Anglo American Stereotypes of Californianas

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Richard Henry Dana in Two Years Before the Mast (published anonymously in 1840), presented the first major image of Mexican women in California. Dana, the scion of a cultivated patrician family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sailed to California on the Pilgrim, a ship belonging to Bryant, Sturgis, and Company, the major American firm engaged in the hide and tallow trade. In this work, Dana recorded his experiences as a sailor as well as his impressions of the country, the land and the people he saw on his journey during his two years aboard ship.

Dana has little to say of a positive nature about Mexican people in general. His views of Mexican women, which center on virtue, are moralistic and judgmental. According to Dana, "The fondness for dress among the women is excessive, and is sometimes their ruin. A present of a fine mantel, or a necklace or pair of earrings gains the favor of a greater part. Nothing is more common than to see a woman living in a house of only two rooms, with the ground for a floor, dressed in spangled satin shoes, silk gown, high comb, girt if not gold, earrings and necklace. If their husbands do not dress them well enough, they will soon receive presents from others." Therefore, Dana points out, "the women have but little virtue," and "their morality is, of course, none of the best." Although the "instances of infidelity are much less frequent than one would at first suppose," Dana attributes this to "the extreme jealousy and deadly revenge of their husbands." To this Yankee patrician, Mexican women are profligate, without virtue and morals, whose excesses are only kept in check by a husband's vengeful wrath. In this narrative Mexican women are seen as purely sexual creatures.

Dana's work, which had immediate success in the United States and England, set the precedent for negative images of Mexican women in California. He created the image of Mexicanas as "bad" women. This condemnation of Mexican women's virtue appears again and again in subsequent works. The view of Mexicanas as women of easy virtue and latent infidelity easily led to the stereotype of the Mexicanas as prostitute in the literature of the gold rush.

While Dana's writing attempted to convey the impression of an interested but rather detached objective observer of California's people and life, Thomas Jefferson Farnham's Travels in California and Scenes in the Pacific Ocean, published in 1844-45, was sensationalistic and vituperative. Farnham, a lawyer, came to California from Illinois by way of Oregon. He arrived in Monterey in 1841. . . . Farnham described his travels on the Pacific Coast. . . . Throughout his account Farnham consistently derided the Californianos. In his words, "the Californians are an imbecile, pusillanimous race of men, and unfit to control the destinies of that beautiful country." In clear, direct and hostile terms, Farnham echoed the same sentiment that Dana and others had expressed with more subtlety, replacing passionate partisanship for the previous pretense of objectivity.
The Californiano's mixed racial background is a constant theme in Farnham's narrative. It is also the focus of his blunt comment on women, of whom he states "The ladies, dear creatures, I wish they were whiter, and that their cheekbones did not in their great condescension assimilate their manners and customs so remarkably to their Indian neighbors." Unlike Dana, who was, at times, ambivalent about the racial characteristics and beauty of the elite Californianas, Farnham was clear about their racial origins and his own racial views.

Like Dana, Farnham was also concerned with the Californiana’s dress and appearance. While Dana focused on the extravagance of dress, Farnham centered on the looseness of the clothing and the women’s “indelicate” form. “A pity it is,” notes Farnham, “that they have not stay and corset makers’ signs among them, for they allow their waists to grow as God designed they should, like Venus de Medici, that ill-bred statue that had no kind mother to lash its vitals into delicate form.” Since Californian women do not lash their own or their daughter’s “vitals into delicate form,” they obviously are neither proper themselves nor are raising proper daughters for California. Farnham would have women’s dress hide their form in the multiple layers of clothing that simultaneously hid the bodies of middle-class women in the United States and severely limited their physical mobility. Although Farnham made few additional direct statements about women, he did relate the woeful tale of a Southern lad’s romance with a Californiana. The young man, who was ready to bequeath her all his worldly goods, was left bereft by the infidelity of his Californiana sweetheart. For Farnham, whose work justified the filibustering efforts of foreigners in California, Mexican women had no redeeming qualities.

Alfred Robinson, while no less concerned than Dana or Farnham with Californian’s virtue, morality, race and appearance, countered his countrymen’s negative image by presenting the polar opposite view—albeit only of upper-class women—in his work, *Life in California*, published in 1846. Unlike Dana, who spent only a short time in California, or Farnham, who came in 1841, Robinson had been in California since 1829 and was on intimate terms with the Californianos.

Robinson interspersed descriptions of women’s physical appearance, dress, manners, conduct and spiritual qualities throughout his work. In this book, Californianas are universally chaste, modest, virtuous, beautiful, industrious, wellbred aristocratic Spanish ladies. “With vice so prevalent amongst the men,” Robinson states in his most explicit passage, “the female portion of the community, it is worthy of remark, do not seem to have felt its influence, and perhaps there are few places in the world where, in proportion to the number of inhabitants, can be found more chastity, industrious habits, and correct deportment, than among the women of this place.” Robinson defended the morals, virtue and racial purity of elite Californianas. By making racial and class distinctions among Californianas he transformed the image of immoral, bad and sexual women into the image of the sexually pure, good Californiana.

Dana and Farnham cast Mexican women into molds of the women of easy virtue, no morals and racial inferiority. Robinson cast elite Californianas into the stereotype of a genteel, well bred Spanish aristocrat with virtue and morals intact. Her European ancestry and aristocratic background, to say nothing of her economic value, made her worthy of marriage. Dana and Farnham, in their concern
with the Californiana’s race, virtue and morals set the parameters of the stereotype. Robinson accepted the parameters and addressed the same issues.

Recently, these nineteenth century narratives have attracted the attention of scholars and others working in Chicano, Women’s, California and Southwestern history and culture. While Chicano historians and other scholars have noted the existence of contradictory stereotypes of women, few have examined the nature of these dual images. Generally, these scholars have attributed Mexicanos stereotypes to historical Hispanophobia, anti-Catholicism, racial prejudice and to the economic and political issues involved in the Mexican-American War. . . .

My research leads me to concur with the conclusions of earlier studies that nineteenth century North American literature on California expressed an ideological perspective reflecting an economic interest in California, that the stereotypes of Mexicanos, including those of women, functioned as instruments of conquest, and thus served the political and economic interests of an expanding United States. However, . . . the stereotypes of women were not static; they changed across time—from the pre-War period, through the War, the gold rush and the late Victorian era. The changing images of Mexicanas in California, . . . were consistent with the economic and socio-political needs of a changing U.S. capitalist and imperialist system.

Initially, the pejorative images of Mexican people, which derived from the authors’ firm belief in Anglo America’s racial, moral, economic and political superiority, served to devalue the people occupying a land base the United States wanted to acquire—through purchase if possible, by war if necessary. The values of supremacy, including male supremacy, expressed in the creation of negative stereotypes and embedded in the notion of Manifest Destiny, were central to America’s ideology—an ideology based on the exclusion of non-whites from the rights and privileges of American democratic principles and institutions. Thus, the early negative stereotypes of Mexican people focused on their racial characteristics and alleged debased condition. These stereotypes appeared regardless of class or circumstance of the writers. Their writings uniformly portrayed the same image of Mexicanos whether the latter were encountered in the Mexican interior or in Mexico’s northernmost provinces. . . .

The changing image of Mexican women . . . derived from America’s unfolding system of beliefs and ideas about sex and race, as well as about economic and political expansion. With reference to Mexicanas, these images functioned on two levels: first, as rationalization for war and conquest and, second, as rationalization for the subordination of women. . . .

Although the image of woman sheltered from the competition of the marketplace was generally appropriate only for middle-class women, by the mid-nineteenth century the notion of woman as the purveyor of a people’s morality was being applied to all women in general. The American woman became the symbol of the country’s innocence, morality, and virtue; she was held almost solely responsible for the morality and virtue of the nation. Thus, in the 1840s, women’s value was not only determined by her newly defined gender-specific roles, but she represented the moral strength of her country. This view of women was part of the ideological framework within which North American authors, most of whom were from the middle class, perceived, interpreted and judged the Mexican female in California.
Anglo American male writers assigned to Mexican women the same social value based on gender specific norms and roles they assigned to white womanhood in the United States. However, for Mexican women, the dimension of race was also integral to the judgment of their virtue and morality. Nineteenth century Anglo Americans’ views of Mexican people as racially inferior are well-documented and need not be elaborated here. What does need to be understood is that in terms of women, America’s racial bias against Mexicanos coalesced with the moral judgment of women and hardened into a stereotype of Mexicanas as both racially and morally inferior, with one reinforcing the other in a most pernicious way. . . . The most salient stereotype of Mexicanas in the pre-War literature is that of the racially inferior sexual creature—the “bad” woman of easy virtue and no morality. In America’s ideological framework, racially inferior people found wanting in moral strength deserved to lose their country. Stereotypes of Mexican women’s morality not only encompassed both the sexual and racial dimensions, but were also the basis for moral judgments about Mexican people as a whole.

While Anglo women in industrializing North America were being economically displaced and entombed in the virtues of domesticity, Mexican women in agro-pastoral California were an economic asset. Hispanic law protected women’s property rights and gave them equal inheritance rights with males. Mexicanas held an economic power their North American sisters were rapidly losing. Mexican women’s economic significance did not escape the Anglos’ perception or appropriation; and it clearly affected the creation of a new image—a counter to the pejorative stereotype of the “bad” woman.

From the mid 1820s to the end of Mexican rule, a number of intermarriages between elite Californianas and Anglo males were celebrated in California. Most of the Anglos who married Californianas prior to the North American occupation acquired land through their marriage. The land grants often became the basis for vast wealth.

Californiana-Anglo marriages were occurring at the moment that commercial capitalism of international proportions was penetrating the developing agro-pastoral economy of Alta California. The nascent economy, based on the rise of private property and the corollary rise of an elite ranchero class of large landowners, was tied through the hide and tallow trade to European, Latin American and North American markets. Manufactured goods and products from these markets were being rapidly introduced into this remote Mexican province. At the same time, Mexican women, particularly elite women, held significant economic power as large property owners in their own right, as conveyors of property to others, and as consumers in a nascent but expanding market. Most of the Anglos who married Californianas were merchants and traders who were directly related to the development of commerce in California. Marriage to an elite Californiana, in addition to landed wealth; also established family and kinship ties with the largest Californiano landowners. Marriage solidified class alliances between Anglo merchants and the Californiano elite, who were jointly establishing control of California’s economy. The image of Californianas as “good” women emerged from these marriages and economic alliances on the eve of the Mexican-American War.

As the United States consolidated its conquest of California and the Southwest in the post-War period, the negative and positive images of Mexicanas and
Californianas hardened into stereotypes of the Mexican prostitute and the romantic, but fading Spanish beauty that still plague us today. In the literature of the gold rush the negative views of women's morality were generalized to Mexicanas and Latinas who migrated to California during the period. These views found continued expression in the almost singular depiction of Mexicanas/Latinas as fandango dancers, prostitutes and consorts of Mexican bandits. The pejorative stereotype of Mexicanas as women of easy virtue was cemented into the image of the volatile, sensuous, Mexican prostitute. It is significant that Juanita (Josefa) of Downieville, the only woman hanged during the gold rush era, was Mexicana. For her, the image, the beliefs and the ideas that manufactured them, had dire consequences.

The commonly advanced notion that women, due to their scarcity in the Mother Lode, were afforded moral, emotional and physical protection and respect by Anglo miners, does not hold for Mexican women. Mexicanas, as part of the conquered nation, and as part of the group of more knowledgeable, experienced and initially successful miners competing with Anglos in the Placers, became one object of the violence and lawlessness directed against Mexicanos/Latinos. Mexican women's gender did not protect them from the brutality of racism or the rapacity attendant in the competition for gold. . . . For Mexicanas in the gold rush era, the combined force of sexism, racism and economic interest resulted in a hardening of pejorative stereotypes which further impugned their sex and their race.

The image of the woman of easy virtue, firmly fixed in the literature in the years preceding the war, easily transformed into the Mexican prostitute. It further helped to justify the exclusion of Mexicanos/Latinos from the mines and rationalized their subordination in California. With specific reference to women but also inclusive of men, the literature of the post-War/gold rush era further cemented the earlier shift that divided Mexican women along racial and class lines.

Negative stereotypes of women from the post-War period to the end of the nineteenth century were specifically applied to Mexicanas and Latinas who migrated to California from Mexico and Latin America. Newspaper accounts make a distinction between Mexicanas/Latinas and Californianas. Mexicanas are prostitutes and would remain so for the rest of the century—Californianas are not.

In the literature of the late nineteenth century, Robinson's positive image of Californianas as aristocratic Spanish ladies was picked up, further elaborated and generalized to women living in California prior to the Mexican-American War. And in the pre-War period, now romanticized as the "splendid idle forties," and the "halcyon days of long ago," Californianas are depicted as gentle reposing souls sweetly attending to the sublime domestic duties of ministering to large households of family and Indian servants on their caballero husband's baronial estate. If single, these gay and beautiful Spanish señoritas are in a constant flurry of girlish activity and preparation for the next fiesta and the next beau—a dashing American, of course.

The important point here is that this image not only negates Californianas' mestizo racial origins, ignores or denies the existence of any kind of work and assigns them all the attributes of "True Womanhood," it also locates their existence in a remote, bygone past. They were, but they no longer are. In this representation, the Mexican prostitute and the Spanish Californiana are totally unrelated by race, culture, class, history or circumstance. In the former there is immorality, racial im-
purity, degradation and contemporary presence. In the latter there is European racial origins, morality, cultural refinement and historical distance.

Irrespective of the view, the end result was the same. Mexicana or Californiana, both representations rended women in California ignorant, vacuous and powerless. In both cases, her Catholicism and culture made her priest-ridden, male dominated, superstitious and passive. Undemocratic Spanish and Mexican governance made her ignorant. If Mexicana, however, her immorality and racial impurity established her lack of value and exacerbated her ignorance. As part of the conquered Mexican nation, the War confirmed her powerlessness. If Californiana, on the other hand, her racial purity, morality and economic worth elevated her status, making her worthy of marrying an Anglo while dispossessing her of her racial, historical, cultural and class roots. With marriage and a husband’s possession of her property, elite Californianas forfeited their economic power. Finally, the Californiana’s presence was abstracted to an era long past, her person romanticized. In either case, Mexicana or Californiana, the conquest was complete.

Finally, the early narratives which set the parameters for the dichotomous images of Mexican women were written during the brief Republican period of Mexican California. Yet, these dual images have become the standard view of Californianas for the entire nineteenth century in the historical, as well as the novelistic, poetic and popular literature. The dichotomous stereotypes cast in the 1840s have not only frozen Mexican women into a specific, exceedingly narrow time frame and effectively obscured her historical reality for the nineteenth century, they have also exacerbated the notion of discontinuity between nineteenth and twentieth century Mexican women and their history.

In view of the consistency of the stereotypes, Mexican women appear not to have an historical presence prior to the 1840s, and to exist only as romantic, but fading Spanish beauties after the Mexican-American War. By the turn of the century, Californianas, like their brethren, cease to exist historically. Within this perspective there is no continuity with women prior to the 1840s, nor any room for continuity between Mexicanas who were here during the 1840s and those who migrated from Mexico during the gold rush or who were part of the Mexican migration in the latter part of the century. In the literature, Mexican women’s historical existence is defined out of all but a few short years of the nineteenth century. Her historical presence is confined to the 1840s and left to the assumptions, perceptions and interests of Anglo-American entrepreneurs and filibusters who wrote about California in a period of American continental imperialism that resulted in the Mexican-American War.

Life for Mexicans in Texas After the 1836 Revolution

ARNOLDO DE LEÓN

The Spanish-Mexican population [of Texas], excluding soldiers, numbered approximately 2,240 in 1821 and increased to over 4,000 by 1836. San Antonio, Goliad, and Nacogdoches (also Victoria, founded in 1824) remained the main