Representations of Mexican Indigenous Women

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Since European contact, indigenous women of the Americas have survived multiple efforts to be silenced and removed from history. These women played a variety of complex roles in their respective societies as mothers, warriors, priestesses, artisans, and more. When Spanish chroniclers in the sixteenth century attempted to document Mesoamerican histories, they did so from a Eurocentric perspective. Mesoamerican women remain elusive to scholars even today due to the lack of pre-Hispanic primary sources. Despite recent scholarship on Mesoamerican women that challenge traditional portrayals, U.S. college textbooks on pre-colonial Mexican civilizations only briefly mention indigenous women and the various roles they played. A handful of films set in Mesoamerica, both pre- and post-contact, also rarely contain portrayals of indigenous Mexican women. Thus, emerges the question: how are Mesoamerican women from the pre-contact era depicted throughout history? Portrayals of Mesoamerican women are multifaceted. Considering the Spanish settlers' deliberate destruction of indigenous peoples' histories, it is important to transcend our current understandings of gender. Furthermore, all depictions are influenced by writers, filmmakers, and scholars' experiences contemporary to the political and social events that occurred in their lifetime. To illustrate, recent feminist movements of the mid-to-late twentieth century brought to light a greater consciousness about gender oppression and inequality, and further opened the narrative about gender roles in Mesoamerica. Focusing on gender and sex limits our ability to see a clearer portrayal of women's thoughts, choices, and experiences. Modern depictions of women are becoming less based on Eurocentric gender standards. Increasing scholarship about women and written by women has also impacted the discourse on gender. More modern portrayals have begun to transcend the gender binary with publications on re-envisioning sex and gender and films like *Eréndira Ikikunari* (2006) portraying women not only as mothers and wives, but also partaking in religious ceremonies, war, and craftsmanship.

This study compares portrayals of Mesoamerican women by analyzing colonial-era writings, scholarly publications on ancient Mexican civilization, three college textbooks and three modern films.[1] These sources all exemplify how portrayals of ancient Mexican women reflect the ways in which people perceive their world. Prior to analyzing the primary sources for this project, it is essential to understand that the first Spanish chroniclers (mostly friars and soldiers) who attempted to document Mesoamerican cultures did not do so for the purpose of writing history; they did so with the intent of understanding the people whose souls they wished to "save" through conversion to Christianity. Tinged with Western preconceptions on gender roles and sexuality, Spanish chroniclers did not concern themselves with explicitly investigating women's roles. Instead the clergy's anti-female rhetoric consistently supported male dominance.[2] In reality, women played a variety of roles, including but not limited to warfare, religion, and artisanry.

Historiography

The studies of gender in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica use three primary models: gender hierarchy, gender complementarity, and a non-binary model. Gender hierarchy centers on the notion that one gender is superior to the other while gender complementarity

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[1] The college textbooks in this study were selected through a search of recent college syllabi of U.S. undergraduate courses offered after 2000. These textbooks were assigned as required readings for their respected courses. Such courses were offered in institutions such as the University of California, Santa Barbara, UCLA, and the University of Southern California. Scholarship on ancient Mexican women was sought through the California State University, Los Angeles Library database. I utilized databases such as JSTOR to find articles based on Mesoamerican women and gender. Some of the monographs and articles were written by scholars who were commonly referenced by previous faculty mentors from my undergraduate career at UCLA. The films used in this project are from a list compiled and featured on a website dedicated to providing the public with names of films that depict the indigenous peoples of the Americas. For more information on films about indigenous peoples of Mexico see http://www.nativeamericanfilms.org/mexico1.html.

[2] Paula M. Rieder. "The Uses and Misuses of Misogyny: A Critical Historiography of the Language of Medieval Women's Oppression," *Historical Reflections*. Volume 38, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 1.

implies that both sexes enhance or emphasize each other's qualities. From the sixteenth century Spanish invasion to the mid-twentieth century, gender hierarchy permeates the discourse on Mesoamerican gender roles.[3] Colonial preconceptions based on Western gender ideologies placed indigenous women in an inferior position to men in regard to social status. More recently, gender complementarity is the dominant model applied in scholarship, particularly by feminist scholars.[4] Women held positions of authority that did not distinguish between public and private spaces. At the same time, the idea of gender parallelism does not mean gender equality and both gender complementarity and hierarchy coexisted in late pre-Hispanic Tenochtitlan.[5]

Distinct from gender hierarchy and gender complementarity, recent scholars have taken on a non-binary perspective. These scholars do not believe it is suitable to view gender in Mesoamerica as twofold.[6] Pete Sigal, for instance, aims to understand Nahua concepts of sexuality that existed before Spanish arrival to the Americas.[7] He argues that the Nahuas did not have a concept of "sex" or "sexuality" like that of Western societies, and subsequently does not depend on the Eurocentric view of

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[3] Rieder. "The Uses and Misuses of Misogyny," 1.

[4] Primarily around the 1990s to the present, gender complementarity has become the dominant model applied in scholarship. Scholars such as Kellogg discuss women's roles through this model. Kellogg posits that the Mexica viewed gender as parallel, where both men and women played important public roles.

[5] Susan Kellogg. "The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period," *Ethnohistory* (1995) 564.

[6]Stockett proposes that exploring pre-Columbian identity, gender included, should be prioritized instead of focusing on which of the previous models is superior. As a result, Stockett believes that scholars can properly place gender concepts in a greater social framework. Gender hierarchy and complementarity are both based on Western "understandings of the sexual division of labor, which may not always accurately characterize past social systems." Given Stockett's argument, this third model is essential to Mesoamerican studies due to its ability to transcend the boundaries that come with binary constructions.

[7] Pete Sigal. *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

sexuality.[8] Contrary to college textbooks, which maintain discussions about women and gender limitations and films, which go no further than suggest a gender complementarity model, scholarship on Mesoamerica continues to push the discourse even further.

Colonial-era Writings

The older generation of chroniclers and scholars studying Mesoamerica were predominantly white, European males. Spanish explorers and friars who settled in Mexico in the sixteenth century wrote the earliest Western documentation regarding Mexico's indigenous population and cultures. Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and Bartolomé de las Casas exemplify the colonial perspective of the newly-encountered indigenous Mexican population. These explorers wrote for the sake of documenting their occupation and possession of the land in the name of their monarch, Charles V. Consequently, their accounts lack indigenous context and cultural relativism. Colonial writers did not attempt to understand indigenous values and practices based on indigenous culture, but judged them against the criteria of Western culture. Incoming European men defined indigenous women according to their own gender ideology; their reports were intentionally made as personal tributes and, to ensure continued support from their European sponsors.[9] These men followed an imperialist agenda that proudly sought to gain control of the Americas.

Born in 1485, Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés fought and overthrew the Aztec empire in central Mexico during the early sixteenth century. In his letters to the Spanish Crown, Cortés carefully orchestrated his correspondence to carry a largely "imperial" theme; he wrote with the purpose of describing the overall landscape and journey towards conquering a new land in the name of his king. This explains the lack of reference to

[8] Sigal's source base includes pre-Hispanic codices, Spanish texts, and Nahuatl documents; he also argues that sexuality to the Nahuas was not simply connected to fertility and pleasure but was also associated to warfare and ritual.
[9] Rebecca Kay Jager. *Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea: Indian Women as Cultural Intermediaries and National Symbols*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), Kindle Location, 68.

indigenous women; Cortés did not prioritize them for discussion in his letters. The tone in Cortés' writing suggests the belief that Charles V was already the legal emperor of this region, even before it was conquered.[10] Although he makes various references to indigenous peoples during his time in Mexico, he does not recognize individuals, except for leaders such as Moctezuma. His letters do not recognize men and women's social roles. Cortés prioritized documenting the land, including its people, flora, fauna, and culture to report back to Charles V.

A fellow explorer to Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (born in 1495 in Castile, Spain) also authored his experiences while exploring Latin America. In 1532, he published a narrative in protest of the academic accounts of sedentary historians.[11] In contrast to Cortés, Díaz del Castillo did shed light on one indigenous woman in particular: Malintzin. Malintzin became Cortés' translator and concubine and Díaz del Castillo devoted a complete chapter to her. She guided and contributed to the Spaniards' success at taking over Mexico. Díaz del Castillo, seemingly proud, highlights the fact that Malintzin changed her name to Doña Marina once she was baptized because it represented her apparent assimilation into Spanish culture and religion. Her conversion into Christianity demonstrated her devotion to the Spaniards' mission.[12] To Díaz del Castillo, indigenous women were considered significant if they provided translation, navigation, and/or meals. Malintzin was an asset to the Spanish armada.

In contrast to Cortés and Díaz del Castillo, Spanish historian and Dominican missionary Bartolomé De las Casas (b. 1474) wrote on the oppression of the indigenous peoples by European explorers in the Americas.[13] Like Cortés, de las Casas frequently placed women in the context of belonging to men and being attached to

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[10] Hernán Cortés, Anthony Pagden, and J.H. Elliott. *Hernán Cortes - Letters from Mexico*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xxvii.
[11] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Bernal Díaz Del Castillo." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. May 25, 2009. Accessed November 12, 2018. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bernal-Diaz-del-Castillo.
[12] Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 52.
[13] Bartolomé De las Casas. *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. (London: n.p., 2011.) Kindle.

their children. Similarly, Jager addresses this belief by referencing Shirley Park Lowry, who claims that Christianity defined women as men's helpers; this is a female stereotype which stems from the Judeo-Christian creation story that views women as secondary to men.[14] His sentiment towards this is different from that of Cortés and Díaz del Castillo because he disapproved of these events. Still, de las Casas' perspective on indigenous women as inferior to men echoes a European colonizer's view. Nevertheless, this gender hierarchical attitude continued to permeate narratives in Mesoamerican scholarship, textbooks, and film well into the twentieth century.

College Textbooks

Michael Coe and Rex Koontz collaborated to author and publish a book on ancient Mexico. It has been assigned as a required textbook for college-level classes, such as a course titled "Cultural Development in Mesoamerica," offered in 2013 at the University of California, Santa Barbara. References to early indigenous Mesoamerican women in this textbook are brief and scattered, focusing on archaeological sites. The women in this text are of a higher social rank. Ordinary women are barely mentioned. In an excerpt discussing the houses found at San José Mogote, references to women only focus on the domestic sphere. Based on the items found at the site, women are described as taking charge of textile making. The text further notes that inside the houses there were "clear signs of an area mainly used by women [which] consisted of concentrations of bone needles, deer bone cornhuskers, and spindle whorls made from potsherds."[15] The authors do not include further details regarding women's tasks in the home. On the other hand, in the same chapter, Coe and Koontz discuss female figurines found in burials at Tlaltilco. These figurines are described as small, yellow and intricately designed. Apparently, the figurines "usually represent girls with little more to wear than paint applied in patterns (probably with the clay roller stamps which have been

[14] Jager, *Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea.* 4745-4748.
[15] Michael D. Coe & Rex Koontz, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (Ancient Peoples and Places). (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), (Kindle Locations 918-921). Kindle.

found in the excavations), although some are attired in what would seem to be grass skirts."[16] Yet, we are still left with the question of what the patterns on the figurines meant. Although they do not go further into this detail, they indicate that these statuettes represent aristocratic women. The female figures only denote women "affectionately carrying children or dogs."[17] The aristocratic women are portrayed to be loving and kind, but nothing more is said.

Even more intriguing are the almost life-size hollow ceramic figures that were found in central Veracruz. Coe and Koontz describe just over a dozen hollow colossal figures, both in seated and standing positions. They wear long skirts and serpent belts, which are characteristic of the *cihuateteo,* a term that refers to the spirits of women who died during childbirth.[18] Sharing this knowledge regarding the statues highlights the importance of their meaning. Women who died in childbirth were revered just as much as fallen warriors because childbirth was analogous to fighting a battle. However, the authors leave many questions unanswered. In a chapter on the rise of the Aztec state, the authors describe how the Aztecs were perceived prior to gaining control over the Valley of Mexico. The only mention of women in this section is a description of how the Aztecs raided other groups for their wives.[19] We learn that women were victims of tribal invasions; nothing new from what we typically learn from history books: men taking women for their own purposes and conveniences. We also learn that women were objectified by rulers and "gifted" to Spanish explorers like Cortés.[20] The authors acknowledge that men and women received equal education but that this equality did not apply to marriage. Coe and Koontz refer to this society as "male-oriented," and that a man could take as many "secondary wives or concubines" as he could get.[21]

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[16] Coe & Koontz, *Mexico*, 945-948.
[17] Coe & Koontz, *Mexico*, 945-948.
[18] Coe & Koontz, *Mexico*, 2515-2518.
[19] Coe & Koontz, *Mexico*, 3141-3144.
[20] Coe & Koontz, *Mexico*, 3317-3318.
[21] Coe & Koontz, *Mexico*, 3380-3385.

Discussions of women are brief and scattered throughout the textbook. From reading about figurines portraying women displaying affection, women who died in childbirth, to women taken as concubines by princes and lords; they all belonged to higher social classes. Women of lower social status are not mentioned, however that may be in part due to the lack of sources available. Considering this is a college textbook that is assigned to students taking introductory courses on Mesoamerica, the discourse on Mesoamerican women appears fragmented. Though there is an attempt to portray women as being able to obtain an education and even having equal rights in divorce, it remains influenced by the gender hierarchy model.

David Carrasco and Scott Sessions' book consists of 253 pages, yet there are only seven references to women.[22] The most extensive discussion of women in the book focuses on the role of the midwife and how essential a position it was, suggesting the gender complementarity approach. Carrasco and Sessions state that men were to become warriors while women stayed at home.[23] They claim that the midwife played a major role in Aztec culture.[24] While Carrasco and Sessions focus on the role of the midwife, they highlight that it was considered a vital role in Aztec society.

Like Carrasco and Sessions, Susan Toby Evans follows the gender complementarity model.[25] Although references to women remain brief and scattered, Evans' portrayal of Mesoamerican women mostly situates them in parallel standing with men. Unlike Coe and Koontz's text, she does not only mention women as victims and servants to men. She discusses women playing roles of shamans, warriors, and overall having influence on society. Nevertheless, the discussion about women and their roles are still limited. In a passage about shamanism, Evans is aware that the role was fulfilled by a person of either gender. She describes that a "shaman may be a woman or man, called to the role by a life crisis

[22] David Carrasco and Scott Sessions,.*Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998).
[23] Carrasco & Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 97.
[24] Carrasco & Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 95.
[25] Susan Toby Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America: Archaeology and Culture History*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013).

that reveals the individual's sensitivity to emotional and social ambience, and ability to gain the confidence of their followers through convincing displays of psychic and extrasensory power."[26] Here readers learn that both men and women were capable of tending to spiritual matters. Women in the spiritual realm are also described as parallel to males. Toby Evans emphasizes that while major temple-pyramids were dedicated to male deities, female deities were worshipped at other significant temples, shrines, and homes.[27] She emphasizes the influence and significance of goddesses to everyone, not just women.

Descriptions of women's personal lives remain focused on the household and motherhood. Toby Evans describes the typical Mesoamerican woman's life as divided among childbearing and education, spinning and weaving, and other household responsibilities.[28] She explains the ways young girls were set up for their domestic roles. According to Evans, "most girls were trained in skills that would make them admirable housewives and at the same time would secure their ability to support themselves, because of the importance of textiles in the economy."[29] Like Coe and Koontz, she highlights that the Aztecs saw women who died in labor equal to warriors who died in battle.[30] They were known as *Cihuateteo.* Among the Cihuateteo, a woman's status was elevated to that of a deity. Evans describes that "they were deified […] accompanying the sun from noon to sunset, the morning solar transit having been escorted by the spirits of men who died in battle."[31] Many indigenous cultures revered domestic roles; they were just as essential as other roles in Mesoamerican society.

Gender complementarity is apparent twice more when discussing social strata among the Aztecs as well as on Aztec sex and marriage. Evans does elaborate that "political offices were typically held by men; however, women had great influence at all social levels, and had rights to express themselves, including in

[26] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 65.
[27] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 414.
[28] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 414.
[29] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 506.
[30] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 415.
[31] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 415.

legal cases, extract themselves from unhappy marriages, and hold property."[32] We see notions of equality in Aztec society as the author indicates that women did have the ability to exercise their influence to a certain extent. When talking about adult duties introduced to Aztec children, "boys were trained at home and in special schools; some girls also attended special religious schools."[33] This juxtaposition between boys and girls obtaining education suggests Evans employs the model gender parallelism.

Scholarship

Utilizing scholarship as a primary source highlights the significance of having an objective standpoint when studying gender and sexuality in Mesoamerica. Cultural relativism, or the notion of understanding an individual's beliefs and practices based on that person's own culture is an apt theory for this field. Pete Sigal, for instance, studies gender and sexuality in the context of Mesoamerican culture rather than analyzing it against Western gender concepts. In an article on Nahua goddesses, Sigal explores the role of Nahua goddesses in pre-Hispanic times. He argues that the Nahuas related sexuality to fertility, a dual division between moderation and excess, and a concept of ritual that deferred daily rules on sexual activity.

Sigal opens his article by introducing the reader to Cihuacoatl, the ancient Nahua goddess whose name translates to *serpent woman*. He includes background information regarding the goddess, as well as a visual description of her from Sahagun's Florentine Codex. He describes her as "conceptualized in the pre-conquest Nahua universe alternately and concurrently as a feared deity, a defeated woman and a cross-dressed man."[34] This description of Cihuacoatl suggests the blurring of the gender binary in Mesoamerican beliefs. He further explains that in Nahua gender ideology, Cihuacoatl's "nature as a feared individual who could kill upon a whim and who forced individuals to work signified a powerful masculine individual." Again, we are presented with the

[32] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 473.
[33] Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America,* 506.
[34] Pete Sigal. "Imagining Cihuacoatl: Masculine Rituals, Nahua Goddesses and the texts of the Tlacuilos." *Gender & History.* 22, (2010), 538.

complexity of Aztec gender ideology. Although Cihuacoatl appears to be a woman, she possesses masculine qualities. In fact, Sigal describes this as a "jumble of the masculine and the feminine—coming from a society that we believe rigorously separated masculine from feminine roles." Sigal analyzes his primary source base, which includes pre-and-post-conquest manuscript texts such as the Florentine Codex and Codex Borbonicus. He informs the reader of the challenge posed by texts and images like these, which require close analysis. Considering the lack of primary sources available from pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, Sigal rightfully claims that images are just as important as text sources. The reader is informed that the Nahuas maintained a strong oral tradition. It is explained that it is important to acknowledge that Nahuatl as a language does not possess gendered pronouns.[35] His discussion on the historiography of this topic is limited to two paragraphs, followed by an extensive analysis of some key Nahua goddesses.

Sigal emphasizes that sex and gender are not identical, and that the limits between the two concepts in Nahua culture, need careful analysis.[36] Sigal continues to use Cihuacoatl as an example, and questions whether the figure was a god or a goddess. He asserts that "neither Cihuacoatl nor any of the other Nahua god can be defined easily based on these binary divisions."[37] Thus, it is clear that Sigal follows the non-binary model in order to approach the discussion of feminine figures and gender/sexuality as a whole. Towards the end of the article, Sigal states the importance of these goddesses and how his findings support his overall argument. This conclusion makes his article well-balanced and reminds the reader of the importance of this research topic. Sigal's writing style is clear and concise, which is ideal for scholars attempting to follow the non-binary model.

Rosemary Joyce is another scholar who employs the non-gender binary approach to her scholarship. In her book, *Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica,* Joyce aims to explain the intricate and vibrant Mesoamerican concepts of gender in a way that shows how they weren't limited to two fixed sets of

[35] Sigal, "Imagining Cihuacoatl," 538.
[36] Sigal, "Imagining Cihuacoatl," 539.
[37] Sigal, "Imagining Cihuacoatl," 540.

identities.[38] Though Joyce focuses on the Maya in this study, she does include discussions on how the Aztecs assigned gender and age classifications on the bodies of nobles and commoners. This demonstrated how they reinforced gender hierarchy and complementarity. Furthermore, Joyce argues that gender is a way of being in the world, through dressing, actions, and overall presenting the corporeal self.

Some scholarly discussions demonstrate both the gender complementarity and non-binary model, which reflects this undergoing transformation in the way Mesoamerican women are portrayed. Susan Kellogg, for example, examines how the Mexica viewed gender as parallel, where men and women both played important public roles.[39] Women held positions of authority that did not distinguish between public and private spaces. Consequently, Kellogg makes two arguments. The first, there was no single type of *cihuatl*, or woman; class also influenced women's experiences. Second, she claims that women's experiences show that although gender differentiation was central to Aztec ideology and society, describing this type of distinction would not be adequate. Although men and women were viewed as different from each other, both were seen as autonomous adults whose responsibilities were essential for sustaining the Mexica society. Kellogg seems to contradict herself, as she first states that the Mexica saw gender as parallel, while later she argues that both men and women were viewed as autonomous. How can genders be complementary to each other while being autonomous? Don't genders need to influence each other in order to be complementary? There is a contradiction in perspectives here, which is indicative of the transformation in portrayals of Mesoamerican women in history.

Mesoamerican studies employ the non-binary model. Stockett argues that we should be careful when referencing either model of hierarchy or complementarity to explain gender ideologies and gendered practices of that era. She declares that "[…] we should turn our attention away from debating the relative merits of these

[38] Rosemary Joyce, *Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).
[39] Kellogg, "The Woman's Room," 563.

models and focus instead on the exploration of pre-Columbian identity."[40] Approaching Mesoamerica with the intent of understanding identity as a whole is more beneficial than to approach it with a binary lens. Stockett supports this claim by reminding readers that gender hierarchy and complementarity are both rooted in Western understandings of the sexual division of labor. Thus, these understandings may not always accurately characterize past social systems.

Traci Ardren is another scholar who began to push for the use of the non-binary model. She describes three major themes regarding gender in Pre-Hispanic America.[41] Ardren examines gender in native cosmologies, the intersection of gender and the body, as well as studies of work and specialization. Ardren states that there still exists a disagreement amongst scholars as to what gender roles entail in precontact indigenous cultures. To some, biology is just one aspect of gender roles. She thus concludes that engendered archaeology requires a careful approach toward the way in which we reconstruct the history of these cultures. Ardren acknowledges the potential risks of misunderstanding Pre-Hispanic cultures through the use of engendered archaeology.

With limited books dedicated solely to Mesoamerican women, it is still crucial for scholars to bring their discussions to the forefront. Miriam Lopez Hernández's book on Aztec women and deities exemplifies just that.[42] This book offers a panoramic view of women's lives by discussing poor women to goddesses. Her monograph is divided into three sections, discussing women's life cycles, occupations, and religion. Lopez Hernández discusses their societal contributions, stating "obligations were distributed by sex; in that framework, women played an important role in agricultural and artisanal production and in local commerce."[43] She focuses on

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[40] Miranda K. Stockett. "On the Importance of Difference: Re-Envisioning Sex and Gender in Ancient Mesoamerica." *World Archaeology*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (Dec. 2005), 566-578.

[41] Traci Ardren. "Studies of Gender in the Prehispanic Americas," *Journal of Archaeological Research,* 16, no. 1. (March 2008): 1-35.

[42] Miriam Lopez Hernández, *Aztec Women and Goddesses*, (México City: FCAS- Fundación Cultural Armella Spitalier, 2012), accessed February 18, 2018.

[43] Lopez Hernández, *Aztec Women and Goddesses*, 38.

archaeological evidence to understand how women's lives were at the time. Her study finds that women's conditions were influenced by what social class they belonged to. Additionally, she states that while men focused on imperial expansion, ancient Mexican women "contributed to the stability of the state through social, biological, and economic reproduction."[44] Thus, women's daily activities, though divided by gender in society, were viewed just as significant as men's daily tasks. Men and women both had a responsibility to their society, and they fulfilled it through their daily tasks.

Film

Film is a medium that can reach a wider audience compared to textbooks and scholarship. The three films in this study depict ancient Mexican women differently, further highlighting Mesoamerican women's complex societal roles. Two films, both directed by Mexican filmmaker Juan Mora Catlett, follow the gender complementarity model, while Salvador Carrasco's film follows a gender hierarchy model. Though a different medium from textbooks and scholarship, these films connect with the former sources because they contribute to the discourse of gender roles in ancient Mexico. Portrayals of ancient Mexican women in these films offer a chance to spark conversations between viewers about the roles they played in society. In an online article, Mora Catlett states that when premiering *Eréndira* in Michoacán, an elderly indigenous woman expressed that she was "very happy because it was the first time she had understood a Mexican film," and that one man stated that the film made him feel proud of his culture for the first time.[45] Consequently, Mora Catlett claimed that those comments justified his purpose for creating the film.

Eréndira Ikikunari (2006) is a Mexican film about a young girl whose community becomes disrupted by Spanish explorers who have just overthrown the Mexica Empire. This story follows the gender complementarity model as Eréndira, the film's protagonist,

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[44] Lopez Hernández, *Aztec Women and Goddesses*, 67.

[45] Juan Mora Catlett, "Eréndira Ikikunari: Celebrating Indigenous Cultural Heritage" *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, (Fall 2009), accessed April 15, 2018, https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/er%C3%A9ndira-ikukinari

leads a resistance against the Spanish and ultimately gains the respect of her male elders. Throughout the film, Mora Catlett represents Eréndira as a fearless woman who challenges male authority and becomes a leader despite the initial opposition of her community. This film reflects the gender complementarity model as Eréndira's outspoken, persistent, and passionate personality gains her a position parallel to male warriors in her community. Her introduction in the film reveals her being prepared to marry a young man named Nanuma. Her demeanor during this moment reveals that she is not happy at the thought of marriage, as she is told by an elderly woman what her duties will be once she is wed. She is nonconformist as the elderly woman tells her she is stubborn and thus dishonors her family. Eréndira does not appear to be affected by those comments. Moments later, Spanish conquistadors arrive, leading to a division between the indigenous groups there. While forging an alliance is a viable option for the local leaders such as her uncle Timas, others including Eréndira are not willing to allow the Spaniards to intervene with their lives.

Eréndira's leadership highlights the gender complementarity model the moment she and a group of her community approach the village leaders and contest their decision to work with the Spanish. She does not stay quiet, as the men expect her to, and challenges Nanuma. When Nanuma's warrior status is questioned, he grabs Eréndira by the hair and drags her out of anger. This does not intimidate her, as she throws a rock at Nanuma in retaliation. Despite being surrounded by her community and leaders, who are mostly, if not all male, Eréndira stands her ground as she voices her concern about the recently arrived foreigners. She further demonstrates that she is not easily intimidated after Nanuma's violent treatment as she tells her uncle Timas that she wants to fight alongside the rest of the warriors, whom are all male; Eréndira states that she is willing to die fighting. Timas reluctantly allows her to join the resistance, but she is not accepted by the men when she attempts to work with them instead of the women. The men ostracize Eréndira and tell her to "keep her place." Seemingly resentful of the way the men treat her, Eréndira declares that she will not be Nanuma's nor anyone's woman. Mora Catlett follows the gender complementarity model by depicting Eréndira's

determination to lead the resistance against the Spanish alongside her fellow male villagers

From the moment Eréndira realizes the Spaniard's arrival to when she insists on joining the resistance against them, she continues to persevere and fights like a warrior; she reaches an equal status to men. For example, a pivotal moment in the film is when the natives find a horse that was lost by the Spanish. Bewildered by the foreign beast, which they refer to as a "deer with no antlers," they cannot gain the horse's trust. However, Eréndira proposes to gain control of the animal, and forges a deal with Timas, stating that she will be allowed to fight if she proves she can ride the horse. Though she struggles to mount the horse at first, Eréndira eventually succeeds in taming the horse. The respect that she gained from her community continues to be apparent as she is flanked by soldiers who aim their arrows at the Spaniard who decides to charge towards her. He is fatally struck by an arrow and the crowds begin to chant the name Xarátanga, a Purépecha goddess, as they believe she is embodied by Eréndira. Thus, her status is elevated from local girl, to warrior, to goddess. A disgruntled Nanuma unfortunately kills Eréndira while she mourns the loss of her uncle Timas, a casualty of the battle. The film ends with Eréndira dressed in a different garb, with decorative body paint covering her upper body. Her hair is braided, and she resembles an otherworldly being as she departs on the horse she tamed. This conclusion to the film mythologizes Eréndira's story, memorializing her as a warrior who fought to protect her people against foreign invaders. Eréndira ultimately transcends gender hierarchy by claiming her place as a warrior for her people.

Also directed by Juan Mora Catlett is the film *In Necuepaliztli in Aztlan*, which reflects the gender complementarity model through the depictions of the women characters being equally respected as male figures. Released in 1990, the film is available on YouTube with a current view count of 36,000. It tells the tale of a drought which plagued an ancient Mexican empire. This prompts priests to send a man named Ollin, on a quest to find the earth goddess Coatlicue and present her with offerings, so that the drought could come to an end. Though women are not constant characters, the film includes two female characters. The first is an elderly woman living in a cave; she plays the role of a priestess, as

she warns Ollin of the hardships he will face in taking his tribute to Coatlicue. Like a male village elder or a priest, the elderly woman is highly revered for her power. The second woman's role is that of another elderly woman who plays Coatlicue. In both cases, Ollin appears intimidated by these magical and godly women, and speaks to them with utmost respect. The two women in this film have power and the ability to manipulate and control nature; they are of equal status to male priests and deities, characteristic to the Aztec perception of duality.

Contrary to Mora Catlett's *Eréndira Ikikunari* and *In Necuepaliztli in Aztlan,* Carrasco's *The Other Conquest (La Otra Conquista)*, released in 1999, employs the gender hierarchy model. Isabel, the only woman at the forefront of the film, is constantly disregarded by men. The film follows a young, illegitimate son of Moctezuma, who struggles to resist being converted over to Christianity following the fall of the Aztec empire. Isabel, his half-sister, attempts to survive the downfall of her father's empire, as well as tries to sabotage Hernán Cortés via his letters to the Spanish Crown. Like Eréndira, Isabel appears to be unhappy with the Spanish takeover of her people. She expresses her thoughts to Cortés and makes certain demands of him to help keep her brother alive. Unlike Eréndira, Isabel's opinion is frequently disrespected and overlooked by Cortés and his men. He uses her for his physical desires, and only appears to respect her when she performs services for him, which mainly included translation between the natives and the Spanish. Regardless of her role as a translator, there is a clear hierarchy between Cortés and Isabel throughout the film.

Isabel becomes Cortés' favorite companion to have during his stay in central Mexico, and she tries to take advantage of her new position in order to bring him down. However, she is unsuccessful as she is caught attempting to forge a letter by Cortés that would grant benefits to herself and her half-brother. Eventually her character is imprisoned while expecting a child. Her constant failure to sabotage Cortés, including the lack of Spanish respect indicates that the director employs a gender hierarchy model. Although Isabel does not show fear towards the men around her, the last we see of her in the film is her alone, with child and imprisoned. This film follows the gender hierarchy model through Isabel's decline and lower status in comparison to men.

Conclusion

The narrative in these textbooks, scholarship, and films suggests that portrayals of Mesoamerican women is complex and transforming as the discourse on them continues. While earlier scholars employed the model of gender hierarchy, recent scholars have increasingly employed gender complementarity, most likely as a result of the increase in feminist theory following the feminist movements of the late twentieth century. As we continue to move forward in our discussions on gender ideologies, more scholars are beginning to challenge complementarity and move towards the non-binary approach, which calls for scholars to not limit themselves to studying women through a gender lens. Focusing on gender limits our ability to learn more about Mesoamerican women's lives. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware that our perspective on Mesoamerican gender roles may not be synonymous to the way ancient Mesoamericans thought during their lifetime. At the same time it is important to continue the discourse of ancient Mexican women's roles, especially because gender and identity are so relevant to our lives today.