Queer Machos: Gender, Sexuality, Beauty, and Chicano/Latino Men

The Hispanic macho goes out of his way to keep up appearances, to exalt his virility, but he often fails. Sooner or later, his glorious masculinity will be shared in bed with another man.

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Even though beauty is socially, culturally, and historically variable, it is clear that beauty standards have tended to develop in ways that privilege those who possess the physical attributes most valued in any given society at any given historical moment. As a result, hegemonic paradigms of beauty are established and they, in turn, regulate the visibility of bodies. Certain looks and body types are disproportionately displayed in the media, films, or art of any culture whereas others, especially those deemed abject, are not. The privileging of such bodies comes with real personal and socioeconomic consequences. For example, we now know that people who possess traits deemed beautiful, and especially those that are marked as ideal, are automatically granted several privileges: professional advancement, higher income, more friends, and more sex.

Minoritized groups (women, people of color, queers, people with disabilities, and others) have historically had to contend with their positioning as marginalized subjects whose lives are also shaped by hegemonic paradigms of beauty, which—in the United States and most Western societies—can be classified as Anglo, heterocentric, and patriarchal. As Lesley Higgins argues in The Modernist Cult of Ugliness, the “aesthetic ideology within a Western patriarchal system produces a sexual-aesthetic discourse privileging masculinist [sic], heterosexual, class-inflected values—a dominant discourse wholly dependent on its constructed Others.” Thus, beauty standards in Western culture are primarily shaped by an Anglo, patriarchal, and heteronormative lens that determines what looks and body types are
valuable and merit public display while simultaneously marking Others as not being as valuable and, hence, abject. A beauty hierarchy is established and the aesthetic traits of members of minoritized ethnic groups are, more often than not, less valued than those of the members of the dominant culture.

The displays of bodies that make their way into forms of cultural production shape the everyday lives, experiences, and identities of people. For example, the consistent portrayal of women as erotic objects and of Black men as criminals in the media, as well as in other forms of cultural production, has played a role in maintaining these groups in subjugated positions. In the case of Chicano/Latino men, an array of stereotypes, overwhelmingly negative, abound: Latin lover, buffoon, clown, gang member, drug dealer, “dirty Mexican,” and “lazy Mexican.” These images have contributed to an aesthetic discourse that has vilified, dismissed, objectified, exoticized, and eroticized Chicano/Latino men. Hegemonic paradigms of beauty that are constructed solely around Anglo, patriarchal, and heteronormative values prevent minoritized people from becoming the beneficiaries of the privileges associated with possessing traits deemed aesthetically valuable by the dominant culture. Therefore, it is imperative to permit the articulation of alternative models of beauty and to recognize that, contrary to popular belief, the aesthetic values of Western culture are not solely constructed around Anglo, patriarchal, or heteronormative codes.

In this chapter, I examine representations of Chicano/Latino men that can and have contributed to a more inclusive paradigm of beauty—extending well beyond the archetypes mentioned above. I highlight queer artists and images of queer Chicano/Latino men that, I assert, have both shaped and shaken up Chicano/Latino aesthetics and male aesthetics overall. The works of writers John Rechy and Michael Nava, performance artist Luis Alfaro, playwright Guillermo Reyes, and visual artists Alex Donis and Héctor Silva reconfigure male aesthetics by diverging from the stereotypical representation of Chicano/Latino men as well as from Western patriarchal heteronormative paradigms of beauty. I focus on a figure that exists in their works and has been prevalent in U.S. cultural production for decades: the queer macho. I posit that the queer macho can be used to remove Chicano/Latino men from an abject state to one where they are recognized as valued human beings by allowing them to be portrayed in their full complexity, outside of rigid gender, sexual, and aesthetic codes. The queer macho permits Chicano/Latino men to be portrayed as courageous and heroic, masculine and feminine, (homo)