

El Baile de Los 41 and Sexuality in 1900's Mexico

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On November 17th, 1901, a clandestine ball was discovered during the follow up on a noise complaint. When authorities arrived, a man in an elegant woman's dress answered the door, thus prompting a raid. That night, 42 men, a number of them members of Mexico's elite, were found dancing together and participating in various compromising acts.¹ Although an event like this was not entirely unheard of, the attendees, location, and the political climate of Mexican society all play a vital role in its infamy.² Half of the men were discovered wearing dresses and jewelry, and using padding to emulate breasts.³ In the days that followed, many of these men were publicly humiliated, jailed, and hastily exiled to the Yucatán.⁴ The remaining men are assumed to have paid away their shame.⁵ Despite an outpour of news coverage, there is no photographic evidence of this event and all but a handful of names were lost to history. The Dance of the 41 altered the sexual climate in Mexico, and thus, had a lasting impact on sexuality and gender roles over the following centuries.

In 1901, Mexico was in the midst of rule by President, and later dictator, Porfirio Diaz. During this time, Mexico underwent a period of great growth, entering the 20th century on a wave of progress and modernity. As authors Susan M. Deeds, Michael C. Meyer, and William L. Sherman discuss in *The Course of Mexican History*, "When Diaz assumed control of Mexico in 1879, the country had been scarcely touched by the scientific, technological, and industrial

¹ Jose Guadalupe Posada, "The Famous 41: Newspaper Scandal of 1901: 'Ball of Effeminate men,'" *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, ed. Robert McKee Irwin et al (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 21-22.

² Robert McKee Irwin et al., "Introduction," *the Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

³ Posada, "Newspaper Scandal of 1901: 'Ball of Effeminate men,'" *The Famous 41*, 21-22.

⁴ Irwin, "Introduction," *The Famous 41*, 3.

⁵ Carlos Monsivais, "The 41 and the Gran Renada," *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, ed. Robert McKee Irwin et al, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 148.

revolutions of the 19th century... [and thus] Diaz believed it would be necessary to change Mexico's image drastically."⁶ During his first term, Diaz was able to alleviate a number of Mexico's economic struggles, established a relationship with the United States, and worked ardently against bandits and smuggling.⁷ Part of this reform was Diaz's focus on order and progress.⁸ In application, Diaz wanted to establish a firm and unrelenting order which would allow Mexico to progress as a nation. After Diaz returned to power in 1884, "Mexico entered the modern age, [and with it] steam, water, and electric power began to replace animal and human muscle."⁹ Additionally, Diaz ensured the arrival of the telephone and an electric tramway.¹⁰ In this way, Porfirio Diaz successfully created a modern Mexico.

These developments are important to the trajectory of the changing social culture in Mexico. A focus on morality took center stage as an underlying facet of President Diaz's reforms to Mexican society. Therefore, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mexican society perceived sexual deviance as being "unnatural, antisocial, and linked to innate criminality."¹¹ In "Las Jotos: Contested Visions of Homosexuality in Modern Mexico," historian Rob Buffington examines the relationship between homosexuality and Porfirian political ideologies. Buffington claims that the Mexican political climate aimed to paint sexual deviance as being innately threatening to national, political, and societal developments.¹² Contrary to this conservative perspective, new education and knowledge lead to new thoughts, feelings, and experimentations.

⁶ Susan M. Deeds et al., "The Modernization of Mexico: Society and Culture during the Porfiriato," *The Course of Mexican History*, (New York: Oxford University press, 2018), 322.

⁷ Daniel Santana, 10/3, In Class lecture. (Supported by "The Modernization of Mexico: Society and Culture during the Porfiriato," *The Course of Mexican History*, 323.)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 325

¹¹ Rob Buffington, "Los Jotos: Contested Visions of Homosexuality in Modern Mexico," *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Balderson (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

According to Robert McKee Irwin, editor of *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, “Mexican cultural trends in literature, in the sciences, and in journalism were inciting an atmosphere of sexual curiosity that was in search of the right turn of events [in order to] focus interest on what was not a new phenomenon, but was about to become a new concept: homosexuality.”¹³ What would come to be known as the scandal of the 41, would serve as a catalyst, provoking new feelings regarding the eroticism that could exist between men.¹⁴

The information that is known regarding the party and the sequential raid is provided as follows: The ball took place on November 17th, 1901. A *gendarme* (armed police officer) heard a commotion coming from the building where the ball was held and knocked on the door to inquire about a permit for the gathering.¹⁵ At this point, “an effeminate type answered the door dressed as a woman, his skirt gathered up, his face and lips full of makeup... at this sight, he entered the annex, and found there, 42 such couples.”¹⁶ Of the reported 41 individuals, 22 were dressed as men and 19 were found dressed as women, complete with wigs, fake hips and breasts, fans, embroidered slippers, and makeup.¹⁷ In the two weeks that followed, newspapers such as *El Popular*, *El País*, and *El Imparcial* reported on the ball, the forced humiliation of the crossdressers, and finally, their exile to Yucatán.¹⁸

Most firsthand information about the “The 41,” comes from newspaper articles in the days following the scandal. For example, the first news articles to report on the scandal claimed an attendance of 42 partygoers. Historical legend insists that the 42nd was none other than Diaz’s

¹³ Irwin, “Introduction,” in *The Famous 41*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ Monsivais, “The 41 and the Gran Redada,” *The Famous 41*, 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁷ Monsivais, “The 41 and the Gran Redada,” *The Famous 41*, 147.

¹⁸ “The Famous 41: Newspaper Scandal of 1901,” *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 21-33.

son-in-law, Don Ignacio de la Torre.¹⁹ As news continued to erupt over this blatant impropriety, very few names were actually obtained. In Carlos Monsivais' examination of the ball in "The 41 and the *Gran Redada*," he observes that "the most common trait during the *redadas* (raids) [was] the [convenient] forgetting of one's identity... [but even] one hundred years after the raid, all certainty has vanished, except for the presence of Nacho de la Torre."²⁰ With the absence of photographs, however, there is no way to prove the attendance of any singular person.²¹ Due to the lack of photographs, the most popular images associated with the ball are caricatures illustrated by famous artist, Jose Guadalupe Posada; these illustrations portrayed the men as having tiny waists and large mustaches in order to exaggerate both their masculine and feminine qualities.²² Furthermore, the only account in regards to the transgressions before and during the party, Eduardo Castrejón's *Los 41: Novela Crítico-Social*, is almost entirely fabricated. Despite the inaccuracies concerning the ball and its internal affairs, it still provides valuable historical insight regarding homosexuality in the early 20th century.²³

On November 19, 1901, the newspaper, *El Diario del Hagar* published an article entitled, "Men-Only Ball," where the first line read as follows: "Repugnant is the only word to describe the incident that the police discovered Saturday night in a house on La Paz Street."²⁴ On November 22nd *El País* published, "The Nefarious Ball" decrying that "the state of immorality has revealed itself in yesterday's news story."²⁵ For the first handful of days, the actual date of the ball was indiscernible to news reporters. According to Robert Irwin, it was like that the party started on the

¹⁹ Monsivais, "The 41 and the Gran Redada," *The Famous 41*, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

²² Posada, Illustration I: "Los 41 Maricones," *The Famous 41*, 7.

²³ Robert McKee Irwin et al., "Introduction," *the Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 9-10.

²⁴ "The Famous 41: Newspaper Scandal of 1901," *The Famous 41*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

16th, with the raid occurring in the early hours of the 17th.²⁶ The participants who were unable to buy their way out were subject to court-ordered public humiliation due to their “offenses on morality,” and thus, were made to sweep the streets of Mexico City while still wearing the dresses they wore upon arrest.²⁷ Within two weeks, the men that remained were exiled to Yucatán to serve the Mexican Army as mess hall staff and trench diggers.²⁸ Throughout this process, the perception of the men involved was that of disgusted indignation. On November 24th, *El Popular* attempted to justify such actions, writing “that the harsh commentaries that we make and have made are directed to those who, utterly lacking in shame, have stooped to dressing as women and dancing with other equally shameless men.” This rhetoric highlights the belief that sexual deviancy threatened the moral health of the new and improved Mexican society.²⁹

Following the outing of the 41, Mexico worked to repress and erase sexual promiscuity.³⁰ However, this attempt would ultimately be in vain due to the growing popularity of Mexican bathhouses. When the Porfirian government initially discussed the development of public baths, it’s goal fit within the scope of modernity and societal progress.³¹ Ironically, bathhouses allowed for men of different social stations to mingle within a common and exposed space.³² Victor M. Macias - Gonzalez, author of *Sex and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, elaborates on the purpose of the integration of classes, and the elite was optimistic that the lower class would adopt their bathing practices.³³ Additionally, elites hoped that the lower class would share their “notions about how

²⁶ Irwin et al., “ Introduction,” *the Famous 41*, 6.

²⁷ Monsivais, “The 41 and the Gran Redada,” *The Famous 41*, 164.

²⁸ Robert McKee Irwin, “ The Centenary of the Famous 41” *the Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 170.

²⁹ Buffington, “Los Jotos,” *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, 125.

³⁰ Irwin, “ The Centenary of the Famous 41” *The Famous 41*, 174.

³¹ Victor M. Macías - Gonzalez, “The Bathhouse and Male Homosexuality in Porfirian Mexico,” *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, 27.

³² *Ibid.*, 27.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

bathing could potentially be an object of national pride.”³⁴ What resulted was the opposite. While the upper class associated cleanliness with a sense of status, the lower class viewed the elites excessive bathing practices as being too feminine.³⁵ Lower social classes correlated medieval superstitions with the notion of full body submersion, such as immorality and being of ill health.³⁶ Furthermore, public opinion “scorned the luxurious lifestyle of the *lagartijos*³⁷ because they blurred traditional gender boundaries and represented an unproductive - and thus un-masculine use of capital that violated the values of frugality, modesty, [and] decorum.”³⁸

According to Robert McKee Irwin’s research regarding sexuality and social control in Mexico, he concludes that “the discourses of social control do not necessarily repress sexuality, and they certainly do not repress interest in sexuality... [the Mexican Government could not] define homosexuality because they lacked access to the sexual reality of the sexually subversive.”³⁹ Behind closed doors, male homosexuality continued to thrive. The bathhouses not only allowed for men to meet others from different social status’, but provided ample opportunity for them to meet new sexual partners.⁴⁰ Despite their best efforts, Porfirian era bathhouses allowed for men to sexually satisfy themselves with another man.⁴¹ Macías - Gonzalez concludes his findings by observing that despite the Porfirian regimes best efforts to repress same-sex relationships, they had incidentally facilitated a community for it.⁴²

After the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, Porfirio Diaz’s progress in Mexico came to a halt. Since then, Mexico has struggled to achieve more progressive reforms. The first

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Ibid., 28.

³⁶ Ibid., 28.

³⁷ Mexican-Spanish Slang, “lizards” being used as a derogatory term for the upper class.

³⁸ Macías - Gonzalez, “The Bathhouse and Male Homosexuality,” *Masculinity and Sexuality*, 27.

³⁹ Irwin, “ The Centenary of the Famous 41” *The Famous 41*, 175.

⁴⁰ Macías - Gonzalez, “The Bathhouse and Male Homosexuality,” *Masculinity and Sexuality*, 38.

⁴¹ Ibid., 44.

⁴² Ibid., 45.

organized gay rights demonstration took place in 1979,⁴³ a decade after the Stonewall Riot in the United States. In 2001, Mexico celebrated the centenary of *el Baile de los 41*, and according to Robert McKee Irwin, the reason for this was not to celebrate the repression, but the visibility that came along with it.⁴⁴ However, Mexico has slowly joined the 21st century, legalizing same-sex marriages across all Mexican states on October 27, 2022. Despite prejudice, humiliation, and years of systemic repression, same-sex relationships have persisted and persevered. Gone is the absolute necessity to share secret looks in bathhouses, and secret dances behind closed doors.

⁴³ theycatantimes.com, “Gay Pride Parade: Hundreds of Thousands March in Mexico City,” 26 June 2020. Accessed 29 November 2022.

⁴⁴ Irwin et al., “Introduction,” *the Famous 41*, 3.