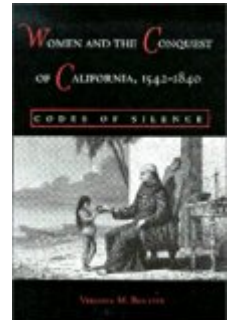


Virginia M. Bouvier. *Women and the Conquest of California, 1542-1840: Codes of Silence.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001. x + 266 pp. \$42.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8165-2025-1.



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Hearing the Silence

In recent years attention to the participation of women and to issues of gender has deepened and enriched our understanding of the history of California and the West. Studies such as those by Albert Hurtado, Antonia Castaneda and others have shed new light on the role of women on the California frontier.[1] Virginia M. Bouvier, in *Women and the Conquest of California* makes an important new contribution to an understanding of the Spanish conquest by exploring the significance of gender ideologies and women's presence in the colonization of Alta California. Her study includes both indigenous women and female Hispanic settlers during the Spanish period of exploration, evangelization, and colonization. Refusing to accept a simplistic model that pits the Indians against the Spanish, this book underscores the complexities of race, ethnicity, and gender relations on the development of life on the California frontier.

Using methodologies drawn from disciplines such as anthropology, gender studies and literary criticism as well as from history, Bouvier expertly

examines a vast array of sources including mission records, journals, ethnographic accounts, church and government records and correspondence, legal transcripts, and oral histories. She meticulously constructs a sophisticated and richly nuanced analysis of the roles played by American Indian women and Spanish female settlers during the mission period. In addition, she probes the gender ideologies of both indigenous peoples and the Spanish, pointing out that each community held and acted upon deeply ingrained ideas about gender.

In the first chapter, "Mythic Beginnings," Bouvier establishes the centrality of gender ideology to her analysis. Popular culture, such as plays, stories, and novels, had a lasting impact on Spanish ideas about conquest. One example, *Las sergas de Esplandian* (*The Exploits of Esplandian*) depicted California as an island inhabited by black women led by a beautiful queen named Califia. In the novel, the queen and her subjects are both conquered and converted. Bouvier explains, "the fictional representation of California as pagan, as well as female, hierarchically governed, and easi-

ly subdued, reinforced the conquerors' imagined superiority" (p. 11). The myths, she claims, "'masculinized' the conquerors and 'feminized' those to be conquered." Accordingly, these myths helped to shape a belief in "the unspoken paradigm of conquest as a male venture enacted upon a 'feminized' population" (p. 17).

The patriarchal beliefs that shaped the attitudes and expectations of the Spanish led them to preconceptions that would in turn fashion their approach to the California Indians. They assumed, for example, that sexual conquest was necessarily a part of victory. Moreover, their assumptions about gender did not allow them to understand the implications of the presence of Indian women nor did they grasp the roles women played in Indian societies, where women leaders might determine how the Spanish would be received.

Bouvier analyzes Spanish accounts of the establishment of the first missions and presidios in Alta California, noting the meanings that indigenous groups may have attached to the absence of Spanish women. Efforts to establish the missions and presidios were hampered by conflicting attitudes on the part of the military and church on the issue of gender. Franciscan missionaries seeking converts criticized the behavior of Spanish soldiers toward Indian women and the church used this criticism to assert its moral authority over the military. Ultimately, this problem led the Spanish to embark on a major colonization effort that included bringing women and families from New Spain.

Christianized Indian women and their families arrived from Baja California as early as 1772. Subsequently, the Anza expedition of 1775-1776 required that troops be married; women and children were the majority of participants. Bouvier's analysis of the journals from that expedition finds that Hispanic women were central to the colonization effort even though their presence is all too often ignored in the journals except for notations about childbirth. Valued mainly for their re-

productive roles and as teachers and models of proper female behavior, women's voices were rarely heard directly.

Women were central to the activities of the missions, as well. Bouvier notes that the experiences of women varied according to religion, ethnicity, age and civil status, but they played significant roles. Hispanic women worked to support the mission system and taught European customs of hygiene and industry to the Indians. Indigenous women were often forced into the missions; others came by choice. Indian women who converted to Christianity served as teachers of Spanish customs to newcomers. Indian women were at greater risk than men to diseases as well as being vulnerable to the violence and sexual desires of Spanish soldiers.

Crucial to the control of the Indians at the missions was the effort to convert Indians to adopt Christian attitudes toward sexuality and marriage. According to Bouvier, "the transformation of indigenous sexual behavior and marriage practices legitimated the evangelization project" (p. 108). The priests criticized the Indians for licentiousness, unfaithfulness, and polygamy as well as for their customs of easy divorce. With the goal of increasing the population, the effort to force the Indians into Christian marriages turned colonization into a moral crusade. The priests saw promiscuity as causing lack of industry on the Indians' part and even blamed them for contracting venereal disease. Accordingly, adultery, abortion, and even failure to procreate were harshly punished. These attempts to regulate marriage and sexuality seem to have inspired dissent and ultimately resistance on the part of Indian women and men.

The chapter on resistance is especially interesting. Bouvier argues that the persistence of women healers and religious leaders was a crucial factor in the struggle of the Indians against their colonizers. In addition, Indian women and men resisted conquest in several other ways.

There were rebellions and local revolts led by both women and men. Some Indians ran away or simply refused to comply with attempts to control their sexuality or their religious ceremonies. They refused to attend church or do chores, even though this often led to punishment. And they also practiced various forms of cultural resistance such as refusing to stop speaking their native languages. According to Bouvier, women resisted speaking Spanish to a greater degree than men. Clothing was another issue of cultural conflict since the mission priests made a clear connection between being civilized and wearing clothing.

The most intriguing theme of this book is Bouvier's depiction of multiple "codes of silence about female experiences, sexuality, ceremonies, and the use of force" (p. 174). Bouvier argues that these "codes of silence" have served to obscure the full history of women's roles in early California. Information about women was often included in primary documents only to be excluded in later historical narratives such as Hubert Bancroft's index of California pioneers, which did not list female settlers. Church authorities attempted to control complaints about the treatment of Indians and in particular, the punishment of females at the missions in order to keep these problems secret from the public.

Codes of silence also existed among the indigenous groups. They kept silent about religious ceremonies, perhaps to protect them from outsiders trying to stop this practice (p. 133). "Cultural codes, spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten, have mediated whose stories were heard then and whose stories are heard now," Bouvier writes (p. 170). Certainly silence could protect those whose cultures were threatened by domination and indigenous groups often used silence to maintain some control over their own lives.

She asserts, "female experiences have remained imbedded in a labyrinth of taboos related to the use of force at the missions, gender relations, indigenous dreams and ceremonies, and

questions related to sexuality" (p. 170). Language also obscured truth; as Spanish displaced native languages, English then displaced it. And, Bouvier points out, if female experience was not valued enough to be documented, reconstructing that history becomes problematic.

Bouvier accomplishes much more than merely to document the presence of women on the California frontier. She illustrates the centrality of women and gender ideologies to an understanding of the history of the region. Most importantly, this book may help scholars to think differently about the analysis of sources. Bouvier looks beyond the obvious, creatively teasing new meaning from the scarce documents to reveal what has been hidden by the "codes of silence." One must acknowledge, however, that these "codes of silence"--along with the fact that most of the sources for this study were written by male observers, and not the women they were about--leaves questions about interpretation. Bouvier notes how the documents copied by hand for Hubert Howe Bancroft are fragmentary when compared with the original texts, obscuring the historical record. And as Bouvier acknowledges, many of the original sources were written in order to justify the conquest of California and are inherently biased. They require talented and careful interpretation.

This book is an important contribution to the history of California because it adds new knowledge while raising significant new questions for future exploration.

Notes

[1]. Antonia Castaneda, "Comparative Frontiers: The Migration of Women to Alta California and New Zealand," Lillian Schissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk, *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), pp. 283-301; Antonia Castaneda, "Engendering the History of Alta California, 1769-1848: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family," *California History* 76:2-3 (Summer-Fall 1997), pp.

230-259; Antonia Castaneda, "Gender, Race, and Culture: Spanish-Mexican Women in the Historiography of Frontier California," *Frontiers* 11 (1990), pp. 8-20; and, Albert Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

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