

# Sexualizing Señoritas: Portrayals of Mexican Women during World War I

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## ABSTRACT

The obstacles that white women had to face during WWI have been widely documented in books such as Elizabeth Cobbs', *Hello Girls* and Diane North's *California at War: The State and People During World War I*. However, less attention has been paid to the obstacles faced by Mexican women. My paper draws on newspaper articles, fictionalized accounts, and recent scholarly work to examine how Mexican women were portrayed in contrast to portrayals of white women during this period. The portrayal of Mexican women in the media as illiterate, ignorant, and in need of white saviors, reinforced the stereotype of a hypersexualized damsel in distress. These portrayals of Mexican women reflected existing racism, sexism, and classism by neglecting/diminishing their accomplishments. Recovering the contributions and lived experiences of Mexican American women during this time are crucial to understanding California history in World War I.

KEYWORDS: feminization, misogyny, racism, stereotype, hypersexualization, Americanization, assimilation

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Dr. Jonathan Eacott is an Associate Professor in the Department of History, and earned his PhD at the University of Michigan. Eacott's research focuses on the British empire from the eighteenth century to the present. His first book, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600-1830* won the World History Association Bentley Book Prize. It demonstrates the centrality of India--both as an idea and a place--to the making of a global British imperial system. His research links four continents over three centuries to offer a new approach to the empire by revealing the importance of regions not under official imperial rule, including pre-conquest India and Africa and the post-independence United States, to imperial thinking and the exercise of British power. He previously won the Junior Faculty Teaching Award from UCR, and his articles have appeared in several edited volumes, *Quaderni Storici*, *History Compass*, and the *William and Mary Quarterly*.



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## INTRODUCTION: PART 1

Works, such as *Diane North's California at War: The State and People During World War I*, focus on the accomplishments and stories of middle-class white women. This manner of portrayal can also be found in *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers*, which focused on the importance of women as telephone operators, because men were busy being drafted so they were not as familiar and as talented as women who were able to multitask. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of study on poor women of color during World War I. This paper analyzes the contributions Mexican women made in California during World War I as presented by newspaper articles, books, political cartoons, and fictional works from 1910-1919. The portrayal of Mexican women in the media as illiterate, ignorant, and in need of white saviors, contributed to the stereotype of a hypersexualized damsel in distress. Through comparison of obstacles that white women had to face as opposed to the obstacles of Mexican women, and if race and class affected the successes of women as seen in Elizabeth Cobbs' book, *Hello Girls*. By focusing on a few selected works, I hope to demonstrate the need for increased scholarly engagement with this topic.

Mexican middle-class servant women were placed at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, despite multiple attempts to climb it through Americanization and assimilation. Natalia Molina's book, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles 1879-1939*, discussed Mexicans attempting to be a part of the American mainstream. She argued that the foundation of Los Angeles is credited to white supremacy, due to the racial hierarchies between Spanish, Mexican, and white peoples.

These racial hierarchies were determined during the Spanish Mission era in the nineteenth century. Mexicans were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, because those that had previously identified as *Californio*, a term associated with Mexican heritage, were now identifying themselves as Spanish. Molina describes an openly racist magazine, *The Grizzly Bear*, whose "statement of purpose praised the racist Alien Land Laws of the 1910s and encouraged increasing California's white population."<sup>1</sup> The Alien Land Laws were a series of discriminatory laws that prohibited immigrants from owning land and participating in American society. *The Grizzly Bear* was a popular magazine in the mid 20s that elevated the importance of keeping America white and published "restrictionist sentiment towards Mexican and Japanese immigration."<sup>2</sup> By celebrating white supremacy, this magazine was emphasizing discrimination towards minorities.

Mexican mothers were pivotal to the assimilation of Mexican families, because of the influence in implementing American values and culture within their children. In George Sanchez's book, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles*, he describes the importance of Mexican women during World War I. "Americanization advocates were interested in the contribution Mexican women could make in transforming their families' habits from those of a rural, pre-industrial lifestyle to a modern American one."<sup>3</sup> Anglo American home teachers focused on Mexican mothers from 1915-1949, this is one of the rare sources that validated the importance of Mexican women that started from within the home.<sup>4</sup> Rather than focusing on the patriarch of the family, the future of an Americanized Mexican family lied with Mexican mothers. Americanization advocates

1 Molina, Natalia. *Fit to Be Citizens?*, 104.

2 Molina, Natalia. *Fit to Be Citizens?*, 103.

3 Sanchez, George J. *Becoming Mexican American*, 99

4 George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 99

focused on Mexican mothers because they wanted to instill American values within second-generation Mexicans, so it was crucial that Mexican mothers were accustomed to the American lifestyle through the knowledge of nursemaids, seamstresses, and laundress.<sup>5</sup> This perspective correlates with the demand for Mexican labor in help wanted ads. By answering these ads for nursemaids and seamstresses, Mexican women were able to close the labor shortage gap in the Southwest, so long as they were able to learn English and pass it on to their children. “During and after World War I, however, English instruction was intended to provide the immigrant with much more than facility with the spoken language of the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

In July 1918, a young girl from Los Angeles wanted to teach her Mexican servant, Francisca Munoz, how to read and write English in order to better understand Mexican contemporary and historical events. This led to Francisca paying her mistress for lessons in hopes of increasing her wages.<sup>7</sup> The story, “A Young Teacher,” is one of many instances where Mexican women had to rely on white counterparts to assimilate into American society. This anecdote is a common example portraying the celebration of the Americanization of poor Mexican women. Mexican working- and middle-class women were limited to jobs as servants and caretakers, due to a lack of upward mobility for immigrants as opposed to white middle class women. The article, “A Young Teacher” illustrated that white children were offered more opportunities through education than grown Mexican women. Mexican women were entering the American workforce by primarily applying for job titles as servants or housemaids. “Domestic servants in Mexico are, as a rule, very ignorant, scarcely one in a thousand being able to read

and write.” During World War I there was also a revolution in Mexico, a possible reason for the lack of emphasis on literacy was that the Mexican government was fearful of the lower and middle class mobilizing. If there was a more educated and politically aware society during the Mexican revolution, it would have dramatically affected the actions of Mexican soldiers and wives. Mexican women could have directly contributed to World War I efforts and the Mexican revolution as white women did with the American Red Cross, rather than indirect participation through middle- and lower-class workforce. If there was a census or chart that compared Mexican wages to white wages, as well as what types of jobs both races of women typically took, that would provide a more concise comparison of economic as well as social opportunities. Had Mexican women been given the same opportunities as white women, they too could have become nurses and purchased war bonds, this is where it becomes a class issue, because there was little to no upward mobility for Mexican and Mexican American women.

There were also significant economic differences between working class Mexican and white women such as job opportunities and requirements. While some upper-class white women were able to pay for housemaids and caregivers of children, there were Mexican women providing childcare and housemaid duties. That is not to suggest that all, or even most white women were able to afford servants, as a majority of the white women were working class. In *Hello Girls*, class background is argued to have shaped voluntarism, “[m]iddle-class women did not need or expect to be paid, and officials were relieved not to fork over money.”<sup>8</sup> White women did not have to worry about payment, because they lived comfortable

5 George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 100

6 George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 100

7 “A Young Teacher” *Los Angeles Herald*, 8.

8 Elizabeth Cobbs, *The Hello Girls*, 40.

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lifestyles. However, this sentiment is opposite that of the story described in the article, “This Young Girl Hopes to Solve Servant Girl Problem,” where a woman, Mary Rouillet, attempted to correct the stigma of servant girls being uneducated and ignorant, “[b]y making the work an honorable profession she believes it will not only be better, but attract a better class of girls.”<sup>9</sup> The article shows Mary Rouillet opening a school to teach social and life skills to young women in order to counteract the stigma surrounding servant girls, however, a majority of servant girls at this time are young Mexican women.

The same day this article was published, President Woodrow Wilson had ratified the 16th Amendment, creating the Federal Reserve, which imposed and collected income tax.<sup>10</sup> In this article, the phrase, “better class” is used but not clearly explained. While it is possible that this is in reference to educated white women, I am left wondering if it could have also been intended for a woman of any racial background. This article could have been created to bring attention to dissatisfied women with servant girls that did not understand social cues or have a grasp on what an American home and upbringing should look like.

It was difficult to find positive accounts of women in databases, because a majority of searches consisted of hypersexualized descriptions of Mexican characters in plays or illiterate maids and/or servants in need of English lessons. Primary and secondary sources are used to support evidence of silencing of minority voices and to explore the trials and tribulations women faced at home and in other states. An issue of economic and cultural discrepancies would be the forced assimilation into American society,

because Mexican women needed to learn English in order to be a part of the job market. Some difficulties I encountered were the articles written about the Mexican War which dates conflicted with World War I. Although there were many primary sources, a majority of newspaper articles had obscure or nonexistent authors. As such, the lack of focus on Mexican and Mexican American women stories made it difficult to find clear evidence of lived experiences.

Despite coming from Mexican middle and upper classes and owning property, class structure was not the same in America as some Mexican families had hoped. The article, “Joining the American Mainstream: Texas’s Mexican Americans during World War I” describes the hardships Mexican families experienced while assimilating into American society. Although a majority of Mexican assimilation occurred in Texas, slow Mexican migration into southwest America was occurring. World War I was the beginning of assimilation of Mexicans into American society due to participation in civilian and military activities.<sup>11</sup> It was the hope of Mexicans that if they attempted to become a part of mainstream society that they would be accepted by Anglos. Similar to African American veterans, Mexican veterans were not credited after or during military service, and Mexicans were still isolated culturally and politically from American mainstream society.<sup>12</sup> While Mexican men were drafted, Mexican women were fulfilling help wanted ads for nursemaids and nannies. Climbing to the middle class was slim for a majority of lower class and poor Mexican families. Mexican Americans in California and other southwestern states experienced Anglo hostility and social and job discrimination in the nineteenth and

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9 “This Young Girl Hopes to Solve Servant Girl Problem”, 7

10 “This Month in Business History: Federal Reserve Act Signed,”

11 Carole E. Christian “Joining the American Mainstream” 559

12 Carole E. Christian, “Joining the American Mainstream,” 560

twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup> It appeared that Mexican women were at a predetermined disadvantage due to racial and class factors.

While whites were directly assisting with war efforts, Mexican women were indirectly assisting by entering the lower- and middle-class workforce. White men were drafted and white women were assisting through the American Red Cross and creating dressings and shipping them to soldiers. Examples of prejudice against non-white women was rampant, with documents such as hiring ads making opinions of the time clear. A help wanted ads reads, “WANTED-Washing, also work by day or hour; white woman.”<sup>14</sup> The people publishing the ad had a preference for a white woman washer. Another ad reads, “COLORED WOMAN-wants child to care for in own home”<sup>15</sup> The importance of describing herself as a colored woman is because someone that might answer the ad may not work for a colored woman, due to racial tension between white and minority groups.

## **THE BLENDING OF FICTIONAL AND NONFICTIONAL STEREOTYPES**

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The line between nonfictional and fictional stereotypes grew increasingly blurred during this time as well. Mexican women were portrayed as illiterate and ignorant in newspaper articles and advertisements as seen in “A Young Teacher” and “This Young Girl Hopes to Solve Servant Problem.” White middle-class families placed help wanted ads for young nurses, housekeepers, and cooks. It was typically young Mexican women filling these roles. While fictional stereotypes seen in “Terrwiliger and the Senorita” and “Ysabella” sexualized Mexican women through racist,

classist, and misogynist lenses painting Mexican women as damsels in distress.

Representation of Mexican women in the media amplified the stereotype of a sexualized damsel in distress, furthered the cycle of Mexican women in need of a white male savior. The article, “Terrwiliger and the Senorita” is an early California pulp story about a group of men sexualizing a young Mexican woman. Senorita Christobell is in a love triangle between a “half-breed Spaniard” and an American. The American was described as affluent, and the Spaniard was dirty and unintelligent. The difference between the two men is important to note because it creates a division between Americans and immigrants and creates lower class versus middle/higher class. Her appearance is described as “a little off-color among all those smoke-colored relatives.”<sup>16</sup> The description “smoke-colored” plays into the stereotype that all Mexicans look alike, and the reason this woman was attractive was due to her European features and lighter skin tone. Several slurs are used to describe Latinos throughout the article, such as “mud-faced half-breed” and the senorita was viewed as property among men. There are several representational issues within this article, the first with Senorita Christobell being sexualized and the second with racial descriptions of her. This is a huge issue leading to the mistreatment and stereotyping of Mexican women as stupid and illiterate, this article was published in 1909 so that sentiment towards Mexicans was shared before the war. Throughout the magazine, *The Overland Monthly*, there are numerous racist and misogynist stories about Latinas.

Misogynist and racist undertones riddled fictional stories about Mexican women which furthered damaged the integrity of Mexican women in real-life. The story,

13 Carole E. Christian, “Joining the American Mainstream,” 565

14 “Female Sit. Wanted”, 11

15 “Female Sit. Wanted”, 11

16 W.A. Scott, “Terrwiliger and the Senorita”, 278-282.

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“Ysabella” is a fictional piece that describes a triangle between a young Mexican woman, Señorita Ysabella Carrillo, American Captain Harry Fitch, and Spanish Governor Enchandia. Ysabella is nineteen years old whereas Captain Fitch is twenty-six. On reflection I believe that it is not a coincidence that Ysabella’s character is young as it normalizes older white men preying on young Mexican women. Captain Fitch describes Ysabella, “[h]er eyes are like twin stars, and her lips hath the sweetness of the wine of life. She is modest and discreet withal.”<sup>17</sup> The description as modest and discreet is important to note because (within a traditional Mexican society/culture) a desirable woman is meek and has no sense of individualism. Ysabella falls within the stereotypical image surrounding Mexicans because she is treated as property and obedient to all of her male counterparts. Initially, Ysabella is betrothed to Governor Enchandia, however, she meets an Americano and immediately falls in love. Ysabella is the damsel in distress and once again an American is there to save her and steal her away from an overbearing Spanish man. Throughout the story, Ysabella is torn between her cultural duties to Governor Echandia, as an obedient Mexican woman, and her internal desires for Captain Fitch. This story is similar to “Terriwiliger and the Senorita” because Mexican women were objectified by American men, and the Latin American characters are described as eccentric and weak as opposed to the heroic white characters. Ysabella is a prime example of the stereotypical Mexican woman.

While some stories focused on Mexican women being young, other stories focused on the physical appearances of Mexican women amplifying the stereotype that these women were one-dimensional characters that existed solely for pleasure. The article, “The Moreno Earrings” is a fictional story about a man purchasing a pair of earrings

<sup>17</sup> “Clarice Garland, “Ysabella”, 246

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Van Etten. “The Moreno Earrings”, 219-224.

at a secondhand shop and imagining a sexual relationship with a fictitious Mexican woman, named Conception, who used to own them. Eventually, this man finds his dream Mexican women in real life, and they marry and live happily ever after. Upon further investigation this work is also filled with stereotypes, when this man was making love to Conception, he states, “the low neck of her gown fell softly from a creamy throat, and only half concealed the sweet roundness of her breast’s that pulsed with life and desire.”<sup>18</sup> The stereotype of Mexican women as voluminous and sexual creatures is present in his description of Conception. Also, the description of Conception’s “creamy throat” exemplifies the desire of light-skinned Mexican women. This is yet another example of how Mexican women were erotically fetishized viewed through fictional pieces. Naming the character Conception was a symbolic representation of the conceptions of



Figure 1: “Just Another Mexican Revolution”

Mexican women.

**Figure 1**, “Just Another Mexican Revolution” is a political cartoon by Clifford Berryman. In it Uncle Sam is sitting at a desk with papers titled League of Nations arguments and peace discussions attempting to find a solution to end World War I. Behind him is a Mexican Pancho Villa jack-in-the-box holding a gun and a knife. Uncle Sam has an amused expression on his face and the text next to him reads, “What again?” At this time, middle-class Mexicans were attempting to break out from under elitist rule due to an imbalance of land ownership. With Uncle Sam’s amusement, it appears that America was taking Mexican politics lightly, because next to Uncle Sam a teddy bear states, “Just one after another.”<sup>19</sup> Mexicans are viewed as barbaric and uneducated, the jack-in-the-box symbolizes American sentiment towards Mexicans, and this carries on to the treatment of Mexican women as objects and used for entertainment. Sexualizing Mexican women is due in part to Americans viewing Mexican people as weak. The depiction of Mexicans as a jack-in-the-box demonstrates that Mexicans were not included in the war efforts and that they were not to be taken seriously. While people might be aware of the conflict along the border and the United States deemed their issues unimportant.

The feminization of fractured countries was detrimental to the public opinion on the strength of women. Louis A. Perez Jr’s book, *Cuba in the American Imagination* describes the political climate of Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Perez argues that white

Americans had been using these metaphors to portray Latin American women for decades by the First World War. The feminization of Cuba in Perez’s book, as seen in **Figure 2**, uses the metaphor of Cuba as a woman in distress. **Figure 2** is the political cartoon, “The duty of the hour; - to save her not only from Spain, but from a worse fate” which is an image of a woman with a Cuban The feminization of fractured countries was detrimental to the public opinion on the strength of women. Louis A. Perez Jr’s book, *Cuba in the American Imagination* describes the political climate of Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Perez argues that white Americans had been using these metaphors to portray Latin American women for decades by the First World War. The feminization of Cuba in Perez’s book, as seen in **Figure 2**, uses the metaphor of Cuba as a woman in distress. **Figure 2** is the political cartoon, “The duty of the hour; - to save her not only from Spain, but from a worse fate” which is an image of a



**Figure 2:** The duty of the hour; - to save her not only from Spain, but from a worse fate

<sup>19</sup> Clifford Berryman, “Just Another Mexican Revolution.”

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woman with a Cuban flag in a frying pan labeled Spanish Misrule. A white hand is holding the pan while attempting to put out a fire labeled Anarchy on the island of Cuba. On both sides of Cuba there are two groups of people fighting, on one side there are the “insurgents” while the other side is the “autonomists.” The white hand symbolizes America as the savior and by treating Cuba as a “damsel in distress,” it describes Cuba as weak and vulnerable. In fact, this damsel in distress is the primary metaphor used for Latin America by white people and justification for the Spanish-American war effort. This highlights a historical pattern of white attitude towards Latin Americans as feminine and weak. The same sentiment was shared during World War I between America and Mexico. Perez writes, “What made awareness of Cuba particularly significant were the ways that it acted on the formation of the American consciousness of nationhood”<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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Assimilated Mexican women were crucial to the war efforts, because of their impact in the lower-class workforce. Some challenges faced while researching were that many sources were focused on white experiences, and the newspaper clippings were typically from the perspective of what it was like to be a Mexican caretaker of white middle class children. This research hopes to have argued that it is time to look more closely at the experiences of Mexican women in the early twentieth century, with the issues of class, race, and gender being used as lenses for interpretation of their lived experiences. Through the analysis of nonfiction and fiction sources it appears that the stereotype of a damsel in distress applied to Latin American women, and through almost every source there was a white savior. The underlying messages within the media that placed Mexicans at the bottom of the racial

hierarchy were detrimental to any attempt to assimilate into American society.

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20 Louis A. Perez, *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos*, 3.

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