



MODERNITY AND THE  
NATION IN MEXICAN  
REPRESENTATIONS OF  
MASCULINITY

*From Sensuality to Bloodshed*

HÉCTOR DOMÍNGUEZ-RUVALCABA

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## Introduction

The objective of this book is to study the relevance of masculinity in Mexican culture. To achieve this goal I propose to interpret male representation as intersected or mediated by the historical process that constitutes the narrative of the nation in the modern period. I offer a theory of maleness not as the knowledge of the male body itself, but as a description of the historical, social, political, religious, and cognitive contexts that enable our perception of it. As Susan Bordo asserts, “[T]he body doesn’t carry only DNA, it also carries human history with it” (26). Thus the density of masculinity is based on its semiotic magnitude. Masculinity as a gender category is culturally produced not only as a perceived entity but also as a device for perception. It is a means by which we can know the peculiarities of a nation’s culture. We talk about masculinity, not only as a problem of gender, but also as a problem of knowledge that the masculine figure poses. Although the term “masculine” depends semantically on its differentiation from the term “feminine”—which reduces its conception to a binary sexual paradigm—its representation appears related to a broader symbolic universe: maleness participates in a rhetorical operation in which it allegorizes historical entities such as nation, modernity, and colonialism or functions as a metonym—relationships of cause-effect, container-content, fraction-wholeness—of social phenomena such as work, violence, oppression, and resistance.

I depart from the assumption that the politics of art production and reception is defined by a gender system whose structure of differences articulates the uses of representations. My endeavor in this



book is to show not only how modern Mexican culture, as in all Western civilization, is built on a structure of gender and patriarchy, but also how this modern masculinity, although connected in general terms to the Western gender principles, has specific features that have resulted from colonial and postcolonial processes. This book does not just point out nuances between the ruling imperialism and its dependent cultures. As its title indicates, it is also concerned with the deep contradictions expressed in the linkage between sensuality and violence. Modern civilization proposes sensuality and provokes violence. The journey from sensuality to violence is the plot of my book, which is based on four arguments I summarize in the pages that follow.

1. Representation of masculinity is an allegory of the nation, but this allegory can be conceived only through paradoxes.

My review of how the male is imagined focuses on the interstices and paradoxes that flow from this allegory. My goal is to underscore those moments of Mexican culture between the Porfiriato (1876–1911) and the first years of the twenty-first century, in which the hegemony of the masculine is put into question. Here we find the signs that point to the profile of the community-nation, its norms, and its limits. This symbolic systematization can be defined, according to Elsa Muñiz, as a civilizing process based on the differences of social functions reinforced by institutions and strict mechanisms of surveillance intended to keep intact the notions of femaleness and maleness (Muñiz 8). The middle-class formation that Muñiz addresses emphasizes the gender system of the Porfiriato and the postrevolutionary period. Against this background and within this collectivity, I propose to highlight the zones of exclusion. I intend to shed light on the hidden aspects of masculine representation—the scandals, the prejudices, the permissive areas, and the strategies of segregation: in sum, all aspects that conservative middle-class “civilization” tends to make invisible. Repression, punishment, and morbid curiosity are instruments of power that pervade a broad production of images and discourses. As Robert Buffington observes when discussing depictions of transvestitism in newspaper cartoons during the Porfiriato, politics is sexualized through homophobia (199). Carlos Monsiváis asserts that the scandal disseminated around the 1901 case of the transvestites’ ball of the “41” proves the recognition of the existence of homosexuality (1998: 2,18). In Martín Luis Guzmán’s narratives and Ismael Rodríguez’s films, homosociety defines an attraction from male to male. In Hugo Argüelles’ theater, in Luis Zapata’s novel, and in ethnographies on popular homosexuality, we find that homoeroticism and machismo are not opposed but intersect in the characterization of male sexuality. In these works, satire, attraction, and scandal open the way to a chain of rhetorical processes that destabilizes social discourses. The materials that I examine in this book

underline the signifying character of gender transgression and its political materialization in the public sphere. Representations of the transgressing body unleash a struggle expressed through phobias and seductions that penetrates beyond sexuality into all dimensions of daily life.

2. Mexican masculinity is an invention of modern colonialism, in which sensualizing means disempowerment.

This book is an attempt to understand how modernity, nation, and masculinity intersect in the representation of men. Modernity is a project imposed by a paternalist conception of government in all historical periods (the 1870s to the 2000s) my analysis covers. Instead of offering a way for the development of democratic society, modern paternalism reproduces the colonial dependency model in which the national is fatally fixed in the subaltern position of unending subjugation to an influx of external civilizing influences. This authoritarian modernity reveals that maleness, as allegorical resource of the nation, is a central trope for understanding Mexican culture. However, this Mexican maleness, which locates the representation of the national in spontaneity instead of making it a deliberate project of the nation, is more natural than rational, more impulsive than controlling.

Sensualizing of the male body amounts to derationalizing the masculine and derogating one of the main attributes of masculinity in Western culture since the Enlightenment, according to Victor J. Seidler (14); but, sensualizing of men also implies their disempowerment and their representation as subjects who cannot control their own impulses. Sensuality reflects the perception of colonized maleness as lacking reason and power and being ruled by emotions. Mexican naturalism and the representation of the indigenous population in the beginning of the twentieth century support the argument that modernity in the arts proposes sensualization of the Mexican male as a symbolic strategy for disempowering him. By the same token, representation of machos in classic cinema configures a melodramatic exaltation of national masculinity.

The idea of disempowering through sensuality leads to the deconstruction of virility through transvestism. Political cartoons of the nineteenth century reiterate the definition of power as virility, and effeminacy as antinational representation. Effeminacy constitutes a device for emasculating political enemies—whereas the military and *charro* (Mexican cowboy) garment denote empowerment. Embodying the image of the excluded, the effeminate male appears repeatedly throughout the twentieth century as confirmation that the excluded is actually an integral part of the disputes that form the national imaginary. Yet, as is shown in several instances, the excluded feminine and effeminate figures form the cornerstone on which the masculine hegemony rests: the case of the forty-one ball in 1901, the derogatory statements against effeminate intellectuals in the postrevolutionary period, and the contemporary murders of women and homosexuals are some of the cases this book discusses in this regard. By focusing on phobias to apprehend masculinity, we take a negative perspective: the masculine is known by what it rejects. This position

leads to an exposé of the contradictions of the patriarchy. The understanding of the masculine hegemony is necessarily an understanding of the politics it performs. In these relationships the moral and aesthetic determinations of the masculine reveal a system of phobias and desires that maps out a vertiginous route of rejections and attractions that constitute male representation.

3. The Mexican state has a homosocial feature, and homosociety is shaped by misogyny and homophobia.

One of the central statements of this book is that homosocial bonds characterize the Mexican political structure. If the male hegemony is produced by phobias, we must question the analogy between homosociety and the state. While misogyny and homophobia construct national otherness, heterosexual masculinity occupies the center stage, that is, the collective's desirable self, represented as the homosocial gathering of men. Homosociety and homophobia are the two faces of Mexican masculinity. The former corresponds to the desirable man and the latter to his rejection. The two depend on each other, to nurture the content of moral structures and to generate rationales and simulacra of sense to confirm the necessity for patriarchy.

Homosociety prevails as a principle of social cohesion despite revolutions and postmodernity: this is the main assumption that provides coherence to the hegemony of masculinity throughout modern history. The structure in which the patriarchal hegemony in Mexico is rooted consists of three versions of homosociety: the belief in the totalitarian state associated with the modernization of the Porfiriato, the belief in the paternalism of the postrevolutionary state, and the belief in the violence of postmodern times. In this sense, homosociety is the model for the Mexican state. Masonic loggias, the revolutionary elite, recreational and economic activities, all gather males and thus political, social, economic, and cultural life are structured around men.

The monumental cult of the image of male heroes as a central reference in the syntax of the city requires an explanation. Staged at the point of convergence of streets, and occupying the pinnacle of public space, the images of male heroes constitute a statement of masculine supremacy. Here are staged the ideas of state and power, and all the abstractions that symbolize the nation. Through this monolithic representation, from the most elevated public image to the most intimate and disdained representations, the male body reveals, not the Habermasian scheme of the ideal rational state, but the dynamics of fluxes and excretions, the currents of communicative actions that configure the fiction of the nation, as well as the failures and compulsions of the representations.

An analysis of the masculine is incomplete without a consideration of the relationship between gender categories. This relationship involves the conflictive contacts that the patriarchal system imposes through its hierarchical structure. The conflictive—often violent—contact between gender categories enables the construction of alternative identities, mainly through two mechanisms of exclusion: homophobia and misogyny. Literature and the arts in general again

and again show this negative relationship. However, this work, instead of dealing with the binary extrapolation of the oppressive patriarchy and the oppressed marginal, studies the internal contradictions in homophobic and misogynist bias.

The border between hate and desire outlines power relations. In this regard, I propose gender as the criterion for the analysis of the state, specifically, homosocial hegemony and its misogynist and homophobic politics, which is defined in terms of desire and phobia. In the politics of desire and phobia, meaning is not produced through the execution of concepts; rather it depends on the positions its enunciation takes. Here it is important to locate the subject who represents (who has the agency that generates the representation), the object represented (either the object of desire or its rejection), and the addressee for whom representation is performed, where the phobia or desire is perceived, disseminated, mythologized, and deconstructed.

The relationship between desire and hate is dialectic, never a definite opposition. Homophobia and male-to-male attraction appear interrelated in narratives of homosociety. As in the machinery of Deleuze and Guattari, a system of fluxes of desire results in a system of excretions, or vice versa (11–17). If homosocial politics is characterized as a process of fluxes and expulsions, when we discuss masculinity as a metaphor for the nation, rather than as the imagined community proposed by Benedict Anderson, we could suggest that the nation represented is a compulsive oscillation between desire and expulsion, acceptance and rejection. Phobias and desires, therefore, make misogyny and homophobia constitutive for the representation of the nation.

My critique of homosociety requires the detachment of desire from hegemonic interest (which here is interpreted as the patriarchal, modern, and national ordering of the field of desire), and the discovery in its representations of the traces of their deconstruction. This will mean the deconstruction of the machinery that determined desirable images, which will lead us to reconsider the representation of males as the representation of disputed meanings. As contradictory, conflicting, or disputed as this work is, it still comprehends the Mexican masculinity as the battlefield of signification, where misogyny and homophobia are not just forms of domination and machismo, but also the fissures that enable its deconstruction.

4. Machismo is an epistemological instrument for critiquing both the state and violence.

Writers, ethnographers, artists, and academics who inquire into the currents of compulsions and failures argue that Mexican machismo depends on the contradictions of ethnicity and nationality in the context of modernity. Imagining and knowing Mexican masculinity in the symbolic fields of the nationality-colonialism dyad makes possible the characterizations that nurture the narratives of fiction, art, films, chronicles, and so on. Rancor, inferiority, hedonism, fear, ritualized challenge, fatality, seduction, and double standards are terms that refer to the drama of colonization or to the illusions

of modernity expressed in the representations of men. Most discourses on the masculine are articulated in a negative mode. Masculine desire bears a destructive effect. Violent eroticism is found in the nineteenth century fin de siècle art and literature, in the novel of revolution, and in classical and contemporary popular films. It is reflected in the essayist tradition on Mexicanness, which began in the 1930s. It is the theoretical ground of most ethnographies on Mexican society. Intellectual interventions throughout the twentieth century problematize masculine desire, resulting in a problematization of the symbolical order of the nation. Critical thought singles out desire, abjection, and ambiguities to characterize the specificity of the national. Terms such as traumas, scars, resentment, and guilt show that the pathology of the macho generates the failure of modernization.

I try to explain how the structure of the norms of social behavior that define and control bodies in Mexican machista society authorizes the community to exclude, condemn, discriminate against, and coerce those whom the patriarchy defines as its others. I also try to show how these excluded bodies interfere with the social norm, which is indeed a mechanism of production of physical and symbolic violence, as it mandates the control, punishment, and persecution of strange bodies. My critical intervention is devoted to emphasizing the strategies of domination through which the hegemony becomes hegemonic, while revealing the mechanisms of simulation and evidencing the incoherence of the social law. In this sense, my analysis is intended to dismount the moral and aesthetic machinery that organize masculinity. This skepticism of mine should be understood as a methodological tactic, a way to escape from the dominance of the patriarchy as a first step toward disempowering it, that is, to deauthorize the violence that the text of social law enables and provokes.

If we identify patriarchal law with violence, rather than recognize its effectiveness in the construction of social order, it is because in gender and sexual matters, national culture has revealed, especially in the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, a compulsion for immolating women and homosexuals. On the one hand, we have the ever-growing movements concerning women and sexual diversities, which have, since the beginning of the twentieth century, significantly influenced literature, art, media, education, and political agendas; on the other, we still have sectors of the state and civil society (from churches to political and criminal organizations) that reinforce patriarchal institutions such as the family, homosocial spaces, and heterosexuality, and create a climate of impunity and complicity with the sacrifice of subaltern bodies. This violence needs an urgent study.

I argue in this work that the state of terror and inequality that characterizes masculine dominance in Mexico is based on a politics of desire. Desire is the foundation of gender; its principle is relational, and it is articulated in terms of the machinery of social goods. Social prestige acquired through valuable masculine attributes is among the most appreciated of social goods. The politics of desire converts the reasons for excluding bodies into valuable

attributes. The system of desire is historical; it functions in the ethic and aesthetic spaces. A reflection on desire is an exercise in deconstruction that deals with the assumptions of what is desirable in both moral rationality and artistic intuitions.

The key concepts of this book are homophobia, misogyny, and homosociety, which are understood as the constitutive axes of machismo and peripheral (colonized) modern culture. My endeavor is to explore instances of discursive and visual materials in which we can find the places and mechanisms that articulate masculinity. I seek to put forward a practical theory of desire that converts aesthetic expression into ethical reflection. Mine is a study of the political meaning of maleness; that is, we try to understand the process that makes the masculine a significant entity. Here man is presented to our gaze both as its exterior expression and its fissures; here I confront what hegemonic masculinity claims to be and its deadening silence in order to offer a reflection on the linkage between intimacy and coercion and their implications for the concept of nation.

Part I

# Sensual Interventions

## Sense of Sensuality

This chapter focuses on the representation of the male body in the art and literature of the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. It aims to answer the question: How is maleness produced as part of the project of modernization in Mexican arts? Departing from a reflection on the meaning of sensuality in this period, I argue that the aesthetics of modern masculinity in Mexico must be understood in the context of colonialism—as modernity perpetuates the cultural dependency of the colonized on their erstwhile colonizers. On the basis of the sculptures of the heroes as well as the depiction of male sensuality in art and narrative and the depiction of Mexican Indians and mestizos in painting, this chapter argues that the male body offers the keys for understanding the process of modernization in Mexico. First, we find in the nudist art of the Academia de San Carlos a pleasurable representation of men, in contrast with the symbolical representation of romantic heroes one generally comes across in most art forms. Second, in the depiction of the sexual nature of men in naturalist stories, it is possible to trace a way of fighting traditional contention of the body longing in naturalist narrative. Third, representation of Indians and mestizos in this period shows the westernization of the natives by providing them with sensuality and subjectivity, so that they can be read in the modern code. These then are three aspects of male body representation in which sensuality and colonialism intersect.



## Enjoyable Males

In a speech delivered in 1873 during an awards ceremony at the Academia de San Carlos art school, D. Pelegrín Clavé, the director of painting, regretted that art had become sensual, as the cult of form replaced Christian inspiration (Romero de Terreros 354). The cult of form, linked to sensuality in Pelegrín's speech, expresses a new direction of art in fin de siècle modernity; characteristically it focuses on representation of the body. In the works of the Academia that Pelegrín refers to, the object of art becomes a domain of senses. Sensuality in art gratifies the senses by means of perception. Then sensuality, that is, the pleasurable depiction of the body, inserts itself as the content of art works. The body itself implies its intrinsic meaning through the suppression of any extrabody content in the artistic appreciation. That is, nude representation in the works at the Academia de San Carlos proposes that art value is implicit in the beauty of the human body, and there is nothing to see beyond its surface. Conceptualization of beauty refers only to the body form. It is a discourse that invisibly dresses the body and prevents the gaze from being distracted by any interest other than the enjoyment of bodies. Sensuality consists of the body as an object of beauty.

The use of body as an aesthetic norm is part of the taste of *modernismo*.<sup>1</sup> Sensuality conveys hedonism, and hedonism is manifested in the field of sensations. Christianity and the nation, the concepts that were used to determine art production and reception in the earlier artistic periods, lost their influence in the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico. The triumph of the Republic against French intervention in 1867 is also the triumph of the liberal bourgeoisie and the start of a new colonialism based on liberalization of markets modeled on British free-trade politics. This geopolitical context locates Mexico in the cartography of the movement of merchandise and discourses that define modernity: that process of urbanization and divulgence, devolution, distribution, and vulgarization of ideas, which challenges the two systems of homogeneity: the Catholic Church that the Reform laws (1857) of liberal politicians such as Benito Juárez and Miguel Lerdo de Tejada constrained politically; and the romantic nationalism that

cohabits with cosmopolitan forms of life. In modernity, art tends to be private, to give pleasure, and to find its own meaning in sensuality. If sensuality is the subject of sculpture by Enrique Guerra, Fidencio Nava, and Agustín Campos (Velázquez 24), who were influential in the last decade of the nineteenth century, we have to agree that sensuality is based on the enjoyment of the gaze and that it detaches reception from Christian and national conceptualizations.

A field of meaning coterminous with the senses, sensuality connotes the resistance to the Christian and nationalist rituals. The immediate reference to sensory experiences keeps sensuality descriptive and on the surface. *Modernista* art introduces appearance, in and of itself, in contrast with the symbolic constructions of iconography in the romantic and baroque periods, which depended on codifications beyond the image as a condition of intelligibility.

Besides *modernista* art, from independence to the postrevolutionary period, masculine bodies in nationalistic paintings were dressed with allegorical codes. Men were represented by the heroic body: dominance, decision, and sacrifice characterized the body in romantic painting, in monuments erected during the Porfiriato, and in postrevolutionary muralism. Emblems, standards, uniforms, and coats-of-arms determined the male bodies' meaning, while written objects such as books, documents, and banners prevented the work from being misinterpreted. The content of these pieces is a series of visual commands and a litany of symbolic paraphernalia that makes art a public-political activity. Military governments imposed a form of figurative expression, making the images of males narrate the country's mythology. In the exhibition "La Contrucción del Estado" [The Construction of the State] in the fall of 2003, in the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City, the protagonists of national narratives are presented in their most public tasks: they celebrate agreements, play at or enact ceremonies of surrendering, founding of towns and buildings, entering the city celebrating triumph, performing military feats, or retiring from the battlefield after defeat. During the Porfiriato, statues of the builders of the nation placed along Paseo de la Reforma Avenue in Mexico City carry out this representative articulation of the patriarchal nation. In the last decades of the