issues with the modern day application of the machismo-marianismo dyad with younger Latinx generations is the religious connotation of the term marianismo and the outdated expectations of women. These expectations stem from the ideas within marianismo that women should be chaste until marriage, women should have sex purely for procreation, and overall, marianismo has stereotypically reflected Christian values. The Christian idea that premarital sex is a sin was incorporated into marianismo, but this has further contributed to a lack of sexual autonomy for women. In the traditional application of machismo, men can have sex before marriage and for enjoyment. This inequality also comes from the thought that women should embody the same traits as the Virgin Mary, but in today’s society, that limits the freedoms of women to do what they want with their bodies. It is also a misogynistic standard to allow men to have sex when they want and for their own enjoyment and to expect women to have sex for

the sole purpose of having children and then being expected to raise those children and remain in the home.

Another area within this dyad that requires reform is the toxicity that comes from the misogynistic stigma that men can have pride in their sexual experiences, whereas women are conditioned to be ashamed of them. Men can further prove their machismo by bragging about sex, but women must do the opposite. I would argue that this comes from the religious connotation of the machismo-marianismo dyad. There is an expectation that women should strive to be like the Virgin Mary. This has tainted the positive aspects of marianismo for many younger Latinx women. On social media such as Twitter, Latinx feminists have worked to bring attention toward the lesser known side of the machismo-marianismo dyad in order to propose feasible solutions. The major criticism that these women have towards marianismo is that it has a heavy emphasis on traditional gender roles for women and men that embody machismo use it negatively to subordinate women through marianismo.

A solution to the issue of sexual and bodily autonomy for women is to secularize marianismo. Machismo is relatively secular, but both sides of this dyad should be secular. That is the next step in making both sides of this dyad applicable to all gender identities. Machismo should not be the sexually liberated side of this dyad solely because it is secular and masculine. That idea is misogynistic and implies that women cannot be sexually active and it restricts them through antiquated Christian ideals. This dyad reflects an outdated idea that masculinity is sexual and femininity is chaste, but I think that both sides of the gender binary are sexual in their own way. Through blending the gender binary to reflect something more fluid and evolving, sexuality can exist within machismo and marianismo.

Removing gender and religion from the machismo-marianismo dyad seems like an overly progressive response to a culture that places many of their values on religion, specifically Catholicism. For young Chicanos and Latinx Americans, this is necessary reform. This dyad can be secular without removing the spirituality and morality of marianismo. Oppressive and misogynistic ideas that women should be ashamed of sex and should prioritize chastity, negatively affect women and should be separated from machismo and marianismo.

*Machismo and Marianismo as a Coping Mechanism:*

Audre Lorde's use of the erotic is as a type of coping mechanism for oppression. Similar to the machismo-marianismo dyad, the energy of the erotic can be spiritual and empowering for marginalized groups. It can be used to uplift and provide strength to push forward. These energies are also exclusive to certain groups. The erotic is exclusive to women and the machismo-marianismo dyad should be used exclusively by Latinx people of any gender identity. I want to create a well of resources for Latinx individuals to tap into when they are experiencing oppression. This can include instances where someone is prevented from buying a house because of their ethnicity or gender identity or fighting to get proper representation in Congress. Inequalities that are out of their control can be handled with these energies that already exist in their culture. Lorde is known for the book *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, and in this case, we are using new tools that are being made out of the foundation of the old tools. The machismo-marianismo dyad which has been used toxically is being reformed into something that can work to dismantle oppressive ideas with the Latinx and Chicano cultures, but out of ideologies that already existed.

There are numerous examples of Latinx individuals tapping into both sides of this dyad. A more recent example is Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez saying "and I am here

because I have to show my parents that I am their daughter and that they did not raise me to accept abuse from men” following misogynistic comments from one of her colleagues (Sprunt 2020). In that moment she showed outward aggression and rightfully so. Being a freshman congresswoman and a female in a male dominated institution, she was insulted and angry. She was angry then, but in other instances she shows reverence and morality such as when she visited the children being held at migrant camps at the United States border. There have been numerous instances when she has gotten emotional and was not afraid to show that emotion or cry. She was especially emotional given her Latinx ethnic background and being the child of immigrants. These two examples of AOC and her behavior show how the machismo and marianismo identities can exist within someone and are there for when they need it most, especially in the face of oppression. Not only is AOC a woman, but she is also Latinx which makes her a double minority in the United States congress. It is clear that when she is feeling subordinated or belittled because of her social standing, she taps into these perspectives to provide strength and further resources to push forward. Again, the end goal is for machismo and marianismo to be accessible for all Latinx gender identities without forcing anyone into a stereotypical gender norm.

When I think of the practical application of this coping mechanism, I think of my own life and family. My grandmother embodied both sides of the machismo-marianismo dyad and preached that women can be as strong as men, but she was connected with her own spirituality and faith as a Catholic. She raised three sons with the traditional machismo and sternness of a Mexican father, but still had a nurturing and caring side like marianismo. There are Chicanos that already perform both machismo and marianismo, it is just not as common and typically marianismo is not even considered. The implementation of this dyad as a coping mechanism

would require a lot of fundamental cultural change within the Chicano community, but it is clear that younger generations are already working towards this new standard.

#### **4. Objections Considered**

A major conflict that will come from my analysis of machismo is that it requires women to simply adapt and mold themselves to better suit the patriarchy rather than dismantle oppressive institutions. Some feminists would argue that you should not have to hide your femininity or show more masculinity to be respected. That is a current issue in the workforce, especially as more women are joining jobs that typically were held by men. In these situations, women may wear pantsuits and darker colors. They are dressing in a more masculine way in order to be taken seriously. Masculinity should not define someone applying for a job or even a political candidate. It seems as though in our society, femininity implies less value. Women should be able to maintain as much femininity as they want or as much masculinity as they want without it inhibiting their ability to be successful in a male dominated world. For these reasons specifically, some feminists would argue in favor of tearing down the patriarchy so that women are actually respected at the same level as men currently.

On the other side of this issue, I cannot assume that all women want to have more power or masculine energy. There may be groups of women that feel that men and women are not equal and they may hold more conservative values. These women would prefer to fill their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers. As problematic as it is to assume that women want to stay at home, it is equally problematic to say that all women should take up traditionally male roles or push for equality if that is not what all women desire. There is also nothing wrong with women making a decision to stay at home and take care of their children rather than have a job.



These objections are valid and address some of the major issues in society regarding the patriarchy and how to approach it. In a perfect world, I would argue that women should not have to mold into masculine roles in order to be viewed as professional or to be taken seriously. The problem with this objection, however, is that we do not live in a perfect world. We have to be realistic when taking steps toward equality for women. Blending into masculine roles and having machismo, for example, is a fair compromise to uplift women and help them succeed. My intention with applying machismo to all genders is that it is a more feasible coping mechanism to adapt to a world that makes it difficult for marginalized groups to see the same success as people with privilege. It may be easier for a white feminsist to say that women should work to dismantle the patriarchy, but for women of color that is not an option. They do not have the same voices and advocates in politics and decision making because they lack the privileges that white women have.

To address the point that some women would prefer to fit a conservative gender role, machismo would not be inhibiting that decision. It is more so that women would have the choice to use aspects of machismo and marianismo to overcome oppression and succeed in a male dominated society. Again, this objection regarding traditional gender roles is also heteronormative and heavily focuses on the dynamic in relationships between a man and a women. In queer couples, blending the machismo and marianismo ideologies makes a lot of sense because they already do not have traditional gender roles, but can access these traits to make their experience more “normal.” In an ideal world, everyone would have equal access to opportunities, but that simply is not the current reality for marginalized groups. Regardless, any marginalized individual can make that conscious decision for themselves.

A plausible objection to Chicanos and Latinx people using the machismo-marianismo dyad as a coping mechanism is that they would be using terms that originated from the colonizers. Historically, this dyad developed because of colonization and its toxicity in particular came from the Europeans which is why one of the worst toxic aspects of machismo is violence. The performative aggression and toxic masculinity of machismo originally came from Spanish colonizers who used it to exert their power over people they deemed to be inferior. Native Mexicans and Mestizos, a mix of Spanish and indigenous Mexicans, were subjected to centuries of oppression due to the original machismo ideology and the subsequent culture of toxic Mexican machismo that developed from it was used to oppress Mexican and Chicano women. This was a way to reclaim the power that Mexican men lost during colonization. Through my informal surveys and looking at social media posts about machismo, younger generations of Mexicans are opposed to keeping these terms in moving forward because of their historical significance.

A very similar argument has been made as more groups reclaim terms and ideas that have traditionally been used to oppress and subordinate them. Instead of completely dismantling a historical and culturally significant idea, we can remove the harmful elements and use it for good. If the tools already exist and have pieces that can contribute to adjusting to oppression, they should be used. There are several examples of marginalized groups “reclaiming” terms that have historically been used to oppress them. In some cases, those same terms are used to uplift them and can be given positive connotations. There is also an element of power and strength that comes from taking back a word that was historically oppression to someone’s identity. Instead of giving that word power, you are shifting the power dynamic and giving yourself the power.

## **5. Conclusion**

Most Chicanos and Latinx Americans have a certain stereotype that they imagine when thinking about the term machismo. Its toxicity has been seen in the media and it has overshadowed the beneficial aspects of this ideology. The traditional perception of the machismo-marianismo dyad has historically neglected marianismo altogether and overlooked the pieces of this dyad that are best suited to handle and overcome systemic oppression. In a society that does not bend to accommodate its marginalized members, they must seek other sources of strength to help them persevere. For Latinx and Chicano people, machismo and marianismo are sources of both internal and external strength, giving them confidence and courage despite their social standing. The current stereotypes that exist make machismo exclusively for men and marianismo exclusively for women. By applying this dyad in an androgynous and secular setting and keeping the masculine and feminine elements, all Latinx gender identities can use machismo and marianismo as a coping mechanism to overcome systemic oppression.

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