

13 Seed of the Nation

Men's Sex and Potency in Mexico

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PAPA'S SONS

Alfredo Pérez's wandering father, like many men of the older generations according to Alfredo, was absent for most of his son's life. Before his father died, however, Alfredo Pérez found him and, as he recounts,

I took my wife and children to see him. He asked me to forgive him. I told him, "Don't worry about it, Papa. I'm no one to judge you, only God." A week later he died. When he died, well, we went to the burial and to the vigil. A lot of people began looking at me. I saw my sisters, and they said to me, "Look, we want to introduce you to Papa's son." So a man said to me, "Glad to meet you, my name is Alfredo Pérez." And then another, "How do you do? My name is Alfredo Pérez." I met five Alfredos, all with the same last name, all my half-brothers—Alfredo Pérez, Alfredo Pérez, Alfredo Pérez, each one.

Alfredo sees himself as similar to his father in certain respects—he talks about his own wild years with alcohol and affairs—but those days are now long past. Today, he says, his family is what counts.

"I've been married for thirty-two years, and we've had our ups and downs. I fight with her, we say things to each other. But she respects me, and I her. Even though we fight and we stop talking for a day or two, afterwards we're happy. And that's the way we will go through life, God willing. But the fine thing is to have some children who respect and admire you. I see now how they respect and admire and love me, and it's a *semilla* [seed] that I planted and taught to grow straight and tall."

As with his father before him, one's self-identification as a man is connected for Alfredo with insemination, financial maintenance, and moral authority, all of which are in turn largely predicated on men's relationships with women. At the same time, unlike his father, long-term mar-

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riage has become a symbol to Alfredo of his having consistently fulfilled his masculine responsibilities to provide financially for his wife and children.

Alfredo Pérez and his namesake brothers are from the *colonias populares* of Mexico City, where between 1992 and 1994 I carried out ethnographic fieldwork on the changing meanings and practices of being a working-class man in the Mexican capital.¹ In contrast to those scholars who feel they have discovered a "typical" Mexican, Latin American, or Spanish-speaking masculinity, in my research I have instead been repeatedly confronted with the diversity of male identities. Similarly, the stereotyped image of a generalized Mexican male sexuality—polygamous, potent, and prolific—that together with poorly defined notions of ubiquitous Mexican machismo has long enjoyed currency in the social sciences and more popularly, seems today all the more inappropriate.² Rather than seeking to define the parameters of a homogenous Mexican male identity, therefore, in trying to understand gender and sexuality in Mexico we must examine the influence of generational differences and other factors like class, ethnic group, and region, and explore how these impinge on the realities of what it means to be a man, *ser hombre*, in contemporary Mexico.

Sexual identities, roles, and relations do not remain frozen in place, either for individuals or for groups. There is continuous contention and confusion over what constitute sexualities among women and men: they mean different things to different people at different times. And sometimes different things to the same person at the same time. In Mexico City today, men and women express greater self-consciousness about sexuality, not in the sense that they talk more about sex, but that their manner of talking about sex is different. Two key factors have contributed to these transformations in Mexico: first, the greater accessibility and widespread use of modern methods of birth control in the past twenty years throughout the country; and second, in a less obvious but still significant fashion, the open challenge of homosexuality as a major form of sexual life and expression in Mexico City and some other urban centers.³

Birth control and homosexuality have been central to changing notions of modern male sexuality in Mexico. Nor is it coincidental that the authoritative portrayals (see below) of twentieth-century Mexican national identity—arguments for an essential *mexicanidad*, or Mexicanness—highlight Mexican masculinity, and especially male potency in the form of the infamous Mexican Macho. It follows that if Mexican male sexuality, especially in the guise of man-as-progenitor, has long been romantically linked to cultural nationalist versions of *mexicanidad*, then changes in male sexuality will necessarily be involved in defining transformations in the modern Mexican nation.

The study of men in Mexico is not new, of course, as male ethnographers have been interviewing and examining men there for decades. However, what has generally not been done by anthropologists in Mexico or elsewhere until quite recently is to study men *as men* (see Godelier 1986: 76). Nor is the case of Latin America unique.⁴ Indeed, even when men are studied as engendered and engendering beings, there is still a tendency to isolate them from women as if male and female gender identities and practices were easily segregated. This last problem is in turn compounded by the curious efforts by some, though not all, anthropologists presently writing about masculinity and manhood to avoid engaging seriously with feminist theory.

We will do better if we understand gender as referring to the ways in which differences and similarities related to physical sexuality of both women and men are understood, contested, organized, and practiced by societies. Which should not imply that what it means *physically* to be a man or a woman can be taken for granted; it must be explained. Understanding the body and sexuality requires an examination of cultural and historical factors and not simply an inspection of genitalia.⁵

COLONIA SANTO DOMINGO

In the case of Mexico, beginning in the 1940s, national identity came to be associated with certain sexually charged kinds of masculinity, in particular the sexually potent (macho) man: one who is physically vital, prolific, and powerful. In much of the nationalist rhetoric of the era since

then, to be examined below, women became the silenced partners of Mexican male patriots. Nonetheless, especially beginning in the late 1960s in Mexico, political and social challenges to dominant gender relations and mores—in the forms of feminism and movements for gay and lesbian rights—provided an opening for questioning and defying social standards regarding issues like female marital fidelity and homosexuality. These developments combined with others like greater access to birth control led to a profound decoupling of sex from procreation in Mexico. And in this way as well, some of the bulwark of cultural nationalist versions of Mexican (male) sexuality has been undermined.

I came to know Alfredo Pérez in Colonia Santo Domingo, a *colonia popular* on the southside of Mexico City, where he and his family arrived in the mid-1970s. This was a few years after the 1971 invasion by thousands of “parachutist” families into the area of volcanic lava flows and caves known as the Pedregales. Among the residents of this self-built neighborhood of Santo Domingo, who now number over 100,000, women as well as men have been active as community organizers and leaders, first to build roads, and then to bring in electricity, schools, and other social necessities. Because of a conjuncture of special circumstances present as well in other communities in Mexico and Latin America in the last twenty years, popular social moments marked by varying degrees of independence from state control have played a prominent role in the cultural politics of Colonia Santo Domingo since the invasion.

In part because grass-roots feminist struggles (see Stephen 1997), such as those occurring in many of Mexico City’s *colonias populares*, have generally had an oppositional character with respect to the Mexican state and ruling PRI party, and in part because Mexican national symbolism has come to be closely identified with macho potency, in the 1970s and 1980s women’s gender and sexual identities developed in ways far less tied to notions of national culture in Mexico. Indeed, women in Colonia Santo Domingo and elsewhere in Mexico City have often sought to confront their men by explicitly opposing Mexican national gender categories. As a consequence men have been rebuked on two interconnected fronts, nationalism and masculinity, and thus for many what it means to be a man (or a woman) is less evident today in Mexico City than ever before.

In this essay I briefly examine three topics held by many to exemplify Mexican masculinity: the *casa chica*, where male sexuality has achieved international renown through the seeming institutionalization of men’s adultery; contemporary sex between men, which is indicative of transformations in what it means to have sex and what it means to be Mexican; and finally, defining statements of *mexicanidad* regarding Mexican male sexuality and national character. Each of these topics may be analyzed as a distinctly “male” province; yet each may also be seen as an illustration of male-female relations in Mexico City’s *colonias populares*.

LA CASA CHICA

In Oscar Lewis’s (1961) affectionate portrait of Mexican working-class family life, *The Children of Sánchez*, he discusses many sexual practices in the capitol in the 1950s. Overly confident in the resilience of cultural practices, I was sure when I began fieldwork in 1992 that one of these, *la casa chica* (the small house), was still an entrenched institution. After all, Jesús Sánchez, whose children are the subject of Lewis’s book, usually seemed to have a mistress or second wife, depending upon how you defined the relationship, whom he maintained in *la casa chica* (or *segundo frente* [second front]). *La casa chica* is usually thought of as the arrangement whereby a Mexican man keeps a woman other than his wife in a residence separate from his main (*casa grande*) household, and is discussed as a modern form of urban polygamy common in all social strata in Mexico, and by no means the prerogative of only wealthy men.⁶

Information on *la casa chica* was initially easy to come by. One man in a Christian Base Community in Colonia Ajusco (that borders Santo Domingo) spoke to me disparagingly of a brother of his who maintained *three* different households simultaneously, and did this on a factory worker’s wages. A few weeks later, Luciano was welding a pipe in our apartment. Neighbors had

already told me Luciano had a *casa chica*, so I was especially looking forward to talking with him. I asked Luciano about his family, and he told me that he and his wife were *separados* (separated). They had not lived together for years, he said. When I asked where he was living then, he replied, "Not far from here." But though he no longer shared a home with his "wife"—Luciano fumbled over what to call her—because the house and the land were in his name, getting divorced was out of the question; in a divorce he would risk losing all the property.

On another occasion I mentioned to a friend, Margarita, that I was surprised I had not encountered the famous *casa chica* in Santo Domingo. Margarita paused a moment and then said to me carefully, "¿Sabes qué? Carmela es la casa chica [You know what? Carmela is *la casa chica*]." Carmela, a woman in her late thirties whom I had previously met, had lived for twelve years with the man she always referred to as her husband. But, it turned out, this man was legally married to (though separated from) another woman with whom he had four children, the youngest then thirteen. Carmela's "husband" had legally adopted her son from an earlier relationship, and she and this man later had a daughter.

After a few months of fieldwork, I was getting quite wary of what *la casa chica* meant to different people, and how everyone referred to the "husbands" and "wives" of those involved in *las casas chicas*. By the time Rafael told me in December that his brother was living in their home with his *casa chica*, I had also grown a little weary of the term.

"Is he married to another woman?" I asked Rafael.

"Yes, he's been married for years," came the reply. "Of course, they haven't been together since he's been with this new woman, but he's still married to the first one."

Then a neighbor happened to mention a remarkable but more "classical" *casa chica* arrangement a couple of blocks from where we lived in Santo Domingo.

"You know the tire repair place on the corner? Well, a guy used to live over it with two sisters. He lived with them both!"

"In the same house?" I asked suspiciously.

"No."

"But each sister knew about the other one?"

"They knew about it and each tried to outdo the other, trying to get him to realize that she was better. He lived with the two sisters, two days with one, two with the other."

"What were they thinking?"

"Their mother was the really stupid one. She used to say that he was her *doble yerno* [double-son-in-law]. If the mother thought this, what could you expect from the daughters?"

Yet how the phrase *la casa chica* is used in daily conversation is often quite removed from such classical patterns. Rafael, who works in maintenance at the National University (UNAM) that borders Santo Domingo, once told me that 60 percent of his fellow employees at UNAM have *casas chicas*. I looked astonished. "Yes, I am talking about women as well as men." It soon became apparent that Rafael was talking about people having extramarital affairs; for him *casa chica* was a catchy analogue.

So too, while Margarita refers to Carmela as "*la casa chica*," and although by Carmela's own account the man she lives with cheated on her early in their relationship, this man has been faithful to Carmela for seven years and he is her "husband." As for Luciano's arrangement, a few weeks after fixing our pipes, and after we had gotten to know each other better, he told me that for several years he had lived with a woman other than his "first wife." He and the "second wife" now have two children together. In responding to questions about "your spouse" in a formal survey I conducted, Luciano always answered with regard to this second woman.

Most of the *casas chicas* that I know of in Mexico City that conform to a pattern of urban polygamy—where a man shuttles between two (or more) households and the "wives" are often ignorant of each other—are maintained by well-paid workers or men from the middle and upper classes. Other than the factory worker with three "wives," generally the only workers who can

afford this kind of set-up are truckers or migrants to the United States, or men who have higher-paying jobs in the electrical, telephone, or petroleum industries.

So what, then, is the meaning of *la casa chica* and what shape does it take in the lives of people in Colonia Santo Domingo? At least in some instances, rather than referring to urban polygamy, *la casa chica* is used to describe second (or later) marriages. In other words, it frequently refers to serial monogamy, and if adultery occasionally occurs, it does so within *this* context. The approach many people take to *la casa chica* is in part a product of Catholic doctrine and antidivorce sanctions. Mexican working-class men as well as women have learned to manipulate the cultural rituals and social laws of machismo, not unlike the sixteenth-century rural French, who were, as Natalie Davis (1983:46) writes, a people with “centuries of peasant experience in manipulating popular rituals and the Catholic law on marriage.”

This is especially true for the poor, who cannot as easily arrange and afford church annulments of their marriages. Men are culturally expected to financially maintain their (first) “wives” forever, just as these women expect to be supported—not that this situation always obtains. That is, for many men and women *la casa chica* is the best resolution to a situation in which legal divorce is out of the question. It is the way serial monogamy is practiced by many people in a society in which one often must be “married” to one’s first spouse for life. The fact that few women and men necessarily intend in this manner to subvert Catholic rules regarding marriage-for-life does not take away from the creative (and subversive) quality of their actions.

In addition to prohibitions against divorce emanating from the Catholic Church, there are other factors that impinge on the situation. After divorce, first wives can more easily prevent fathers from seeing their children. And men such as Luciano can also lose property rights if their *de facto* divorces become *de jure*, and if they marry other women and end up living elsewhere.

The traditional *casa chica* arrangement, in which one man lives simultaneously with more than one woman and “family,” may or may not persist in the upper echelons of Mexican society. But it is not common in Colonia Santo Domingo, at least not in this sense of urban polygamy.⁷ My argument is instead threefold: first, that the expression *la casa chica* is used in a variety of ways in *colonias populares*, many of which ways have little to do with adultery as this latter term is defined by men and women involved in these unions; second, that these multiple meanings of *la casa chica* are illustrations of a cultural practice that has emerged in the context of Catholic laws on marriage; and third, that this cultural practice should be seen as part of a manipulative popular response to the church’s ban on divorce.

Popular approaches to the *casa chica* in Santo Domingo are thus exemplary of Gramsci’s (1929–35: 333) notion of contradictory consciousness, as the unpredictable exigencies of the living enter into lively contest with the oppressive traditions and bromides of dead generations. And, therefore, as Herzfeld (1987: 84) makes clear in another context, in instances such as the daily references and practices relating to the *casa chica* we should, rather than merely bearing witness to an “enforced passivity” induced from on high, especially and instead see “the quality of active social invention” in defiance of official discourse and control.

SEX BETWEEN MEN

If many Mexican male identities used to be wrapped up in adultery and siring many children, especially male children, today these are less central concerns. Such issues are still important to varying degrees to some men, but in Mexico City many younger men (and women) have begun thinking more reflexively about their bodies than their fathers and mothers ever did, and today there is a growing sense that sexuality is as much a possibility as it is an ultimatum, that there are multiple sexualities—not just two—and that sexuality can and does change.

As mentioned earlier, two key elements have contributed to these transformations. The first of these is the greater accessibility and widespread use of modern methods of birth control in the past twenty years in Mexico.⁸ Following tremendous population growth as a result of a rise in

average life expectancy from 25 years in 1900 to 66 years in 1980, birth rates have been cut in half in the last two decades in Mexico (Zavala de Cosío 1992: 16). Such demographic transitions are undoubtedly related to changes in the meanings and practices of maternity, paternity, gender, and sexual identities overall in Mexican society, for if women and couples are having fewer children, presumably this is a result of either increased use of birth control or decreased sexual relations between women and men. Either way, changing cultural attitudes and behavior are deeply involved in the statistics. The changes involving women that are made apparent in the lower birth rates imply re-evaluations and changes among men as well. For if womanhood is no longer so closely tied to motherhood, for example, then manhood too may be at least partially recast, though this does not necessarily manifest itself in immediate shifts regarding parenting practices by women or men.

Adult men have rarely died from childbirth in Mexico or anywhere else, but the separation of sex from pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing has had a profound impact on them as well as on women, and altered more than just fertility rates. Sexuality increasingly has the ability to culturally transform personal and family life. And sexuality, potentially at least, is likewise more than ever before able to be itself transformed, including sexuality in relation to romantic love. Sexuality in this context is less tied to biological imperatives and more associated with desire, that is, subjective and transitory.⁹

In Santo Domingo and other *colonias populares* in Mexico City, sex is today less taken for granted than in earlier generations, and people talk not only of distinctions between the sexualities of men and women but to a greater extent now of differences among men and among women. Sex has a social history today and not just a biological evolution. For instance, friends in Santo Domingo occasionally mention *las casas de las locas* (the houses of the crazy-queens), where gay cross-dressers and transvestites are said to live. But reference is usually made to these houses in the past, and no one ever seems able to say where such a house might be today. Nonetheless, despite the fact that political movements for homosexual and lesbian human rights are less visible in Mexico today than they were in the late 1970s, the organized struggles of lesbians and gays and their supporters in Mexico have had real, if often collateral, importance for residents of Santo Domingo.¹⁰

Gaining even a rough picture of the sexual practices of men is complicated enough, not least of all for lack of common definitions: What is a heterosexual act? What is homosexuality? There is the possibility that men denied to me, or even to themselves, certain episodes of their youth. Carlos Monsiváis says that, at least in the past, sex between males sixteen to twenty-five years old used to be "a habit of youth" in the *colonias populares* of Mexico City (interview by author, 20 February 1993). Still, regardless of the sex practiced or dreamed about by men in Santo Domingo, many have undoubtedly been greatly influenced through what they have seen, heard, and in some cases done outside (or inside) the *colonia*.

It is hardly coincidental that the Zona Rosa, the part of Mexico City best known as a converging area for homosexuals, is also a major tourist district and the site of Metro Insurgentes, the busiest stop on the city's subway line. Millions of people pass through the Zona Rosa each day on their way to and from work and shopping. In addition, the Zona Rosa is a favorite spot among more adventurous teenagers from Colonia Santo Domingo, a place they go to hang out on Friday and Saturday nights. In sites such as the Zona Rosa, people in Mexico City have great access and exposure to people of different cultural orientations, including people of different sexual preferences. Such cross-cultural and cross-sexual intermingling is one feature of life in Mexico City that makes the capital stand out from most other parts of the country.¹¹

The Alameda Park is where many young women who work in wealthy homes during the week as *muchachas* go on Sunday, their day off, hoping young men will buy them sodas or *paletas* (popsicles). The Alameda, next to Bellas Artes, another tourist attraction, is also where young *prostitutos* (male prostitutes), usually adolescent Indian men, cruise the pathways looking for busi-

ness. Many of the *prostitutos*' clients are foreigners, and nearly all are men from the middle and upper strata—some of the people who frequent this part of the Centro Histórico of Mexico City.

Younger men in Santo Domingo who are particularly prone to using sexual innuendo are also more inclined to make insulting and/or defensive comments about homosexuality. However, even the contemporary homophobic language used by young men in the community reveals cultural creativity in response to the new provocation of multiple sexualities in Mexico City. While riding together on the way to matches, the young men on the River Plate *fútbol* team, who come from Santo Domingo or the neighboring pueblo of Los Reyes, usually slap and pinch each other a lot. Amid all this grabbing and touching, two or three of the fifteen young men regularly and loudly jeer the others. Often, employing a kind of generic slur, they accuse one or another of their teammates of being a *maricón*, a queer. Instead of merely responding in kind, the accused often retorts with the more sophisticated insult, "Yeah, well you're a *bisexual!*"

Such rejoinders show no more expansive understanding than the frequent opinion voiced by older men in Santo Domingo that there are more *maricas* (faggots) and machos among the rich, as if to imply that (what they see as) sexual deviance—and sexual *access*—is greater within the elites. But comments about *bisexuales* do announce a growing lexicon that points to new understandings on some level that people *have* sexualities, that these sexualities are part of what makes someone who she or he is, and that alternative sexualities are viable, at least for some.

Among youth in Santo Domingo, the tensions of contradictory consciousness and practices with respect to sexuality are often evident. In addition to the most vocal members of the River Plate *fútbol* team who give voice to homophobia, there are also youth in the *colonias populares* for whom homosexuals and bisexuals are not so much seen as a group apart as they are accepted as one group among many within the culturally accepted boundaries of sexuality. Among some working class youth, sexual experimentation among youth of the same sex is considered positive and a rite of passage.¹² This makes it all the more impossible and erroneous to neatly categorize youth, as individuals or groups, as even heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. After all, it is precisely from such labels that these youth are attempting to escape—even as they articulate and manipulate such markers.

Sexualities in Colonia Santo Domingo are thus thoroughly implicated in constructions of gender identities, yet they also operate to a real degree on their own trajectories.¹³ That is, sexuality is considered by many in the *colonia* as a discrete category that is never simply subsumed by considerations of masculinity and/or femininity, and indeed plays as much of a role in the constitution of gender categories as gender plays in forming ways of thinking about and acting on transformations of sexuality.

SEXING THE MEXICAN NATION

The consolidation of the Mexican nation, ideologically and materially, was fostered early on not only in the gun battles on the wild frontier, not only in the voting rituals of presidential politics, but also in the imagining and inventing of *mexicanidad* in the national cinema, whose Golden Age began in the late 1930s. Although there were female leads in the movies of the period, on the silver screen it was the manly actors who most came to embody the restless and explosive potential of the emerging Mexican nation. And of all the male movie stars of this era, one stood out as "a macho among machos." Ever the handsome and pistol-packing *charro* (singing cowboy) with his melodious and eminently male tenor, Jorge Negrete came to epitomize the swaggering Mexican nation, singing,

I am a Mexican, and this wild land is mine.

On the word of a macho, there's no land lovelier and
wilder of its kind.

I am a Mexican, and of this I am proud.

I was born scorning life and death,
And though I have bragged, I have never been cowed.¹⁴

In the rural cantinas, the manly temples of the golden age of Mexican cinema, the macho mood was forged. Mexico appeared on screen as a single entity, however internally incongruent, while within the nation the figures of Mexican Man and Mexican Woman loomed large—the former

untamed, generous, cruel, womanizing, romantic, obscene, at one with family and friends, subjugated and restless . . . [the latter] obedient, seductive, resigned, obliging, devoted to her own and slave to her husband, to her lover, to her children, and to her essential failure. (Monsiváis 1992: 18)

The distinctions between being a macho and being a man were coming into clearer focus in the Mexican cinema of the 1940s:

To be macho is now part of the scenery. To be macho is an attitude. There are gestures, movements. It is the belief that genital potency holds the key to the universe, all that. It goes from the notion of danger to the notion of bragging; that's the difference between macho and man [*hombre*]. As the song says, "If you've got to kill me tomorrow, why don't you get it over with now?"—that is being very manly [*ser muy hombre*]. "I have four wives"—that is being very macho [*ser muy macho*]. (Carlos Monsiváis, interview by author, 20 February 1993)

Then, at the end of the 1940s, Mexican machismo underwent a most refined dissection by Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). Despite Paz's wish to speak only to a small group "made up of those who are conscious of themselves, for one reason or another, as Mexicans" (Paz 1961: 11), this work more than any other has come to represent the authoritative view of essential Mexican attributes like machismo, loneliness, and mother worship. Therefore when Paz writes, "The Mexican is always remote, from the world and from other people. And also from himself" (p. 29), he should not be taken literally but literarily. It is a beautifully written book, and part of the reason for its elegance may be that Paz was creating qualities of *mexicanidad* as much as he was reflecting on them. As he put it in his "Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude," "the book is part of the attempt of literally marginal countries to regain consciousness: to become subjects again" (Paz 1985: 330).

Paz (1961: 35) writes with regard to men and women in Mexico, "In a world made in man's image, woman is only a reflection of masculine will and desire." In Mexico, "woman is always vulnerable. Her social situation—as the repository of honor, in the Spanish sense—and the misfortune of her 'open' anatomy expose her to all kinds of dangers" (p. 38). Biology as destiny? But there is nothing inherently passive, or private, about vaginas in Mexico or anywhere else. Continuing with Paz, just as "the essential attribute of the *macho*"—or what the macho seeks to display, anyway—is power, so too with "the Mexican people." Thus *mexicanidad*, Paz tells us, is concentrated in the macho forms of "caciques, feudal lords, hacienda owners, politicians, generals, captains of industry" (p. 82).

Many Mexican men are curious about what it means to be a Mexican, and what it means to be a man. One is not born knowing these things; nor are they truly discovered. They are learned and relearned. For some, this involves a quest for one's patrimony. "Pedro Páramo is my father too," declares one of Mexico's bastard sons (Rulfo 1959: 3). Even if he is an infamous brute, a father is a father. For the Mexican macho and for the nation, it is better to have a father than to be fatherless.

In Paz and much of the literature of cultural nationalism in Mexico in recent decades, "the problem of national identity was thus presented primarily as a problem of *male* identity, and it was

male authors who debated its defects and psychoanalyzed the nation" (Franco 1989: 131). In Mexico, nationalist identity and practices have long enjoyed an intimate history with masculinity. At least in the formal pronouncements about *mexicanidad*, however, it is only by implication that women have shared the same history. Building the sense and the material reality of the Mexican nation has required virtues like potency (in the sense of powerfulness, sexual and otherwise), a quality that in the Mexican national canon has generally been made a (male) gendered trait.

The correlation between manliness and potency has never been without its contradictions for ordinary people in Mexico, and authoritative statements about "being *mexicano*" have rather exclusively referred to politically and sexually potent *men*. But not only the elites speak to these issues, as seen in pragmatic and romantic nationalist statements from below (see Mallon 1995). For, nationalist discourse aside, in the daily lives of millions of women and men in rural and urban Mexico, powerful wives are not simply considered mere extensions of their husbands.

SEXUAL CONTRADICTIONS

The multiple expressions of male sexual identities in Mexico today contradict all stereotyped notions of a uniform Spanish-speaking masculinity that crosses class, ethnic group, region, sexuality, and age. As di Leonardo (1991: 30f.) shows in her discussion of the "embedded nature of gender," not only is it a mistake to study men or women in isolation, but also the category of gender itself must be examined in its interconnectedness with other major social divisions. There is not a Mexican cultural system of generally agreed-upon gender meanings and experience. Not only is there tremendous diversity with regard to gender in *colonias populares* in Mexico City, but also gender identities in Colonia Santo Domingo, as elsewhere, are products and manifestations of cultures in motion; they do not emanate from some primordial essence whose resilience bears testament to perpetual forms of inequality.

Given this analysis, it is all the more important to critique the segregated approach still prevalent in women's and men's studies. As we have seen in the case of the *casa chica* in Mexico City, such an approach is wholly unsatisfactory because it would conceal the meanings created by women and men *together*, and their joint practices aimed at circumventing pre-existing religious and civil statutes regarding marriage, divorce, and sexual fidelity. The reticence of some anthropologists who study men and masculinity to participate more openly in feminist debates often seems related to a particular methodology that *excludes* women as irrelevant to questions about male identities and activities.

Yet only by studying men *and* women, and by rejecting the false simplicity of a structuralist binary opposition man-woman, will it be possible to grasp that consciousness about and participation in sexual relations between men in Mexico's *colonias populares*, for instance, does not simply entail greater acceptance of a "third" sex and a "third" gender. What is needed instead is a thorough rejection of fixed and immutable categories of gender and sexuality, both for groups and for individuals in Mexico.

We can similarly either accept that there are multiple and shifting meanings and practices of male sexuality in Mexico, or we can essentialize what were already reified generalizations about Mexican men in the first place. Like any identity, male sexual identities in Mexico City do not reveal anything intrinsic about men there. The contradictory consciousness of many men in Colonia Santo Domingo about their own sexual identities, their sense of and experience with sex, is part of the reigning chaos of their lives at least as much as the imagined national coherence imposed from without.

Further, to paraphrase Mosse's (1985: 67) remark about modern Europe, nationalism in Mexico has had a special affinity for male society, and it has thereby helped to legitimize the dominance of men over women. As odd as women's exclusion from nationalist history may seem, it is all the more bizarre in the case of the history of sexuality. Nonetheless, in this century it was only following the emergence of grass-roots feminism and movements for gay and lesbian rights

in Mexico that clichéd truths about sexuality came to be broadly questioned, in the process eroding many stolid presumptions about Mexican and Mexican male potency.

Sex in Mexico is changing in important if uncalculated ways, as throughout this Catholic land divorce restrictions remain in place, though they are routinely and creatively dodged by some through *la casa chica*. Homophobia is a code of boyish insults, while sexual experimentation by young men with young men and young women with young women is increasingly seen as legitimate. The sexual contradictions of a generation have effectively transformed very little and quite a lot.

NOTES

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2. This stereotype has been developed and/or critiqued in the following: Paz (1961); Ramos (1962); Mendoza (1963); Paredes (1971); Stevens (1973); Monsiváis (1981); de Barbieri (1990); Gilmore (1990); Lancaster (1992); Ramírez (1993); Limón (1994); Gutmann (1996).
3. I draw here on Giddens's (1992) insights regarding sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies. The term "homosexuality" is used guardedly in this paper to refer to sex between men and between women. In Mexico City, however, unlike the United States, people usually mean by homosexual only the man who is penetrated by another (not necessarily "homosexual") man in anal intercourse. For more on these terms and activities, and certain similarities with regard to sex between men in different parts of Latin America and among Chicanos, see Lancaster (1992) and Almaguer (1990).
4. Recent anthropological works that either focus or contain significant sections on masculinity include: Brandes (1980); Herdt (1981); Gregor (1985); Herzfeld (1985); Godelier (1986); Gilmore (1990); Parker (1991); Fachel Leal (1992); Lancaster (1992); Welzer-Lang and Filiol (1992); Limón (1994); and Gutmann (1996).
5. For her discussion of "social constructionism," including with regard to gender, see di Leonardo (1991); see also Scott (1988: 2) on defining gender and sexuality.
6. For a recent mention of the practice, though not the name, of the *casa chica*, see Bossen (1988: 272) on middle-class households in Guatemala City. For Mexico, see also Diaz (1970: 60) and Fromm and Maccoby (1970: 149).
7. At the same time, none of my analysis regarding serial monogamy minimizes the traumatic financial and emotional impact of men who do desert their wives and children, regardless of whether these men take up with other women. Given my interests in fathers and fathering, I was in contact with more men who lived with their families, even if they were not necessarily active in parenting, than I was with those who had abandoned their wives and children. Single mothers were nonetheless common enough in the colonia.
8. In this paper I do not analyze the significant differences and inequalities between women and men regarding the utilization of birth control devices in the working class in Mexico City. For a discussion of this matter, see Gutmann (1996) chapter 5.

9. On "desire," see Lancaster's (1992: 270) emphasis on materialist contextualization and analysis.
10. The gay and lesbian rights movement in the United States may also have indirectly played a political role in Mexico. Although there have been comparative studies of homosexuality among Mexicans in Mexico and among Mexicans in the United States (see, for example, Magaña and Carrier [1991]), as far as I know there has been no research on the influence of the gay rights movement in the United States on Mexico, and of the movement in Mexico on the United States, via Mexican immigrants to the United States. For a treatment that at least raises relevant questions regarding the mutual influence of neighboring gay and Latino communities in San Francisco, see Castells (1983: 99-172).
11. Such public intermingling across sexual and other cultural boundaries is also evident in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, both on the Mexico-U.S. border.
12. This final observation is confirmed in recent research by Florinda Riquer (personal communication).
13. Which is one reason why anthropologists who study masculinity would do well to note Herdt's (1990: 434) assessment: "Generally . . . reductionism continues in studies of males, where there appears to be a compelling match between the cultural expectations ascribed to males, and the biological fact of their maleness."
14. *Yo soy mexicano, mi tierra es bravía.
Palabra de macho, que no hay otra tierra más linda
y más brava que la tierra mía.
Yo soy mexicano, y orgullo lo tengo.
Nací despreciando la vida y la muerte,
Y si he hecho bravatas, también las sostengo.*
From the song "Yo soy mexicano."

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