

Gender Conventions

“Look, he’s drooling now! He must have killed a lot of people. And you invited him in.”

“He’s probably just poor. Go to sleep.”

Juan Rulfo, Pedro Páramo

Hearing me tap lightly on the corrugated metal with the edge of an old five-hundred-peso coin—this was a month or so before the New Pesos would be issued at the beginning of 1993—Marcos slid the door gate open and invited me to enter. It was Saturday, and at 1 P.M. the giant jackhammers had stopped pounding through the volcanic rock to make a trench in which to lay the sewer pipes. A pleasant respite for all of us. As if to celebrate, Gabriel had asked me that morning to stop by Marcos’s in the afternoon if I found time after my interviews. Someone had bought a bottle of Bacardi Añejo, and besides, they wanted to know more about me and why an anthropologist was living down the block on Huehuetzin Street in Colonia Santo Domingo.

But when I got inside the gate Gabi and Toño were yelling at each other, and it looked like it had been going on for a while. Toño was cursing Gabriel, with sideways laughs at Marcos, and now me, as if to say, “Can you believe such nonsense?” Gabriel was telling Toño that he was full of crap. Beyond this it was not immediately clear what they were fighting about so earnestly. Nor could I tell how serious the argument was.

Yet I do remember privately hoping that my newfound friends, these working class Mexican men, might be arguing about their past sexual conquests, or their ongoing capacity for alcohol consumption, or perhaps someone’s erstwhile prowess on the *futbol* field, or maybe about a fantasized future sexual conquest. After all, I had recently arrived in Mexico City to study Mexican men as fathers and sons, adulterers and

celibates, alcoholics and teetotalers. I hoped to enter the affective netherworld of adult males that, I knew, was all but hidden to my female colleagues, who were still often the only scholars who cared to research gender issues. The anthropological journey would undoubtedly prove mysterious and fascinating, for male identity is a topic able to provoke at once the sacred and lurid, and I was excited when I heard Gabriel and Toño shouting something about fathers and children.

Leaning on the fender of an ancient VW and waving his empty glass toward Toño, Gabriel loudly dismissed his friend's suggestion that intricate and already assembled toys were the best presents for youngsters at Christmas. "Because you see, Toño," Gabi argued, leaning forward to emphasize his increasingly slurred words, "helping children to become creative is more important than spending a lot of money wastefully." Toño countered that only a cheapskate would consider a hammer and a few nails adequate as a Christmas gift, as Gabriel had been maintaining. Creativity, indeed! Children needed to see a father spend some money on them to understand how much he cared. "*Pérame* [Hold on there]," Gabriel the father responded to Toño, who was still *soltero* (single). "There is more to being a good father than spending money."

A thinly veiled flexing of masculine prestige in which disposable income was the operative symbol of competitive power? Perhaps fancy Christmas presents represented an extension of that infamous desire of Mexican men to procreate, in this case to have many children who in turn have many expensive presents. Yet, mindful of Freudian cigars, I wondered if an argument between men about children's Christmas presents could ever be mainly an argument about children's Christmas presents. And if it was, what might this tell us about men and male identities?

At the very least, I eventually came to conclude, many of the images anthropologists have been creating about Mexican working class men are erroneous and harmful. For instance, whereas the "typical Mexican man" was often portrayed as a hard-drinking, philandering macho, that image largely ignored the activities of fatherhood in the lives of millions of Mexican men. A new analysis of masculinity and modernity in Mexico was clearly needed.

Nonetheless, an inquiry into working class men as fathers and friends, husbands and lovers, could hardly avoid confronting consecrated stereotypes, especially the cherished varieties bandied about concerning Mexican working class men. Throughout this study, therefore,

examples of what men say and do among themselves, and occasionally with women, are raised as illustrative of several central issues, from images of what *ser hombre* (to be a man) means to different men and women at different times, to moves toward a degendering of certain aspects of daily life among sections of the urban poor today in Mexico. Yet if such episodes provide microcosms of larger sociocultural phenomena, they do so partially in Lila Abu-Lughod's (1993) sense that the stories are meant to "undo the titles." That is, in the course of subverting facile expectations of Mexican male gender identities, the episodes seek to undo our ability to speak of a unitary Mexican man, or Mexican urban man, or even a Mexican urban working class man, in any reasonable manner.

A concluding chapter in this study is devoted to examining the etymologies of the terms *macho* and *machismo*. Conventional methodology, of course, would place all historical sections of this study toward the beginning, but to have defined *macho* and *machismo* in contemporary or historical terms at the outset would have been premature. For instance, what it means to be a macho—whether the macho is considered brutish, gallant, or cowardly—changes over time for various sectors of Mexican society, and we must not ignore the often elusive and mutually exclusive ways in which these catchwords are employed today. Machismo is best understood after and not before other ethnographic details have been developed. I therefore reserve most discussion of the word *machismo* until late in this study in order to provide a fitting coda—and a reflective punch line—to the anthropological descriptions in the preceding chapters.

Like some Weberian ideal type run amok, scholarly and popular images of Mexican men as often as not serve other theoretical and political agendas. Yet despite the many sayings, commonplaces, accepted judgments, and assumptions about Mexican men and machismo, precious little scholarly attention has been paid to the subject. The result of this situation, briefly put, is that by capriciously glossing over significant differences among men based on class, generation, region, and ethnicity among other factors, such generalizations have come to invent and then perpetuate sterile ideal types and stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the objects of scorn and pity who populate these categories, Mexican working class men as well as women, have learned to manipulate the cultural rituals and social laws of machismo. Just as much recent social history has brought to light the previously overlooked customs, agency, and consciousness of popular classes, so too

analysis of modern gender relations in Mexico City should provide a potent antidote to the notion that especially virulent strains of sexism are to be found only in Mexico. Further, and of more long-term scholarly and political significance, through investigation of the vagaries of gender identities amid the realities of gender oppression, we may come to better understand the persistence of gender variations and instability amid enduring patterns of inequality.

In early January, stalled in traffic on a *combi* minibus, I spotted Don Timoteo sitting with his wife in the grassy median of a major boulevard where for twenty-two years customers have sought him out to repair their wicker furniture. I got off to talk with Don Timo, who is originally from the aptly named Valle de Bravo, and his wife, Catalina, also in her early seventies, and someone who neighbors say is one of the most submissive and self-sacrificing women you could ever hope to meet. A notorious drinker and wife beater in his earlier days, Don Timo at least no longer abuses liquor. We talked about my research on families and parenting, and about recent changes in domestic divisions of labor in Mexico.

“What about your children?” I asked. “What did you do with them when they were young but not yet old enough for school?”

Don Timoteo pointed to a spot in the grass where, he said, his children had grown up. Catalina nodded, rocking a little on the wicker chair, as if recalling the scene. Don Timo told me he brought the two girls and the boy with him to work each day, whether his wife joined him or not, and they played while he waited for business.

A few minutes later I asked each, “What do you find has changed between men and women in your lifetime?” Catalina surprised me with a quick response: “*¡Pues, la liberación de la mujer!* [Well, women’s liberation!]” She did not care to expand on this opinion except to add that it had been women who had changed the most since her youth, implying that the men were lagging behind. Still startled by her phrase, I turned to her husband.

“Don Timo?”

His response came quickly as well. “*¡Hay mucho maricón que deja de ser hombre!* [There’s a lot of queers who’ve stopped being men!]” Then he stared at me, as if to say, “There’s really nothing more to say about the matter.”

In the months that followed, I came to view Timoteo and Catalina not so much as representative of Mexican men and women in general, but rather as typical of the enigmas inherent and common in most gen-

der identities that are constructed and transformed each day on the ancient lava fields that make up much of southern Mexico City. Throughout my research on masculinity in Colonia Santo Domingo, my approach has been to study men and women who are typical *because* they are enigmatic. Men like Don Timo, who play an active part in raising their children and at the same time regularly voice their hatred and fear of men who have sex with other men, are not marginal or unusual except in studies in the social sciences. The complex riddles of real lives are the stuff of good ethnography, and they require of the reader as well as the writer an openness to alternative approaches, in this case with respect to gendered images, practices, and beliefs in Mexico City.

CROSSING THE BORDER

As we entered Mexico through the Laredo–Nuevo Laredo checkpoint in our new used car, my wife, Michelle, and I were unprepared for the reception that our other rider would receive. At our first stop, a roadside stand where we paused to purchase sodas in the desert heat, our seven-week-old daughter, Liliana, was taken from us. Not permanently, but just long enough for her to be passed around among the women and one old man who lived and worked at the stand. They delighted in Liliana's baldness and plump cheeks, inspected her for infection, and checked to see that she was well clothed. It was ninety-five degrees that August day, but all over Mexico for several months to come, no matter the temperature, the refrain “¡Tápala! ¡Tápala! [Cover her! Cover her!]” would be as constant as were the strangers who, at the same moment they were asking us if they could hold Liliana, were grabbing her away without waiting for a reply.

Strangers, usually women but sometimes men, would approach us on the street to look at Liliana and offer the advice that she should be better wrapped. A man in a gas station questioned me closely one afternoon about the security of the straps on her car seat. Reassured, he nonetheless directed me, “Drive carefully with her.” As much as this study is dedicated to debunking stale generalizations about common national culture traits, children and parenting do seem more central to more people in Mexico than has ever been my experience in the United States. What might constitute busybody behavior in other locations is in Mexico quite often customary cultural parenting practice.

If anthropology, including that devoted to understanding Mexico,

has often trafficked in simplistic versions of geographically bounded cultural practices, it has in addition sometimes lacked an ability to treat seriously specificity and confusion—for instance, with regard to male gender identities in Mexico in the late twentieth century. Fortunately, in response to this situation, some researchers have recently begun to reappraise hallowed truths (see Brandes 1988 and de Barbieri 1990),¹ and to reject a superficial categorization of Mexican men and machismo. Gender characteristics long presumed quintessential and immutable have belatedly come under closer scrutiny. Even if generalizations about Mexican men and women had in the past been somewhat appropriate—and there is little to recommend such a conclusion—they should be discarded now.

Nor are we dealing simply with the pressing need for social science to catch up to history in its theoretical formulations. In fact, today in Mexico, what it means to be a man or a woman may be less evident than ever before. Among the young in Mexico City the model of aggressive masculinity is no longer the pistol-packing *charro* cowboy of yore looking for a tranquil rancho where he can hang his sombrero. He has been replaced by the submachine-gun-spraying Rambo launching assaults on the Vietnams or Afghanistans of the moment. No one would suggest that Rambo is a product of Mexico, yet there as in his land of origin, is he not known as the ultimate macho? Local symbols become globalized and then relocalized and reglobalized.

Neither is this book a straightforward study that traces the compass and course of modernity as it lurches fitfully ahead in Mexico, as if following painfully but faithfully in the tracks of the United States. Hanging outside a second-floor window in Colonia Santo Domingo, a banner reads, “Kinder Quetzalcóatl. Antes Mickey Mouse”; the school formerly called the Mickey Mouse Kindergarten is now named for a Toltec and Aztec deity, Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent. The geopolitics of Mexico’s two-thousand-mile border and historically unique relationship with the United States weigh heavily on all aspects of Mexican society. But there are also particularities to Mexican modernity that, while often related to the country’s unequal economic and cultural connections to the United States—a \$100 billion debt, for instance—are not reducible to these ties.

Mexico has a long and unique history, and its approach to modernity has been equally complicated. Rampageous urbanization, epitomized by the massive and widespread land invasions of metropolitan peripheries; the massacre by the national army of hundreds of leftist students in

a working class housing project at Tlatelolco in 1968, just before Mexico hosted the Olympics; devastating banking and financial crises like those of 1982 and 1995; an earthquake in 1985, which pancaked the imaginary development of democracy into the boggy foundations of Mexico City; state-run antipoverty programs, like the one called *Solidaridad* (Solidarity), which is broadly ridiculed instead of welcomed by the poor, the presumed beneficiaries of such government largesse; fractious political dueling at the national level that on occasion leads to speculation about electoral upsets, as in the presidential elections of 1988, and political assassinations, as in 1994; an armed uprising in Chiapas in 1994 that gained popular support throughout the country because “Chiapas is Mexico”—these are but a few of the signposts of modernity in Mexico City that have arisen in recent times.

Yet people in Mexico City’s Colonia Santo Domingo and other poor neighborhoods of Mexico are also fascinated by international events and topics as varied as U.S. military activities in Iraq and police brutality in Los Angeles because they see these events as part of their world and their future. For example, the subject of Rodney King, the Black man whose 1991 beating by Los Angeles police was shown to the world on videotape, confronted me with great regularity in Mexico in the year or two following the incident. It came up one afternoon at the house of a relative of a friend in the town of Tepotzotlán, on the northern reaches of the Mexico City area, where in the course of an afternoon I was subjected to a two-hour interrogation on King and many other issues by half a dozen men and women. My smiling hosts explained that it was only fair that the anthropologist be so interviewed every once in a while, though as a guest of honor I was given one of the two or three collapsible chairs to sit on. The others stood or sat on the ground outside the two-room concrete dwelling, which had been “under construction” for some years and boasted no other furniture save a fold-up cot and a black-and-white television set. Cooking was done on the makeshift *comal* (grill) outside.

The owner of the property, Armando, initiated the inquisition. “Listen, Mateo, you are welcome, you are very welcome in my poor home. But, listen, Mateo, I must know one thing. Mateo, why is the U.S. bombing Iraq? What the hell can you tell me about this?” He had attended school for less than one year, some fifty years earlier, but Armando enjoyed watching the TV news. As I incautiously tried to explain what I knew of U.S. strategic planning for the Middle East, others interrupted. “And what’s with this Rodney King beating?” We discussed

racism and recent police campaigns against African American youth in the United States. "So how much do you bribe the cops in the U.S.?" I responded that while bribing police was far less necessary in the United States than in Mexico, clipping a twenty-dollar bill to your driver's license used to be a common practice in working class areas of Chicago when I lived there. "Why won't Blacks work as hard as Mexicans there?" The nasty feelings of some Mexicans for African Americans, with whom few have ever had contact, is largely a product of Southern California's economy and provides another indication of the ambiguities of national borders.

"What Mexican food do you like best?" Politics and cuisine were beginning to mix. "Did you know that Taco Bell is opening up here?" Which led to a discussion of why the Mexican upper middle class, the main group that frequents such establishments, might wish to eat U.S.-style Mexican food. "How did you learn Spanish?" "What do you hope to accomplish with this anthropology?" "Why did you choose to live in Santo Domingo?" "What kinds of jobs have you had in the U.S. and how much did you get paid?" "What are the gangs like in Houston?" There followed questions about the Mexican film comedian Tin Tan, Mexico City's pollution, finding a job in Oakland for someone's niece, and how many children Michelle and I were going to have.

The consequences of modernity require an analysis of changing structures and events by lay practitioners and professionals alike. Why certain changes occur and what happens to the men and women who are the actors and critics of modernity as they themselves change is the subject of this study. But though emerging cultural practice—what used to be called culture change—is a focus here, Arrom's (1985:231) description of early-nineteenth-century Mexico City remains relevant: "Although Mexicans believed that wives should be subordinated to husbands, they disagreed on what that meant in practice." Nonetheless, fewer Mexicans, especially Mexican women, share such beliefs today, and a broad comparison between life in the Mexican capital then and now would probably indicate an even greater disparity between the ideals of familial authority and responsibility and their practical realities. The diverse ways in which power is manifested and wielded at the household level do not, however, prevent us from recognizing recurrent elements in the wider sociological context.

In the financial and governmental elites in Mexico, men routinely control economic and political power. At all wage-scale levels, women get paid a fraction of what men receive. Rape and domestic violence are

widespread and, some argue, increasingly characteristic of the subordination of women to men. The rising rate of single abandoned mothers is but one indication of the double standards that are broadly utilized to exculpate men by absolving them from parental and marital responsibilities.

To adequately allow for both structure and agency, therefore, the study of men and male gender identities in Mexico City requires a constant refocusing of one's vision. This is necessary, first, in order to apprehend the Durkheimian invisible hand of social facts—how we are all in a very real sense products of our societies—and second, in order to accent the existential issue of cultural accountability. For, as suggested by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992:22–23), “the ethical is always prior to culture because the ethical presupposes all sense and meaning and therefore makes culture possible.” What constitutes good and bad gender identities and relations for women and men in Santo Domingo is not knowable through abstract discourse on culture, any more than changes in culture can be explained without examining previous changes in ethical standards of belief and behavior.

FALLING FROM CONVENTIONAL GRACE

After spending nearly a year living and working in the *colonia popular* of Santo Domingo, Mexico City, I sat with a friend going over some questions that I had asked him six months earlier. I do not know if he remembered his initial answers, but the second time around his personal history had changed in significant ways. No doubt this change reflected a mutual trust that had developed between us in the interim, but I think that the ethnographic process had also allowed him, as it had me, to increasingly bring certain events in his life to light, to put into words many of the actions and feelings that had remained hidden from his consciousness.

Precisely because ever more men and women throughout Mexican society are today reflexively considering their multiple gender identities, the process of documenting these identities grows more complex. One reason to avoid thin and sweeping conclusions about gender relations in Mexico, and in Latin America as a whole, is that we still know too little about them. But the main reason to avoid such overly ambitious generalizations is that there exists no stable set of determining and essential gender qualities that can adequately capture the situation for the region as a whole; relentlessly emergent gender variations see to that.

Whenever I was in doubt, for persuasive evidence I had only to walk through my section of Colonia Santo Domingo, beginning with the agnostic printer who bragged to me about his vasectomy a week after I met him, who worked in front of the house with a single mother and five young children, who lived a block over from the woman who resided openly with her children and a series of male lovers, who was next door to the woman who could not leave home without her husband's permission, who was across the street from the cobbler who ridiculed state- and church-sponsored marriages in the same breath as he rebuked unfaithful husbands, whose shop was below the home of a notorious and belligerent wife beater and his alcoholic sons, one of whom was the boyfriend of a young mother of two small children who lived in a home in which all the males were waited upon by all the females of the household, all of whom were surrounded in the *colonia* by young women who would be the first people in their families to graduate from high school.

These are but a few of the numerous men and women whose lives may at first glance appear too mundane to merit attention but in whose everyday activities, if we look closely, we might just glimpse the creative efforts of people coping with the gender relations they have inherited from past generations while simultaneously striving to fashion new approaches as best they can.