

RUDOLFO ANAYA

**"I'M THE KING":  
THE MACHO IMAGE**



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**WHAT IS MACHO?**

The word *macho* has one of the shortest definitions in the Spanish language dictionary, and yet the cult of macho behavior (machismo or the macho image) is as ambiguous and misunderstood as any aspect of Hispanic/Latino culture. To be macho is to be male, that's simple, but when the term is applied to Hispanic male behavior, then the particulars of the role are defined according to the particular culture. From Spain to Latin America, from Mexico to the Chicanos in the USA, one gets a slightly different definition of the macho image at every turn.

Being macho is essentially a learned behavior; as such it is a conditioned behavior. We males learn to act "manly" from other males around us; the "macho" that preceded us was learned from the cultures from which it evolved. Many forces impinge on the Hispanic/Latino cultures, so throughout history, machismo—or the conditioning of male behavior—has attracted all sorts of positive and negative elements.

Many cultural forces (from literature and religion to the latest musical fad, movies, MTV, or car styles) play a role in promoting the behavior of the macho, and these influences are the issue here. Still, beneath the conditioned behavior, the essence of what maleness means remains largely unchanged across time. We can describe conditioning and its effects; it is more difficult to describe the essence of maleness, especially today, when males seem to be retreating from describing, or laying claim to, a positive macho image.

Drunkenness, abusing women, raising hell (all elements of *la vida loca*) are some mistaken conceptions of what macho means. And yet the uninformed often point to such behavior and call it machismo. In fact, much of this negative behavior is aped by a new generation, because as young men they are not aware that they are being conditioned. Young men acting contrary to the good of their community have not yet learned the real essence of maleness.

## SEX

One generation passes on to the next its ideals and rituals, and important behavior that has to do with our sexuality. People have always composed games about sexuality. In this respect, the macho image has a history. The cock-of-the-walk behavior is game playing. Games and sex go hand in hand.

The game can be spontaneous and fun, reflecting the courtship and mating we see in the natural world. Part of the purpose of gender games is to reflect nature's dance of life, evolution playing itself out in each new encounter. Animals, insects—high and low organisms—engage in this dance of life. We are caught up in "nature's game," this vast and beautiful dance that is part of the awe of life. We feel love in the harmonious flow of nature, the movement of birth and death, and we take meaning from our sexual natures.

But the game has taken on a manipulative aspect. The assertion of one over another is part of our conditioning. The game has turned ugly in many ways, and we are numbed by the outcome of the conditioning factors. But we can still be in charge of the game, and change the negative aspects of the game. We can choose not to play a power game that hurts and demeans women.

Macho behavior, in large part, revolves around the acting out of sex roles. The games the macho plays may be part of nature's dance, with the goal of procreation imprinted on the cells long ago, but the power to subjugate is also inherent in our relationships. When the male gets caught up in superficial power plays that have to do with sex, he is acting against his community. It's time to analyze the social forces that condition negative behavior and toss out the ones that destroy family, friendship, and community.

For the Chicano, the roots of the idea of maleness extend not only into the Mediterranean world but also into the Native-American world. We still act out patterns of male behavior emerging from those historic streams. To fully understand our behavior requires a knowledge of those literary and cultural histories. The Don Juan image and how it sets the tone for a pattern of behavior from Mediterranean Spain to the present

day is only one aspect of a behavioral legacy. We need to know the role of the Native-American warrior and how he cares for the community. The Chicano is a synthesis of those, and many more, streams of influence.

**"I CAN PISS THE FARTHEST"**

Little boys like to brag about the length of their penises, or they have contests to see who can piss the farthest. Acting out "I'm bigger, I'm better," the game begins to have its built-in power aspect. Later, boys will brag about having scored with a girl, and in the boast is contained a hint of the power they have exercised. Those who haven't yet scored have less power. They're virgins in the game. Those who don't see girls as the goal to be conquered have even less power. A hierarchy of needs and behavior begins to define the male role, and the power inherent in it. The truer essence of male and female doesn't need this hierarchy, for hierarchy implies the use of power over others. And why should that which is most natural to our nature, our sexuality, require us to deal with others as objects?

Macho needs partners, not objects.

Until my father's generation, the men of the Mexican culture of the southwest U.S. could continue to speak Spanish and interact within the parameters of their history. That is, they set the code of behavior, one that was communal and focused on survival in an often harsh land. As Anglo-Americans moved into the territory, a wrenching of male relationships took place. As Anglos moved in, the language of domination shifted from English to Spanish. The Anglo-American law came to New Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century, but the rule of law in daily life and most communal enterprises remained Spanish. It was not until after World War II that the ways of my ancestors were overwhelmed. And therein lies an epic tragedy.

My father's generation *had* to adjust to the new language, the new man in town, the new laws. To be a man under Anglo domination was difficult if you didn't have the tools. I saw men broken by the new time, the new space. If they didn't adjust to the new language, they were demeaned. I now better understand my father's behavior, why he gave up. He didn't have the language, the tool with which to protect his own dignity, his own

concept of macho. An excellent example of this meeting of cultures is shown in the movie *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, a film that takes its story from a real legend.

In some areas the males did absorb one another's concept of maleness. For example, the New Mexican land owners, lawyers, and politicians (those generally known as *los ricos* or *los patrones*) quickly learned to work with their Anglo counterparts. The Mexican vaqueros taught the Anglo cowboys the trade, so there existed some camaraderie on a macho level in those endeavors. But overall, the power of law and language was too vast and overwhelming. The Anglos could dictate roles; they could piss the farthest, so to speak.

### "I'M THE KING"

"*Sigo siendo el Rey*. I'm the king" are the lyrics from a popular Chicano rap song I hear on the radio. The words and rhythm are catchy. I listen to the song and find myself repeating the lines.

Macho behavior is instilled in us as children. Both father and mother want their boys to grow up to be manly. Usually, the more traditional the rules of behavior are for the macho, the stricter the behavior the child learns. When he becomes a man the child sings, "I'm the king. I rule the family, like my father before me, and what I say goes." The child is the father to the man. But fathers at home are more and more rare. The child turns to the gang in the streets. A new style of being king is learned.

My parents knew a wonderful couple, old friends, who came to visit. My mother and her *comadre* would cook up big meals, my father and his *compadre* would buy the wine. It was fiesta time. The old man would have a few glasses of wine and start acting like the king. "*Yo mando*," he would tell his wife, and the teasing about who ruled, the man or the woman, would go on. Visiting across the kitchen table and drinking wine, they were all caught up in discussing the roles of man and woman.

It has always been so. In that space of the family fiesta in the small kitchen, they could define and redefine their roles. The mask of gaiety put on for the fiesta allowed them to speak freely. But beneath the surface a real dialogue was going on, defining and refining the roles of the men and the women. Do we have that dialogue about machismo going on in our

community today? Or have we accepted old roles conditioned by forces beyond our control? Are we too programmed to see the light?

The male child observes and learns to be the king, how to act as *número uno*, how to act around men and women. In a community that is poor and often oppressed there is much suffering, so he is taught *aguantar*: to grin and bear it. "*Aguántate*," the men around him say. A macho doesn't cry in front of men. A macho doesn't show weakness. Grit your teeth, take the pain, bear it alone. Be tough. You feel like letting it out? Well, then let's get drunk with our *compadres*, and with the *grito* that comes from within, we can express our emotions. Lots of essays could be written on *aguantar*. The women also learn *aguantar*: Bearing it crosses the gender boundary. How women express the floodwaters of the *aguanto* is now being documented by Chicana writers.

The macho learns many games while learning to be *número uno*. Drinking buddies who have a contest to see who can consume the most beer, or the most shots of tequila, are trying to prove their maleness. From the pissing contest to drinking, the wish to prove his manliness becomes antisocial, dangerous. The drunk macho driving home from the contest he won can become a murderer.

The car in our society has become an extension for the macho. The young male hungers for the most customized, flashiest car. It replicates him. It is power. The car is used in the mating ritual. As in our small villages generations ago the young vaqueros came into town to show off their horses and their horsemanship, the young now parade the boulevard showing off their cars. The dance is the same; the prize is the same.

To other males, the *vato* with the best car is saying, "I'm bigger, I'm better, I'm the king." Exactly the lyrics to the rap song. "*Sigo siendo el Rey*," he sings, "I continue being the king." The song describes one goal of the macho, to be king, to be *número uno*, to answer to no one. The message is aimed not only at other males, it is also for the female of the species.

### OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

But guns have entered the game. Perhaps they've always been there, because certainly the Mexican *charro* and the cowboy of the movies both carried pistols, both fought it out with the bad guys, and the fastest draw

won. In the rural areas hunting is most often male behavior. The gun extends the power and the sexuality of the young men. Now you can strike farther and deadlier.

It is time to call that behavior that is good, good. And that which is negative to the self and the community, not good. To be unkind and violent is not macho. The *vato* in the song who wants to be the king needs to find positive ways of acting for his community.

In my generation the "attitude" of James Dean influenced young male behavior, as did that of black musicians and black talk. Today, parents worry about the violent influence of the movies. The characters portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger (and other such exaggerated macho images) and the Power Rangers have become symbols of violence in our society. Machos seem to solve problems only through violence, and quickly. Discourse and problem solving, which take time, are not honored in such movies. Parents worry about the influence such media are having on the young. Macho has really gotten out of hand; in fact, it's been perverted by those who use a false idea (ideal) of manliness to achieve their goals. We need to stand up and say, loud and clear, that violence and oppression are not macho.

As more Chicano families become single-parent families, the traditional role of the father and the extended-family males will not be as influential in shaping the behavior of boys. The boys are being conditioned instead by the behavior they see on TV, in movies and music videos. Boys loose in the hood are being shaped by the gang instead of the father.

*La ganga* shapes behavior, provides initiation, belonging. (Life in the gang—whether it's a neighborhood group of boys; an athletic fraternity ("the jocks"); or a gang into *la vida loca*, cruising, drinking, drugs, and guns—is a subject that requires a book to itself.) In the traditional culture, we didn't practice drive-by shooting as initiation into maleness. Young Chicanos moving into the maleness of the gang now practice a more violent form of initiation.

Young Chicano males learn from the past generations (drinking is often learned from brothers or close relatives), and such behavior is greatly influenced by the mainstream society. The influence of the Anglo-American culture on the Chicano culture cannot be overlooked. We can no longer speak of a continuum of learned behavior that is solely Mexican

macho, because young males are greatly influenced by the totality of the culture around them. MTV, music, movies, television, and the behavior of other cultural groups *all* influence the behavior of the young Chicano male. To truly understand himself, and his maleness, the young male *must* ask himself: Who is affecting me? What do they want of me? How can I take charge of my own life?

There is a lesson to be learned here. Let us *not* repeat the loss of the prior generation, a loss we see today in the streets. Let us *not* be "powerless" as men. Let us *not* act out negative behaviors. We have within us the power to change. We have the future of our community at stake, so macho behavior has to be used positively for the community.

### LOS CHUCOS

Each new generation becomes a new link in the group's tradition, but also transforms behavior. My adolescent years saw the advent of the *pachuco*, a radical departure in the male behavior of the small New Mexican town I knew. Who were *esos vatos locos* imitating in the forties when they invented the *pachuco* argot, the dress, sexual liberation in attitude and action, use of drugs, use of cars, etc.? Was there a continuous line of macho behavior in which the *chucos* were a link? Or was the behavior so spontaneous and new that the *pachucos* initiated a new definition of what it meant to be macho? After all, being macho does mean to defend the territory, and the *chucos* did defend their barrios against mainstream encroachment. Were the *pachucos* a reaction to the growing oppression by Anglo America? Partly, but once the warriors defined themselves, they spent as much time fighting each other as they did fighting the enemy, *el gabacho*.

The *pachuco* became a new model of behavior, breaking with the past, and yet in his role vis-à-vis *la chucha*, the male-female dance contained the same old elements embedded in the Mexican culture. The power play was definitely at work. *La chucha*, as liberated as she was from her contemporary "square" sister, who remained a "nice" girl, was still subservient. The *pachuco* loved to show off his baby doll.

This makes us question if breaks with the past are really radical, or does only the surface dress of the macho change? Beneath the zoot suit of

the *pachuco*, old cultural forces and conditioned behavior continued to define the relationship between the macho and *his* woman. "*Esta es mi ruca*," he said proudly, introducing the woman as property in which he was pleased.

The *pachuco* practicing *la vida loca* continued to influence the definition of macho behavior into the nineties. They were the early lowriders. They spawned the baby chooks and those Chicano males who today are acting out roles, sometimes unknowingly, with roots in the *pachuco* lifestyle. (The Chicano rapper borrows from the black rapper, but in his barrio, in his strut and talk, he is borrowing as much from the old *veteranos*.) This role of an "unconscious energy" in the community is something we can't measure, but it's there. History is passed on not only in stories and books, but by osmosis.

It makes us ask: Is behavior only learned? Or is there real maleness, a golden rule not only in the blood but in the myths? I look at the young machos parading down the street, acting out their roles, and I wonder how much of their behavior comes from that unconscious influence, something inherent in maleness itself. There is something in that dignity of maleness we don't want to give up. But what is it? We know those negative forces that condition us have to be repudiated. But we also yearn to be noble men, and to act in a noble fashion for our families.

### LA FAMILIA

The *pachuco* macho behavior, while very visible in the barrio (and introduced to a larger audience by the U.S. Navy anti-*pachuco*, anti-Mexican riots during the early forties in Los Angeles, and made more visible through the Valdez "zoot suit" film), was not the only model of maleness in the community. A far greater percentage of the men of the barrios went about their work, raising families, trying to do the best they could for them. Macho means taking care of *la familia*. Perhaps this is the most important definition of macho, the real, positive meaning of the word. And yet it is often given short shrift. Critics often look at the negative behavior of the macho and forget the positive.

In the villages and barrios of New Mexico when I was growing up, being manly (*hombrote*) meant having a sense of honor. The intangible of the

macho image is that sense of honor. A man must be honorable, for himself and for his family. There is honor in the family name. *Hombrote* also means providing for the family. Men of honor were able to work with the other men in communal enterprises. They took care of the politics of the village, law and order, the church, the *acequia*, and the old people.

The greatest compliment I could receive as a child when I did a job well was to be called *hombrote*. I was acting like an *hombre*, a man. This compliment came from both males and females in the family and in the extended family. By the way, this compliment is also given to the girls. They can be *hombrotas*, as well as *muy mujertas*, "very womanly." Either way, the creation of male and female roles are created and rewarded with the appropriate language, and the language is male-centered.

Much is now written about male bonding, how the father and other males in the community shape the macho image. In Hispanic culture the role of the *compadres* is such a role. (The *compadres* are the godfathers, for lack of a more thorough definition.) The *compadres* bond at marriages, baptisms, or other family celebrations. Their goal is to ensure the welfare of the child that one of the *compadres* has baptized or confirmed. The best man at the wedding becomes a *compadre*. *Compadrazgo* has a very positive role to play. The *compadres* act "manly" toward one another, and the children of the *compadres* learn male behavior through those interactions.

Still, it's not just the males that are in charge of shaping the macho image. Women play an important role.

### THE WOMAN CREATES THE MACHO

Talking about being macho also means talking about the role of women in our lives. In a traditional setting, the Mexican mother raises the male child and has a great influence on the learned macho behavior of the child. We learn a lot about the sexual behavior from the males of the clan, but the mother, if she does the raising of the male child, is a most crucial ingredient in the evolving macho role.

Food, warmth, protection, the first sounds, and all that has to do with the tactile sense of the first years on earth are provided by the mother. In our culture the mother is the first confidante of the male child. If the Catholic Church says, Give me the child for indoctrination for the first six

years of life and I will mold a lifelong Catholic, the mother has already imprinted her femininity on the child and the child's response to that feminine aura in the womb. No wonder mothers exclaim at birth, "I have created."

In her novel, *Face of an Angel*, Denise Chavez explores the role of women in the formation of macho. By exploring the lives of women in the culture, she gives us an excellent, uninhibited view of the woman's influence on the life of the male. Other Chicanas are also doing this in their writings. Ana Castillo in her essay on machismo (in *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, University of New Mexico Press, 1994) has much to tell us of the history of the macho image. We need to listen to the ideas of such writers as the role of the macho is transformed. By us, by them.

Oedipal complexes and fears aside, we are our mother's creation, and so early macho behavior will be shaped actively and by nuance by the mother. Perhaps this is what we recognize when we attribute great value to the family. A mother who is active in shaping the maleness of her child will produce a more integrated man; if the mother is not there or if her behavior has been conditioned by an oppressive patriarchy, a more dysfunctional child will emerge. (This role of the woman who has historically been controlled by the demands of a male-oriented society has been amply analyzed by Castillo.)

Chicano males brought up in a positive atmosphere do not hesitate to say they love their mothers. Embracing (*el abrazo*) is as common for the mother as for the father. A continuing relationship with the mother as a guide who provides warmth, love, strength, and direction is integral to the culture. Our community did not traditionally initiate a cut-off age when the young male had to leave the household, i.e., leave his mother's side. Both father and mother remain confidantes—thus a description of the closeness of the family. Only recently, as we copy Anglo-American behavior, and as the status of the culture has changed from rural to urban, do some Chicanos begin to practice readying the child to be completely independent.

As we grow we begin to leave the mother's side. I learned about the male's role in the family and society from my father and his *compadres*, men who worked and drank with him. And I was fortunate to have three

brothers who were around long enough in my adolescent years to allow me to learn from them. I learned from my boyhood friends. Playing together we created and acted out the mythology of boyhood. Sexuality played an important part in those years of definition.

We learn not only how to talk, act, respond, and think like men from the intimate clan of males in which we are raised, we also learn an attitude toward life. We learn that intangible which lies beneath behavior. Part of that essence is how we carry ourselves as men, the dignity and honor we exude. Men who don't have this dignity are *sinvergüenzas*, men without shame. They have a tough time holding their heads high, a tough time being macho. We learn to carry ourselves as men in our families, in the community, and in respect to women and men. And because we are members of a different cultural group living within the boundary of Anglo America, we learn to carry ourselves in respect to the Other, in this case, other white males.

END OF ANAYA READING = HERE.

#### MYTH AND MACHO: LA LLORONA

There are deeper currents to wade in when we speak of our maleness. For me, myths and their inherent messages are integral to a definition of our humanity. Myth and legend shine in our folklore; folklore is a reflection of myth when there is no written text. The stories of the people also define our maleness. Let me propose a few areas of interest that don't have their history in a Eurocentric past. For example, let's look at one of our most persistent legends, which I believe also describes the macho image.

Part of the underpinning of our worldview, our values, is indigenous. The indigenous myths are part of our inheritance, working most often quietly in the cells, in memory, in dreams, and appearing as stories in the folklore. Our male relationship to the female can be better understood if we understand such pervasive legends as that of *La Llorona*. Every Chicano I know has heard of *La Llorona*. Some have actual experiences of the wailing woman, i.e., they claim to have met her. (Who knows how many times we have met her in our dreams and our *pesadillas*, but contemporary psychologists have not been trained to listen to our mythology. They have not