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Creating Masculinity and Homophobia: Oppression and Backlash under Mexico's Porfiriato

Héctor Armando Navarro

The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, which lasted from 1876 to 1911, brought political stability to Mexico, which in decades prior had seen *caudillos*, military strongmen, seize and then lose power one after the other. In hopes of modernizing and industrializing the nation, Porfirio Diaz welcomed foreign investment from the United States and Europe, and his regime promised “Order and progress.”¹ Part of “progress” meant adopting new social concepts of masculinity and establishing class distinctions to elevate the status of middle and upper class men. Porfirio Díaz and his *científicos*, his technocratic advisors, believed that in order to carry out this mission of modernity, they had to behave as bourgeois men did in Europe and in the European colonies. Consequently, they consulted self-help manuals, including Manuel Antonio Carreño’s *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras* (1854), which promoted European, colonial values such as self-mastery, repression of one’s passions, cleanliness, proper grooming, and control of social “inferiors” such as women and children.² In the process, the Mexican political elite reworked old imperial notions of race and class to characterize indigenous and lower class men as either passive or uncontrollably sexual, which were both represented as feminine qualities. As decades of Díaz’s oppressive authoritarianism angered much of the population, men of lower ranking social groups reacted by depicting him and his regime as elitist and effeminate. To criticize the dictatorship, opponents of the Porfiriato feminized its culturally European identity, targeting scandals like the famous *Baile de los cuarenta y uno* (a private dance in Mexico City where forty-one upper-class men, nineteen of whom cross-dressed, were arrested by police in 1901) and championing more brutish, macho standards of manliness. This embodiment of hyper masculinity in defiance of the Porfirian regime laid some of

¹Robert M. Buffington, "Men and Modernity in Porfirian Mexico," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, <http://latinamericanhistory.oxfordre.com/>, accessed 2 February 2017, 6.

²Edward McCaughan, *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 12-14.

the foundations of the homophobia and machismo that influence conventional Mexican ideals of manhood to this day.

Most scholarship on Mexico's Porfiriato overlooks the topics of gender and masculinity largely because this historical period is deemed unpopular, as Díaz ruled autocratically.³ Indeed, when defining Mexico's national self-perception, many look to and revere the Mexican Revolution, which was fought to oust the dictator. As a result, the majority of analyses of Porfirian Mexico focus on his liberal, market economic policies, political and economic oppression, and the ensuing collapse of the regime during the war; but from a gender lens, the revolution also played out as a struggle against effeminate elitists, who in the eyes of the oppressed did not merit the right to rule. Homosexuality and transvestitism, markers of Porfirian effeminacy, were now an enemy of the nation and a threat to maleness.⁴ Therefore, the macho, "protest masculinity" would define the new ideal man of Mexico who rejected bourgeois, effeminate behavior associated with Díaz and upper class men.⁵ However, post-revolutionary Mexican cinema, literature, and political discourse defined the nation as a male entity by contradictorily celebrating male heroes and homosocial bonding,⁶ and the latter could be a slippery slope towards homosexuality. Consequently, Mexican art and the Mexican state would try to expel or deride effeminacy and homosexuality from national expression.⁷ Cleansing the nation's image therefore entailed celebrating macho values and distancing Mexican identity from queer culture. Thus, the Porfiriato saw a development of masculinity and femininity as a mechanism for delegitimizing those in power and redefining a national identity that was up for grabs.

Markers of Elite Men

Some of the categorizations of gender which Díaz and his *científicos* adopted paralleled the discourse on gender found in nineteenth century British

³ William D. Raat, "Ideas and Societies in Don Porfirio's Mexico," *The Americas*, 30, no. 1 (July 1973): 32-53, 48.

⁴ Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 33-34.

⁵ Buffington, "Men and Modernity in Porfirian Mexico," 7-8.

⁶ Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity*, 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*

imperialism in India. In the context of colonial India, the ethos of masculine behavior was “aggressive-but-gentlemanly” meaning that white, British men exhibited not just physical strength, but also rationality.⁸ By contrast, according to colonial officials, Indian (and especially Bengali) men were unable to exercise rational control over their appetites.⁹ Lack of self-mastery was associated with femininity, implying that Bengali men were less masculine and thus inferior to their white rulers. Easily succumbing to moral vices led to the “vigor of their race” being “sapped;”¹⁰ and in the British colonial imagination, this is why Bengali men were “weak and sickly.”¹¹ On the other hand, British men in power were depicted as “robust” with an inherent “manly character” that vindicated their right to rule over “puny” subordinate males with a “diminutive physique.”¹² Additionally, the *Indian Medical Gazette* claimed that Indian premature sexual activity – which was identified as a symptom of male degeneracy – led to “physical deterioration of the human stock, and physical deterioration implies effeminacy, mental imperfection and moral debility.”¹³ British authorities attributed controversial practices such as child marriages to Indian males’ unnatural lust or “sexually indulgent attitudes.”¹⁴ As a result, Indian women were seen as vulnerable since they were in danger of being violated by unrestrained native men. Consequently, women’s bodies became the sites for establishing and violating the boundaries between male communities (predators and protectors), a consistent theme throughout the colonies of France and Britain, and as we shall see, in Mexico as well.¹⁵ Ultimately, categorizations of gender were constructed to cement power structures between colonial rulers and their subjects. In Porfirian Mexico, the political elite denoted levels of masculinity and femininity, in terms of restraint, degeneracy, sexuality, and morality, in a similar fashion to justify their authority over indigenous and lower-class men.

⁸ Mrinalini Sinha, “Giving Masculinity a History: Some Contributions from the Historiography of Colonial India,” *Gender and History*, 11, no. 3 (1999): 445-460, 448.

⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, “Race and Gender: Gender and Imperialism, Colonial Policy and the Ideology of Moral Imperialism in late nineteenth century Bengal,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, Michael S. Kimmel, ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 217-230, 227.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sinha, “Giving Masculinity a History,” 450.

One way in which upper class men in Mexico could reaffirm their masculinity was to abide by rules of conduct found in self-help manuals. Manuel Antonio Carreño's *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras* (1854) illustrates some of the principles of manhood that Porfirio Díaz, his political advisors, and wealthy *letrados*, "men of letters," sought to emulate. The manual outlines standards of personal comportment in the public and private sphere, which mirror nineteenth century bourgeois values of Europe and European colonies. Regarding men's clothing and grooming for example, the document states, "Our attire must always be neat, not just when we present ourselves in public or walk down the street, but also when we find ourselves in our homes... Neat clothing is not the only condition that enforces our tidiness: it is necessary to not wear anything ripped or tattered."¹⁶ In the same manner, men were "to have cleanliness and restraint in our personalities, in our attire and in our homes, to encourage respect."¹⁷ In relation to women and children, proper men were expected to exhibit dominance, cloaked by a gentle touch of personal restraint and morality. Such behavior can be seen in the expectations of husbands and fathers. "The father takes care of his wife with more tenderness than ever. He lives concerned about the dangers that surround her, accompanies her in her distresses, consoles her when she suffers, and gives himself to her to watch over the sweet fruit of his love."¹⁸ The manual also reasons that tolerance is necessary in domestic life, and as long men do not repress their anger, pride, and hate, they can never achieve moral perfection. Thus, male superiority was framed largely in paternalistic terms, as husbands and fathers were expected to act as stewards of their wives and children. Elite men's behavior was supposed to uphold civilized society and maintain the "harmony that should exist among men."¹⁹

Mexico's political elite during the Porfiriato strived to appear as civilized as bourgeois, European men were depicted to be, which can be seen in photographs of Porfirio Díaz and his technocrat advisors. Figure 1 shows Díaz in his later years sitting among his cabinet members after a presidential procession that took place in Puebla, where the Mexican victory over France was commemorated. Despite the

¹⁶ Manuel Antonio Carreño, *Manual de Urbanidad y Buenas Maneras*, (Lima: Librería Universal, 1875), 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

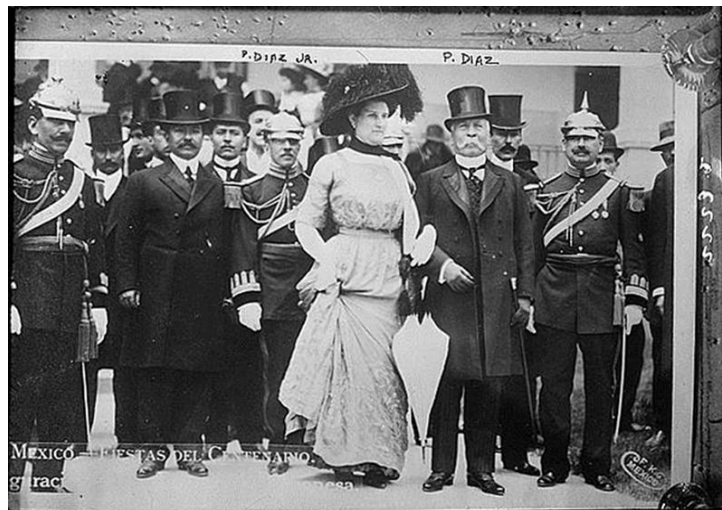
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

celebration being centered on a victory over a European power, Díaz and his *científicos* are dressed in European fashion, including a suit and top hat, which were marks of status and wealth. Figure 2 (also Díaz) and figure 3 (his finance secretary José Yves Limantour) demonstrate the stoic, restrained qualities of manliness outlined in the *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras*. Both Díaz and Limantour are neatly dressed and express a calm demeanor. Opponents of the government would later characterize this elitist aesthetic as a “feminine touch.”²⁰



Figure 1. Porfirio Díaz and his cabinet members after a presidential procession in 1901 in El Castillo del Cerro de San Juan, located in Puebla. “Las Fiestas Presidenciales en Puebla: Inauguración de Mejoras Materiales, El monumento franco-mexicano,” *El Mundo Ilustrado*, (Mexico), January 13, 1901.

Figure 2.
Porfirio Díaz
and his wife,
Carmen Romero



References to physicality and morality as measures of manliness can also be found in the memoirs of Díaz. In these writings, he both derides men he deems inferior and lauds those (including himself and his brother, Félix Díaz) for living up to physical and moral standards of manly conduct. Díaz, who served in the liberal army during Mexico’s Reform War (1857-1861), writes of his military

²⁰ Buffington, “Men and Modernity in Porfirian Mexico,” 7.

campaigns, often in a boastful manner. His methods of ascribing feminine or masculine qualities are rooted in colonial constructions of race and class. When referring to his own behavior, he tries to depict strength, control of one's passions, and clemency. In his memoir about the 1859 invasion of Oaxaca, which was controlled by the conservative army forces, Díaz recounts his experience in handling prisoners of war. In the treatment of captives, he portrays himself as a moral, enlightened general in contrast to his supposedly more brutal opponents. He writes:

My humanitarian sentiment determined that I did not shoot the prisoners, exchanging them for a weapon and warning them not to take part in the war again. But the experience showed me that they did not know how to appreciate my generosity, since they fell for a second and even a third time with the weapons in their hands, which made war endless, and then it was necessary to change my behavior. On the other side, since my adversaries did not give quarter to the few prisoners they made of my men. I decided to follow their example and make reprisal a means of defense.²¹



Figure 3: Finance Secretary José Yves Limantour, 1910.

²¹ Porfirio Díaz, *Tehuantepec: Los Amates, Jalapa, Tequisixtlan, Juchitán*, 1892, 84; obtained from Alberto María Carreño, *Archivo del General Porfirio Díaz: Memorias y Documentos*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (México, D.F.: 1947)

Distinguishing himself as a “humanitarian” practicing “generosity” speaks to the European-inspired ideals of manhood which entail standing strong in the face of one’s immoral enemies. British poet Rudyard Kipling incorporates similar rhetoric about keeping calm in the face of adversity in “If,” (1895) a poem written in the form of fatherly advice to his son, John: “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, and blaming it on you, If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting, too.”²² In General Díaz’s account, he depicts himself as the enlightened individual demonstrating a code of combat in front of untrustworthy prisoners. Moreover, he attributes his need to “change behavior” to the fact that his enemies maltreated his men first, casting the blame on them. By portraying his adversaries as men of cruelty, he is able to frame his subsequent retaliation – his harsher treatment of his prisoners – as a defensive measure. Díaz also calls out physical strength as a marker of masculinity. Hardened men were deemed necessary for carrying out colonialism in both nineteenth century Britain and the Third Republic of France. France after the Napoleonic era juggled two ideological frameworks of imperialism, civility and power.²³ The French, who saw their colonial project as a civilizing mission to spread republican values, also acknowledged that controlling colonized peoples required physical force.²⁴ Consequently, the French ideal was a colonial man with high intellect, yet also superior physical attributes.²⁵ Britain in the 1880’s also tried hardening its youth to prepare young school boys for carrying out imperialism. Public schools incorporated intense sports programs that emphasized discipline and endurance, while organizations like the Boy Scouts and the Boys’ Brigade promoted principles of fair play.²⁶ Historian Gail Bederman calls this two-sided (and somewhat paradoxical) model of masculinity “middle-class men with doses of barbarism,” where men adhered to fair rules of conduct yet retained brute strength.²⁷ Díaz echoes this language when describing his esteemed brother, Félix,

²² Rudyard Kipling, “If,” 1895, first published in *Rewards and Fairies* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1910).

²³ Robert Aldrich, “Colonial Man,” in Christopher E. Forth and Bertrand Taithe (eds.), *French Masculinities: History, Culture, and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 90.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John Tosh, “Manliness, Masculinities and the New Imperialism, 1880-1900,” in *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Pearson Longman (UK: 2016), 198.

²⁷ Ibid.

in his memoirs. He compliments Félix's physical attributes in a manner akin to characterizations of the ideal British and French man, emphasizing virility but also restraint and self-mastery. Félix is said to have been "very fond of all the athletic exercises," and he possessed a "robust, muscular constitution."²⁸ Additionally, he studied at a military college to learn the tactics of war. To distance Félix from the "barbarian Indians" whom he campaigned against as a soldier, however, Díaz points out that Félix "showed great courage and serenity" in battle. The general frequently references stoicism and grace throughout his memoirs to differentiate between men of power and their inferiors, reflecting the colonizer-colonized relationship characteristic of British and French imperialism.

As proponents of nineteenth century liberalism, Díaz and those within his elite circle also advocated individual liberties and Social Darwinism, believing that indigenous people were uncivilized, weak, and incapable of comprehending modern ideas.²⁹ This racist concept had been reinforced by European visitors to Mexico and continued by the Díaz government. A study conducted by a French Doctor Jourdanet in 1865, for example, claimed that the indigenous race was degenerate, and that the native inhabitants of Mexico's Anahuac region for example were predisposed to weakness due to the high elevation of their plateau environment.³⁰ A similar relationship between natives and their milieu was identified in British India. During outbreaks of venereal diseases in British army regiments, physicians surmised that Indian men, via contact with Indian women and a tropical climate, were so immersed in such diseases that they had developed a resistance, one not found in European men.³¹ As in India, medical discourse in Mexico traced the health of indigenous men – in this case their purportedly fragile state – to their physical environment as well as their social milieu.

Another study in 1878 titled "Influence of the altitude on the life and health of the habitant of Anahuac" characterized the typical Anahuac male as "less robust than at lower elevations in the country, his muscles little developed, and his

²⁸ Ibid., 119.

²⁹ Buffington, "Men and Modernity in Porfirian Mexico," 6-7.

³⁰ Robert M. Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 146.

³¹ Philippa Levine, "Venereal Disease, Prostitution, and the Politics of Empire: The Case of British India," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 4 (1994), 579-602, 588-589.

material work relatively minimal.”³² The author also contends that the Anahuac natives had a yellowish, sickly complexion and lived apathetic lives, even though these people were known for transporting heavy loads on their backs.³³ Historically, the few times where native men were recognized by Mexican authorities during the modern era was for their manual labor.³⁴ Overall, however, especially under the *Porfiriato*, commentators labelled Indians as backwards or criticized them for their outdated, traditional practices; and since they lived on lands that the Porfirian state desired for export agriculture (essential for Díaz’s modern economy), natives were seen as an impediment to economic development.³⁵ Therefore, what can be taken from the disingenuous description of Anahuac Indians is that elite men embodied productivity and progress, two tenets of nineteenth-century liberalism, as commendable and necessary for the nation’s success, yet unachievable for indigenous people. Moreover, “scientific” studies, such as the report on Anahuac inhabitants, reinforced this racist attitude by diagnosing inherent symptoms of weakness and sickness in native populations. Criminals were deemed predisposed to degenerative behaviors as well. Carlos Roumagnac, a criminologist and *científico* who served Díaz, writes, “Criminals constituted an identifiable class with distinct traits that included atavistic homosexual tendencies.”³⁶ According to Roumagnac, criminals developed such negative traits because they possessed psychological deficiencies and lived within a degenerative environment. In order to keep indigenous men below white and mixed-race men on the racial and gender hierarchy, the Mexican elite had to downplay their role in providing manual labor to society and criticize or feminize their physical health; and similarly, criminals who threatened societal order had to be portrayed as innately flawed. That way, modernity and a national, masculine image – conceptualized as productive capitalism and principles inspired by other Western economies – would be the preserve of lighter skinned, elite males.

³² “Influencia de altura sobre la vida y la salud del habitante de Anahuac,” *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística*, 4, no. 4-5, (1878), 303. Cited in Robert M. Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico*, 146.

³³ Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico*, 145-146.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁶ Carlos Roumagnac, *Los Criminales en México*, (Mexico City: Tipografía el Fénix, 1904), 180.

Díaz also incorporates language of degeneracy to feminize indigenous men in his memoirs, specifically the *juchitecos* (inhabitants of the indigenous town of Juchitán, Oaxaca) who served in his battalion when fighting against conservative forces stationed in the city of Tehuantepec. Here, he assigns grades of manliness and weakness as a way to establish power relations between high ranking generals like himself and the subordinate troops under his command. Even though most of the soldiers who fought in Díaz's army were indigenous, he gives them little to no credit for his military successes; instead, he refers to them as backwards and in constant need of his instruction. Díaz proclaims himself an enlightened individual while portraying the indigenous *juchitecos* under his command as wild and degenerate. He writes that the "alliance with the *juchitecos* was not very solid, nor was it based on principles, but in its great enmity and rivalry with the town of Tehuantepec."³⁷ He goes on to say that they are "impressionable" and "voluble," lacking the cognition of true soldiers.³⁸ In addition, he disrespectfully characterizes the indigenous community as ignorant and superstitious in an account where the inhabitants of Juchitán want Díaz to embalm a fallen indigenous soldier and prepare his body in their native tradition. Lacking the time, will, and necessary supplies, Díaz orders his doctor to gut the corpse and stuff it with hay, and the *juchitecos*, who "did not know any different," are tricked into thinking that the body was indeed embalmed.³⁹

As much as native men were denigrated for being passive or physically weak and thus in feminized terms, the opposite was also true. For instance, Díaz attacks his indigenous soldiers for becoming "so intoxicated that they commit all manner of disorders, are wounded, and killed in great numbers, and waste much ammunition."⁴⁰ Unlike the ideal European man, the *juchitecos* are described as violent, unable to control their passions. By not fulfilling Europeanized codes of masculine conduct that demand self-mastery and morality, they are, according to Díaz, feminine and subordinate to him. Another account in which he depicts them as savages involves his assault on Tehuantepec in which Isidora Manzano, the wife of a prominent colonel, Eustaquio Manzano, finds herself stuck in the crossfire between Díaz and the conservative army's troops. Caught in the combat, she is

³⁷ Ibid., 84-85.

³⁸ Ibid..

³⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 93.

shot (and almost killed) by one of Díaz's *juchitecos*. Díaz claims the reason was that *juchitecos* were accustomed to conducting war without taking prisoners, therefore willing to kill anyone among the enemy – even women – at all costs.⁴¹ With Isidora Manzano now in his ranks, the boundary between potential rapists and a vulnerable woman is in danger of being crossed. As a result, Díaz assumes the role of her protector:

The lieutenant Montiel declared himself as Isidora's nephew in order to protect her from the *juchitecos*' fury, and with utmost care and great difficulty, I took her to Juchitán with the wounded soldiers. Not having a place to put her, since she was a woman, I could not leave her in the barracks with the wounded men. So to save her from the danger that threatened her life, I entrusted her to the wife of Luis Eduardo del Cristo, who I asked to care for her; she attended to her until Isidora recovered and was able to search for her husband.⁴²

The “fury” of the *juchitecos* emphasizes again their supposed ruthlessness, presenting them as a danger to Isidora not only on the battlefield, but also in a more private sphere among the wounded. Furthermore, Díaz constructs the situation as protecting a vulnerable, presumably upper class, woman from uncontrollable indigenous men. In a sense, he keeps the social and gender boundaries intact, shielding the wife of a prominent colonel from her brutish, male, and social inferiors with “utmost care.” She is then entrusted to another woman, who in the colonial context, would be expected to police such barriers; and in accordance with gender roles, Díaz hopes that Isidora recovers in time to find her husband, who would be responsible for protecting her in the first place.

Scandal and Backlash

While Díaz and his *científicos* preached morality and modernity, the majority of Mexico's population endured poverty and oppression.⁴³ The government promoted economic “progress” in the form of an extractive, export economy that relied on mining and large scale agriculture. To sustain these economic activities, indigenous people and the rural peasantry often had their land

⁴¹ Ibid., 94-95.

⁴² Ibid., 96.

⁴³ *The Storm that Swept Mexico*, directed by Ray Telles, (Berkeley, CA: PBS, 2011)

seized by force.⁴⁴ Additionally, working conditions on *haciendas*, export plantations, were akin to slavery.⁴⁵ The political elite also alienated the urban lower and working classes, whose labor strikes were met with violent suppression by federal troops.⁴⁶ As Díaz's regime grew more unpopular, his opponents blamed Mexico's economic and social woes on upper class elitism and its culture of excess.⁴⁷ Porfirian politicians and *catrines*, "dandies," it was argued, engaged in "feminine" activities such as overconsumption and self-congratulation.⁴⁸ Working and lower class men depicted themselves as laborers defending the nation, which was now threatened by the wealthy bourgeoisie who dressed too fancily and spoke too effeminately to be considered legitimate rulers of the country.

Anti-Porfirian and anti-elitist attitudes would manifest following an incident on November 11, 1901 at 3:00 AM, when Mexican police raided a ball in Mexico City that was held on *La Paz* Street (now called *Calle Esequiel Montes*). The ball involved forty-one men, and between nineteen and twenty-two of them had dressed as women. Although the identities of these men as well as an official account of the ball are still unknown, it is agreed that among these dancers were lawyers, dentists, and even priests.⁴⁹ According to legend, (which sprang from rumors circulating in Mexico City) one of the men caught in the scandal was the nephew of Porfirio Díaz, Ignacio de la Torre y Mier, and the myth recounts that de la Torre bought his way out of the ensuing forced labor that was punishment for the rest of the men.⁵⁰ Although no sources can confirm this, the total number of dancers listed mysteriously changes from forty-two to forty-one after the initial press releases on the ball. Most importantly, the rumor is indicative of the lower and working classes' animosity towards the government and those tied to it; *El Baile de los cuarenta y uno*, "The Dance of the Forty-one," allowed the public to link Porfirio Díaz and his fellow elites to sexual deviation, femininity, and homosexuality. Reports on the "nefarious ball" by police officers, newspapers, and political

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Raat, "Ideas and Societies in Don Porfirio's Mexico," 32-53, 38.

⁴⁷ McCaughan, *The Famous* 41, 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁰ Carlos Monsiváis, "The 41 and the *Gran Redada*," cited in Edward McCaughan, *The Famous* 41, 149.

commentators reveal much about how Mexicans perceived (and *would* perceive in the future) homosexuality and masculinity.

The Mexican press exaggerated many of the stories of the drag ball. Depending on the newspapers' political slant, each periodical rebuked the forty-one men differently. The most vivid descriptions chide the crossdressers for wearing "resplendent hairdos, their fake cleavage, with their shiny sparkling earrings, with their false breasts like the ones worn by anemic society girls."⁵¹ An article from *El Universal* paints the scene as follows:

The guard on duty on the fourth block of La Paz Street noted that in an annex to one of the houses on the block, a ball was being held behind closed doors, and he knocked on the door to request a proper permit. An effeminate type answered the door dressed as a woman with his skirt gathered up, his face and lips full of makeup, and a very sweet and affected way of speaking. At this sight, which turned the stomach of even this most hardened sentinel, he entered the annex, suspecting what might be going on, and found there forty-two such people, some dressed as men and the others as women, dancing and merrymaking in that lair. The watchmen felt an urge to tackle the matter by using his stick and by slapping those scoundrels, but instead, containing his justified ire, he took everyone into the station, and from there they were remitted to Belem Prison.⁵²

The article attacks the "sweet and affected" nature of the crossdresser's speech as a way of connecting his bourgeois demeanor to sexual deviation. Interestingly, the watchman is said to have exercised self-restraint when he refrained from beating the crossdressers; this echoes the ethos of moral conduct which was integral to elevating elite men over their social inferiors. Perhaps noting the officer's control over his "justified ire" is a way to emphasize the decadence of the dancers whose caked makeup suggests a fixation on fashion. *El Popular*, a periodical known for

⁵¹ "El Baile de los Cuarenta y Uno: Los Enviados a Yucatán [The Dance of the Forty-One: Those Who Were Sent to Yucatan]," *El Popular* (Mexico), November 24, 1901.

⁵² "Baile de Afeminados [Ball of Effeminate Men]," *El Universal*, (Mexico), November 19, 1901.

its sensationalism,⁵³ also produced several reports on the ball. One of its articles lists “attacks on morality”⁵⁴ as the dancers’ crime:

As a compliment to the previous report, we will say that among the individuals dressed as women, several were recognized as dandies who are seen daily on Plateros Street. These men wore elegant ladies’ gowns, wigs, fake breasts, earrings, embroidered shoes, and a great deal of eye makeup and rouge on their faces. Once the news hit the boulevards, all kinds of commentaries were made, and the conduct of those individuals was censured. We will not provide our readers with further details as they are summarily disgusting.⁵⁵

Again, the dancers are attacked for their elegance, and they are depicted as dandies. Although the act of cross dressing is supposedly too “disgusting” for the article to provide more details, *El Popular* and *El Universal*’s lurid reimagining of the ball suggests a contradictory desire to explore homosexuality, a topic that in previous decades had never been explicitly mentioned in Mexican discourse.⁵⁶ Now that a crossdressing ball was exposed in the form of scandal, the press pounced on the incident, trying to recreate it as decadent, moral corruption as well as a negative evolution. *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, an anti-clerical and anti-Díaz periodical, pokes fun at a priest who apparently was among the transvestites, calling him an “exquisite priest who was caught among the women.”⁵⁷ He is also referred to as a corrupt, wealthy man, like all priests who “are flour of the same sack.”⁵⁸ *El Popular* also chips in to frame the crossdressers as corrupt Porfirian elites, “a bunch of little rich boys; raised with silver spoons in their mouths.”⁵⁹

Eventually, the forty-one were taken to the southern state of Yucatan to dig trenches for the Mexican army, which was fighting against a Mayan insurrection. Daniel Cabrera, founder of *El Hijo del Ahuizote* did not take this very well,

⁵³ McCaughan, *The Famous 41*, 32.

⁵⁴ “Un Baile Clandestino Sorprendido: 42 Hombres Aprehendidos, Unos Vestidos de Mujeres [Clandestine Ball Raided: 42 Men Apprehended, some dressed as Women],” *El Popular*, (Mexico), November 20, 1901.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ McCaughan, *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, 178.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

warning that allowing crossdressers to serve in the army endangered Mexico's national identity. "The army cannot receive among their ranks individuals who have abdicated their sex, the Nation ought to honor with its uniform neither those who have degraded themselves with rouge and the dresses of prostitutes, nor those who served as their partners."⁶⁰ For Cabrera, allowing feminized men who have subverted their gender and compromised their character shames the country. On a global spectrum, his commentary mirrors nationalist discourse found in the writings of anti-colonial rebellions. Indonesian independence fighters in the late 1940s for instance deemed women who collaborated with Dutch oppressors (and women in general) as problematic.⁶¹ Furthermore, Indonesian men attacked women for being "seduced" by the imperialist cause and insisted that men define the nation. Similarly, Cabrera believed that the Mexican nation should be represented by men and not women or effeminate men like the forty-one. Ultimately, for political opponents of the Díaz government, the scandal was a rallying point where they could insult the crossdressers with embarrassing, imaginative representations of the ball and tie them to elitist excess. In turn, the nation could be defined in distinctly male chauvinist terms.



Figure 4: José Guadalupe Posada, "Los 41 Maricones, [The 41 Faggots]", 1901.

⁶⁰ Daniel Cabrera, "La Aristocracia de Sodoma al Servicio Nacional [The Aristocracy of Sodom at the Nation's Service]," *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, November 24, 1901.

⁶¹ Frances Gouda, "Militant Masculinity and Female Agency in Indonesian Nationalism, 1945-1949," in Blue, et al eds., *Colonialism and the Modern World* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 200-216, 206-207.

More conservative newspapers, specifically those tied to the Díaz government or the Catholic Church, avoided delving into “details” of the ball raid, instead focusing on the moral shame that betrayed the good character of decent society, to which the forty-one belonged. *El Pais*, a Catholic journal that opposed liberalism – which in the nineteenth century meant secularization and terminating church privilege – attributed the forty-one’s aberration to the “fundamental abyss of liberalism.”⁶² Its article on the scandal titled “The Nefarious Ball” argues that the men, like others supposedly seduced by liberalism, were led into the “most unbridled licentiousness.”⁶³ According to *El Pais*, the structural problem that bred the scandal was the absence of religious adherence, which allegedly led to “degeneration of the greatest proportions.”⁶⁴ *La Patria*, which received federal subsidies from the government, also held back from using descriptive language such as that found in *El Popular* and *El Universal*.⁶⁵ It mentions the good character of the families of the forty-one in an effort to preserve the reputation of Mexico’s upper class: “It is shameful and highly irritating that among those arrested, there were many who frequent Plateros Boulevard and are from good families.”⁶⁶ *El Imparcial*, a semiofficial journal of the Díaz government, also tried defending the reputation of Mexico’s bourgeoisie. Its article titled “The Scandalous Ball” portrays the forty-one as an anomaly, people “well known for their depraved customs and who more than once have figured in similar scandals.”⁶⁷ Regarding the “more or less fantastic version of events” provided by journals like *El Popular*



and *El Universal*, *El Imparcial* hoped to “rectify those opinions.”⁶⁸ However, the *El baile de los cuarenta y uno* sparked public curiosity about homosexuality, and the

Figure 5: José Guadalupe Posada, “El Feminismo se Impone [Feminism Imposes Itself]”, La Guacamaya, (Mexico), July 25, 1907.

⁶² “El Baile Nefando [The Nefarious Ball],” *El Pais*, (Mexico), November 22, 1901.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ McCaughan, *The Famous 41*, 32.

⁶⁶ “Los Cuarenta Y Un Bailarines [The 41 Dancers],” *La Patria*, November 22, 1901.

⁶⁷ “El Baile Escandaloso [The Scandalous Ball],” *El Imparcial*, November 23, 1901.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

ensuing political cartoons would help shape the homophobia prevalent in Mexican popular culture.

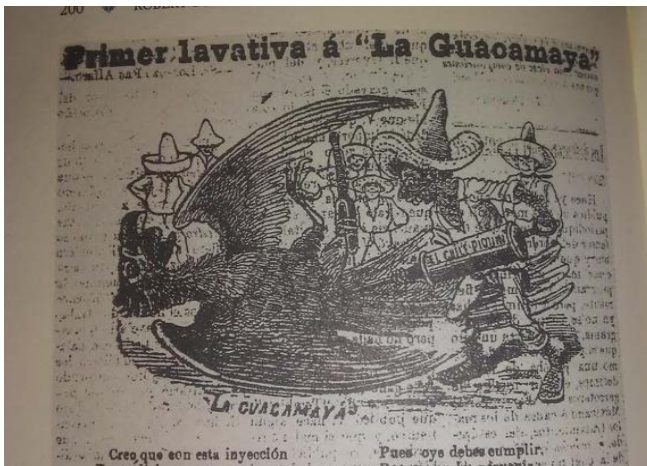


Figure 6: “Primer Lavativa a La Guacamaya [First Injection for the Macaw]”, *El Chile Pequin*, (Mexico), February 2, 1905.

Mexico’s homophobic penny press and the artwork of José Guadalupe Posada, both of which catered to the urban working class, targeted the forty-one as well as archetypal upper-class men as a means of contesting the Porfirian elites’ social domination.⁶⁹ One strategy involved harsh mockery in the form of derogatory language. For instance, in Posada’s famous print titled “Los 41 Maricones,” which can be translated to “The 41 Faggots,” the dancers are called “Very cute and coquettish” as well as “queers.” (Figure 4) Posada also implies that the scandal entails the subversion of gender roles. His cartoon titled “Feminism imposes itself,” (Figure 5) found in a periodical whose subtitle is “of the people and by the people,” states the following. “As women roam freely in bars, men stay at home cooking breakfast, ironing, and caring for the kids, and everyone with great affection call these men the forty-one.”⁷⁰ Other illustrations found in the penny press present crude images that involve phallic objects and penetration in an effort to attack rival newspapers. For example, *El Chile Piquin* published an editorial in 1905 whose cover image is of a peasant worker with a syringe forcefully injecting a crippled parrot – which is labelled “La Guacamaya [the Macaw],” also the name of another newspaper. A similar illustration is found in the cover art of an *El Chile*

⁶⁹ Robert Buffington, “Homophobia and the Mexican Working Class,” cited in McCaughan, *The Famous 41*, 197.

⁷⁰ José Guadalupe Posada, “El Feminismo se Impone [Feminism Imposes Itself]”, *La Guacamaya*, (Mexico), July 25, 1907.

Pequin article published that same year (Figure 6). It shows its editor about to inject the rear end of rival newspaper *El Moquete*'s editor.⁷¹ Rather suggestively, he is drawn bent over and with his pants rolled down.⁷²



Figure 7: “Diarios a la Greña [Newspapers Raise Fists],” *La Guacamaya*, (Mexico), May 23, 1907.

The press indirectly attacked Díaz too; the 1907 cover of *La Guacamaya* portrays the editors of *El Diario* and *El Imparcial* (Mexico City’s two major dailies that were favorable to him) with fake breasts and dresses made of newspapers. (Figure 7) What these images demonstrate is that after the Dance of the Forty-One, the ensuing homophobic scare compelled the penny press to depict cross-dressing politicians, mock the forty-one dancers, and attack the masculinity of rival newspaper editors with comical, offensive illustrations. In so doing, periodicals hoped to win over the hearts of the working class by playing on its newly exacerbated disgust for effeminate elites. If looked at through a gender lens, the Mexican press homed in on a power struggle between a neo-colonial oppressor (the Díaz dictatorship) and the male, lower and working class who would later dominate the narrative of the Mexican Revolution.

Conclusion

In Porfirian Mexico, masculinity, in terms of self-discipline, morality, effeminacy, and homophobia, was constructed to both solidify social control over indigenous and lower-class men as well as contest the authority of elites. Men with political power and social status bought into European ideas of self-mastery and

⁷¹ “Lavativas [Injections]”, *El Chile Piquin*, February 23, 1905; cited in McCaughan, *The Famous 41*, 32.

⁷² *Ibid.*

cleanliness as a way to distinguish themselves as the rightful leaders of the “modern” nation. Stoicism, a strong physique, and European dress were markers of morality in the face of lower class men who fell short of such codes of manly conduct. To uphold this power structure, politicians, physicians, and Porfirio Díaz himself consulted racist ideological frameworks that described indigenous men’s degeneracy, passivity, unrestrained violence, and hypersexuality in gendered, feminine terms. Criminals and other people who were excluded from political power were also deemed susceptible to sexual deterioration. However, as Díaz’s reign lengthened, lower class men and the press that catered to them used gendered discourse of power to combat social domination. Especially after the Dance of the Forty-One, opponents of the Porfiriato reworked the concept of femininity to mean dandyism, excess, effeminacy, and homosexuality in Mexico’s bourgeoisie. As a result, hatred of Díaz’s oppressive regime became linked to hatred of the effeminate, elite class. The social and political climate on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, which in many ways constituted an anti-colonial and anti-elitist struggle, marks a key moment in which modern Mexican homophobia sprouted; and since most of Mexican society still views Porfirio Díaz as the definitive antagonist of the country’s modern history, homophobia – in the dandy, effeminate context – and machismo remain as cultural foundations of Mexican popular culture today.