

**A POPULAR AND WHOLESOME RESORT:  
Gender, Class, and the Young Men's Christian Association  
in Porfirian Mexico**

by

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## ABSTRACT

In the period from 1902 to 1910, the Mexican branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) attracted a large Spanish-speaking membership composed primarily of urban white-collar employees or *empleados*. The Association's Mexican members found the YMCA useful in the pursuit their own social objectives. First, the Association provided Mexican *empleados* with a means to promote the formation of a new national identity through the transformation of cultural practices. The encouragement of sporting activity became a primary element in this program. Second, the YMCA provided a platform from which the Mexican members proclaimed their collective political power and distinct identity. Public athletic demonstrations provided the most prominent means of making these assertions.

In pursuing these two objectives, the Association's *empleado* members constructed sexual identity alongside nationality and class. As a result, they frequently utilized concepts of gender to produce rhetorical effects in their assertions of national and class identity. The Association's *empleado* members consequently sought a masculine national identity in the hope of attaining a new and more powerful position within the community of nations. The linkages established between these elements of identity also enabled Mexican Association members to project a "male" class identity. The establishment of this collective "persona" enabled their attainment of visibility within the public sphere and the assertion of their combined political power.

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Between 1902 and 1910, the Mexican branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) gained popularity among a segment of the urban workforce enabled by social status, if not wealth, to claim membership among the *gente decente*, or decent people. Commonly referred to as *empleados* (a term roughly synonymous with "white-collar" worker), members of this class strove to differentiate themselves from the more proletarian *obreros*.<sup>1</sup> While the YMCA sought to disseminate a system of values among this social class, the Mexican membership utilized the Association as a platform from which to elaborate a discourse of identity and power. First, in the interest of creating to a new national identity, Mexican *empleados* used the YMCA to encourage cultural change through a program whose principle vehicle was sporting activity. Second, through the Association, these members also organized highly visible public demonstrations which asserted their separate existence and collective power within Mexican society.<sup>2</sup>

Pursuing these two objectives, the Association's *empleado* members invoked concepts of gender in their assertions of national and class identity. Through expressions of their adherence to a set of values which laid out sex roles and incorporated these codes of behaviour into a system of morality, *empleados* actively dissociated themselves from the *pueblo*. Such assertions of virtue also provided the basis for criticism of the elite while defending *empleados*' claims to high social rank. Rather than utilize this self-delineation in a solely exclusionary way, however, *empleados* held up the values which substantiated their claims to a separate identity as an ideal for the rest of Mexico. Consequently, the gendered imagery which sustained assertions of *empleados*' collective

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<sup>1</sup> I adopt David Parker's use of these terms; see his "White Collar Lima, 1910-1929: Commercial Employees and the Rise of the Peruvian Middle Class" in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 72:1 (1992) pp.47-72

<sup>2</sup> William Beezley has also examined sport and recreational pursuits as expressions of cultural values in *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

identity and political power provided as well the code of conduct which this group called all Mexicans to emulate. With a vision of a Mexican nation at once exclusionary and incorporative, *empleados* sought to rebuild society in their own image.

Assertions of masculinity, significant because they were constructed in relation to parallel concepts of femininity, assumed prominence within the discourse of the YMCA's Mexican members. Masculinity, however, remained an unstable concept, continually contested within a diverse society. Under these circumstances, all Mexicans did not perceive the same symbolism in the imagery of YMCA demonstrations. Instead, in the pursuit of a particular national identity and in displays of their collective masculinity, Mexican Association members attempted to fix a meaning for the concept, elaborating their understanding of male identity in an effort to impose this view on the rest of society. Discourse on masculinity consequently became an area of conflict in which the Association's Mexican members utilized their collective strength competitively in an attempt to assign meaning to a social category.

### **Garden Party at the YMCA**

The Kermesse, or garden party, held at the Alvarado branch of the Mexico City YMCA in May of 1909 drew together in a single public spectacle all the threads of discourse which surrounded the Association and its Mexican members. As an event, the Kermesse gave a performative representation of the members' conception of society, reflecting the system of meanings underlying the ideology of the Association and its adherents. The event, which over one thousand people attended including an impressive list of notables within the Porfirian regime, took place on the grounds of the Alvarado street branch of the YMCA. While the Mexico City police band played, guests strolled in a garden decorated with Japanese lanterns and strings of electric

lights which provided the yard with a novel and pleasant appearance and enabled the party-goers to remain outside enjoying the festivities long after dark. In the illuminated yard of the Association's converted mansion, guests witnessed a special display organized by Mexican and foreign YMCA members. In the garden stood five booths representing some of the countries in which the Association then operated. Young single women, citizens of the countries being represented, operated the booths. While the German booth served coffee and sandwiches, Britain offered "particularly dainty candies." Young women in the American booth served ice cream and cake to guests. Japan's booth, organized under the supervision of Mr. Arai, the head of the legation to Mexico, featured single women dressed as tea girls. Obscured by a shower of confetti, no less than eight single women operated the Mexican booth. All featured elaborate use of bunting in national colours and flags. The German women wore the national colours on their dresses.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, a different type of display took place nearby. In the Association's tiny gym, quickly packed to capacity by such a large crowd, YMCA members and hired performers amazed onlookers with demonstrations of their athletic ability. The display was somewhat unusual for the Association as it mainly featured professional athletes as special entertainers rather than simply presenting the accomplishments of YMCA members. The program began with a display of fencing by experts from the Romulo Timperi Academy followed by a Jiu Jitsu demonstration by Matsudo

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<sup>3</sup> "Over a Thousand at Garden Party" *Mexican Herald* (Hereafter *MH*) May 16, 1909, p.2. The *Mexican Herald* was an english-language newspaper published in Mexico City. Its factual accuracy was called into question by Kathryn Skibisky Norton, "The Mexican Herald, 1906 to 1908 : Genuine News or Propaganda?" Master's Thesis, Tulane University, 1979, who concluded that the paper was for the most part propaganda intended to reassure American investors. The paper is also discussed by William Schell Jr., in "Integral Outsiders, Mexico City's American Colony (1876-1911): Society and Political Economy in Porfirian Mexico" PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992, pp.93-96

Pasutake and Professor Takeo Honda. Next, Eugene Spinner and Lambert Hernández met for a bout of graeco-roman wrestling before Baldomero Romero of the YMCA took to the mat for another demonstration of Jiu Jitsu. Romero's display was followed by five rounds of boxing between Mexican champion Carlos Tijero and Joaquim Mendizabal. Finally, Pasutake and Professor Sodoke Othima gave yet another martial arts demonstration, concluding the evening's program of sport.<sup>4</sup>

On one level, the 1909 garden party served as part of the YMCA's program to protect the morals of young men. Association organizers believed that the separation of the young man from the private domain of the home brought about by new patterns of employment created great temptations and moral hazards. While most YMCA programs aimed to compensate for this separation, events such as the garden party encouraged the controlled interaction of young single men and women in the hope of promoting their marriage and the subsequent creation of a private conjugal home. With this end achieved, the Association directors and supporters could rest in the assurance that the young man's time of danger had ended and he no longer required the reinforcement of the YMCA program. American envoy General Powell Clayton alluded to this perception at a YMCA banquet held at a prominent Mexico City hotel, stating that "the young ladies are [also] identified with the institution since they are so closely associated with the young men; and those who may not already be associated with the young men may in the future become interested, and in this way the Association may be said to 'embrace' the young ladies."<sup>5</sup>

On a more fundamental level, through the relationship between the two events, the YMCA Kermesse offered to all willing observers an image of the Mexico desired by the Association's

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<sup>4</sup> "Over A Thousand At Garden Party" *MH* May 16, 1909, p.2

<sup>5</sup> "Is Formally Opened" *MH* Sept. 21, 1902



members. In the crowded garden, the booths stood as a representations of the nations they signified. Through them the organizers presented images of unified and cohesive polities, congregating like collective personalities as members in a community of equals. Symbolically, Mexico stood among its neighbours in seemingly unproblematic association, strengthened by the assurance of political cohesion equal to its counterparts. By erecting this symbolic representation among those of other nations, Mexicans (in the same manner as the other nationalities in attendance) hid behind a unified front the internal struggle carried on within a heterogeneous society, removing the conflicts over an ambiguous identity from sight behind the banners and bunting.

Within the discourse of national identity, the female attendants serving guests at the booths presented a further symbolic element in their relationship to the men simultaneously engaged in sporting activity in the tiny gymnasium. The women offered to visitors the comforts of a guest in the proper home, proffered in close association with the symbols of national identity. Like an intruder in the private realm of the bourgeois household, the guests entertained at the country booths witnessed a demonstration of their hostesses' adherence to the values of domesticity. The display given at the booths contrasted sharply with the men's athletic program, which principally displayed the arts of physical combat. The juxtaposition of these events pointed to the bond which existed between the system of gender and the collective identity on display. While national identity seemed to derive from both these sources, the uneven nature of the two realms (the private based on domestic harmony, the public on physical force) meant that political

power flowed from a masculine presence in the public sphere. On an individual level, this disparity also provided the perceived basis of male power in a patriarchal society.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, however, the booths and the athletic display asserted the classed identity of the Association's *empleado* membership. The values presented in such close affiliation with the emblems of nationality were those claimed by the *empleados* as the basis of their own identity. In this process, they constructed gender alongside class and nationality, creating a system whereby the power of nations, social classes, and individual males appeared to flow from the relation between the dual realms of female domesticity and male strength. The female half of this dichotomous construction has received considerable attention from historians to date.<sup>7</sup> The history of the YMCA in Porfirian Mexico, however, offers an opportunity to concentrate instead on the construction of masculinity and male identity.

### **Young Men Take Possession of Their Social Home**

The YMCA organized officially in Mexico in 1902. In May of that year, the newly established Mexico City branch moved into the old Pardo mansion at number four, Calle Puente de Alvarado, an advantageous location close to the terminals of both the National and Central railways. Planning a "popular and wholesome resort," they added a reading room, bowling alleys on the long veranda facing the garden, and a twenty-five by fifty foot gymnasium in a corner of the yard. Following the formal inauguration of the young men's "social home" in September of

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Roper and John Tosh make a similar point in Roper and Tosh "Introduction: Historians and the Politics of Masculinity" *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800*, M. Roper and J. Tosh eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995). The collective assertion of a masculine identity is also discussed by Joan Wallach Scott, in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" and "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988)

<sup>7</sup> See for example, William French, "Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work, and the Family in Porfirian Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 72:4 (1992) pp. 529-553

that year, the YMCA officially began its work in Mexico. Initially, the Association's mission to serve "young men away from home" extended only to Americans and other English-speaking foreigners living in the city. Under pressure from both the American colony and the Porfirian elite, however, the Association extended its criteria for membership and began admitting Mexicans, provided they spoke fluent English.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, though officially a Protestant organization, in 1907 the Mexican YMCA altered its membership requirements to admit Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

The Association received an enthusiastic response from the local community. By the end of its first year, the Alvarado YMCA claimed nearly five hundred members, with one fifth of these identified as Mexican.<sup>10</sup> Despite the Association's prevailing emphasis on American membership, Mexicans appeared enthusiastic to find a place for themselves within the institution. In November of 1903, the *Mexican Herald* reported the Spanish-speaking members holding their own reception for friends at the Association building.<sup>11</sup> The Porfirian elite also reacted positively to the arrival of the Association in Mexico. In general, the Porfirian government supported Protestant missionaries ambivalently at best, tolerating these groups primarily because of their opposition to Catholicism.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the YMCA benefited from the direct assistance of these same

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<sup>8</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Progress" *MH* May 20, 1902, p.8, ; "The Y.M.C.A.'s Work" *MH* May 28, 1902, p.2, "Y.M.C.A. Plans Advance" *MH* June 14, 1902, p.8; "Y.M.C.A. Is Opened" *MH* Sept. 2, 1902, p.2, "Y.M.C.A. Ready" *MH* Sept. 13, 1902, p.5; see also Schell, "Integral Outsiders", 1992, pp.249-250

<sup>9</sup> C. Howard Hopkins, *History of the Y.M.C.A. in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951) pp. 512-513, 519, 680; Protestant religious activities in Mexico have been discussed by Deborah J. Baldwin, see for example her *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990). Jean Pierre Bastien examines similar issues in *Protestantismo y Sociedad en Mexico* (1983)

<sup>10</sup> Schell, "Integral Outsiders" 1992, p.250

<sup>11</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Reception" *MH*, Nov. 30, 1903, p.7

<sup>12</sup> Jean Pierre Bastien *Protestantismo y Sociedad en Mexico* (1983) p.

officials. February of the following year saw the establishment of an "advisory board" composed of notables from within the Porfirian regime and initially including Justo Sierra, the prominent minister of education. Soon the *junta consultiva*, as this governing body was known, became the board of management of a Spanish-speaking Association branch with Judge Luis Alvarez León as its acting head. Mexican vice-president and minister of internal affairs Ramón Corral served as honorary head of both branches. Independently funded, though organizationally subordinate, the new branch operated initially from the separate facilities of an earlier unofficial affiliate, founded in 1891, that had denied membership to Mexicans and lost the recognition of the International Committee of the North American YMCA in 1900.<sup>13</sup>

Under the leadership of the Porfirian elite, the Mexican branch began an intensive funding drive, enabling the acquisition of a more adequate residence at number one, Calle de Patoni. The facility opened May 1, 1905, with a membership of about one hundred, including some English-speakers who transferred to the new branch in order to continue their night classes in Spanish. Some retained membership in both the Alvarado and Patoni branches. Inauguration of the Patoni street branch took place September 21, 1905, in a ceremony attended by Ramon Corral. By the end of the month the Association claimed some 330 Spanish-speaking members. The first anniversary celebrations held the next year saw the membership at 450, a level it held until the 1910 amalgamation of both branches within a new five story building at the corner of Calle de Balderas and Avenida de Morelos. Combined membership then totaled nearly one thousand, or one third of the estimated capacity of the building.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Social Amusement" *MH* Feb. 22, 1902, p.5; "Central in Lead" *MH* Sept. 26, 1902, p.5;; subordination of Mexican branch to general board is mentioned in "Y.M.C.A. Holds Elections" *MH* Jan. 15, 1909, p.7; also Schell "Integral Outsiders", 1992, pp.251-252

Following the pattern of its parent, the North American Association, the Mexican YMCA drew its board of directors from among the wealthy, in this case the multi-national and multi-lingual business community in addition to officials of the Porfirian government. It was not, however, an "elite" institution.<sup>15</sup> Those notables who, holding positions real or honorary, gathered for official openings and other ceremonies seldom appeared among the members for regular events in the social, physical, religious, or educational program of the Association. Instead, the rank and file of membership, both Mexican and foreign, derived from the same social stratum of mid-level employees that could be found living in industrial cities throughout the world. Renouncing most charity work among the poor, the Mexican Association followed the example of other branches world-wide and embraced urban skilled or educated wage earners as the primary focus of its work. In keeping with this mission, the Association located its building near main traffic routes and at the border between business and housing districts, a strategy which recognized the daily routine and economic position of its membership.<sup>16</sup>

Association rhetoric continually alluded to the members' dual status as both employees and members of respectable society. During funding drives, speakers frequently explained that setting fees at a relatively low level enabled attendance by the target membership, but with the result that "the work" never quite paid for itself and required the support of wealthier businessmen.<sup>17</sup> The same fees (in 1902, a ten peso initiation and monthly dues of two pesos)

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<sup>14</sup> "Week at Y.M.C.A." *MH* May 1, 1905, p.2; "Mexican Branch of Y.M.C.A. Is Opened" *MH* May.2, 1905, p.2; "Inaugurated Tonight" *MH* Sept.21, 1905, p.8; "Growing Institution" *MH* Sept. 26, 1905, p.3; "First Anniversary Fetes at the Mexican Y.M.C.A." *MH* Sept. 25, 1906, p.5

<sup>15</sup> Hopkins, *History of the YMCA*, (1951) p. 179, 194

<sup>16</sup> Schell "Integral Outsiders" 1992, p. 249; Hopkins *History of the YMCA* (1951) p. 154

however, effectively excluded a poorer segment of the working population.<sup>18</sup> Speeches such as General Secretary Babcock's 1902 address and Pablo Martínez del Río's 1904 talk, "The Young Man as a Financial Asset," which stressed the value of the Association in the creation of productive employees, also pointed to the identity of YMCA members.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the course content of the night school program included math, bookkeeping, and shorthand, skills particularly appropriate to the daily work of a social class neither elite nor plebeian. In promoting these classes the Association aimed their advertising directly at Mexican *empleados*, claiming that "Great success has attended these night classes . . . there being many cases on record of scholars having duplicated or even tripled their salaries as a result of six months' study in the Association."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the Association scheduled its physical and educational classes for young men in the evenings in recognition of the members' daily pattern of employment. Classes organized exclusively for "Business Men" occurred several hours earlier so that the participants would not be late in returning home to their families.<sup>21</sup> The *Mexican Herald* confirmed that those taking part in the athletic program were mostly Mexicans and foreigners, "of the business and professional classes."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Virtually identical statements regarding the level of dues and the necessity for additional input were made by different individuals on separate occasions. See "Y.M.C.A. Banquet Noted Success" *MH* Mar. 16, 1904, p.1

<sup>18</sup> "The Y.M.C.A.'s Work" *MH* May 28, 1902, p.2

<sup>19</sup> "Association Claims" *MH* June 21, 1902, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Dinner" *MH* March 15, 1904, p.5

<sup>20</sup> "Bowling in Monterey" *MH* Jan. 10, 1909, p. 7; Jane Feinberg Karlin discusses YMCA business education in the United States in "Disciples of Mercury: The Commercial Education Program of the Young Men's Christian Association, 1851-1916" Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Nov. 20, 1910, p.8

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

The selection of team names by participants in sporting events also reveals the identity of the Association members. Teams occasionally played on the names of particular members (such as the "Trimmers"), but more frequently chose some title which reflected a common bond between the players. A team under the name of "Los Mexicanos" competed in the first Association bowling tournament in 1902. Teams also frequently formed among employees of a single firm. Team names such as "Nationals" and "Centrals" made the players easily recognizable as railroad men; the "Popos" represented Mexico Meat Packers and the "Lubricantes" worked in the oil industry. Other teams of employees included the "Inkslingers" and "Bankers."<sup>23</sup>

Reflecting the interest of a specific segment of the population in the YMCA, the Mexico City Association operated an employment bureau which matched prospective employers and employees. Initially, the Association carried out this function informally. Later, however, it formed a permanent department. The service did not provide the men with jobs, only a list of employers who might hire them. In keeping with the philosophy of the Association, the secretaries of the employment bureau expected applicants to provide their own references and to handle all details of the application process themselves. The Association provided this service, which proved extremely popular among employers and employees, without charge to all young men in the city provided they agreed to become a member should their application prove successful.<sup>24</sup>

While the Association membership derived principally from urban wage-earners, the Spanish-speaking Patoni branch served a more limited segment of the population than its English-speaking counterpart. In general, the Patoni branch drew a class of Mexicans who made their careers in the administrative departments of large businesses and could claim membership in

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<sup>23</sup> see for example, "National Team Won" *MH* Sept. 5, 1905, p.5

<sup>24</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" Oct. 24, p. 4

respectable society. By contrast, the Alvarado branch attracted a more diverse group made up principally of foreigners including blue-collar workers, clerks, and members of the American bourgeoisie (and, after 1905, numerous Mexicans who retained their affiliation with the more cosmopolitan Alvarado branch). The delegates selected for the Association's International Railway Conference in 1905 reflected the different patterns of membership among the two branches. One of those chosen was J.C. Foley, an American machinist working in the Central Railway shop in Aguascalientes. His Mexican companion at the Conference was Manuel Muñoz, the chief clerk of the Central Railway's claims department. In another example, the *Mexican Herald* identified N. Reyes as being from among the Association's "office force" following his selection as delegate to the 1909 conference (Reyes was also named among the volunteers assisting with the Mexican refreshment booth at the 1909 garden party).<sup>25</sup>

### **Building Strength of Character: the Code of Masculinity**

The construction of gender within the discourse of the Association's Mexican members situated the concept of sexual identity within a particular framework of interconnected meaning. In the cultural system of Mexican YMCA members, the pairs masculine and feminine, strong and weak, competent and incompetent, dominant and submissive, moral and immoral, and public and private all aligned as parallel and linked structures. The bipolar construction of gender based on biological difference equated metaphorically with the other binary pairs contained by the system. This created a self-supporting framework in which any element could be defined by invoking other elements within the system.<sup>26</sup> In an expression of ideology elaborated in reference to this

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<sup>25</sup> "Will Be Present" *MH* Sept. 11, 1905, p.3; "The Y.M.C.A. Now Plan Big Kermesse" *MH* May. 21, 1909, p.4, "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* May 24, 1909, p.11

<sup>26</sup> My analysis here follows Joan Scott, who argues that "Masculine/feminine serves to define abstract qualities and characteristics through an opposition perceived as natural: strong/weak, public/private,



network of meaning, the YMCA's Mexican membership elaborated a code of masculinity in which maleness (or more appropriately "manliness") equated with "strength of character."

The parallel between the binary pairing of strength and weakness and of masculine and feminine provides a point at which to begin the analysis of this cultural system. Through a series of "tropological" elisions, the strength of masculinity became a composite attribute in which bodily might provided only a single element.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, in the discourse on masculinity, muscular power served as a primary element, enabling discussion of diverse characteristics and qualities using the terminology of physical strength. As such, this metaphorical comparison served as a common denominator, allowing direct comparison of dissimilar personal attributes.

Association General Secretary George Babcock's initial address to his new Mexican audience in June of 1902 utilized the rhetoric of masculine strength as a central motif.<sup>28</sup> The Association, he told listeners, encouraged its membership to lead "cleaner lives." This "clean, strong living," he maintained, promoted the proper growth of bodies and minds. Strength, consisting of physical and intellectual ability, morality, self-control, and spiritual faith (all discussed in the language of bodily power and courage), provided the ideal toward which Association men strove. Images of youthful energy and enthusiasm, the outward expression of male strength, appeared prominently in Association rhetoric. The mission of the YMCA, conceived in these terms, became an effort to direct these energies into creative and constructive channels and away from vice and dissipation. The Association held up for its members, and

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rational/expressive, material/spiritual, are some examples of gender coding in Western culture since the Enlightenment." See Joan Wallach Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working Class History", *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), p.63

<sup>27</sup> The concept of "troping" is here adopted from Hayden White *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1975) p.310-311

<sup>28</sup> "Association Claims" *MH* June 21, 1902, p.5

society in general, the vision of strength created through the direction of youthful male force towards its proper and most productive ends. Employing a direct allusion to bodily growth, the process of building such power was referred to as "development." In a similar reference to vigor and strenuousness, the program of the YMCA was itself frequently termed "the work."<sup>29</sup>

Illustrating the assumption that various personal attributes could be grouped within the category of strength, Babcock explained that the Association, "recognize[d] a three-fold nature in young men - physical, mental, and spiritual, and that he who would accomplish most must have these developed together."<sup>30</sup> This doctrine of balance, the central philosophical tenet of the Association, laid out even more plainly the multiple constructions within the discourse on masculinity. The three elements (spirit, mind, and body), taken to constitute the total being of a man, each contributed to the composite "strength of character." However, the linkage established between physical strength and the areas of spirit and intellect reveals the conscious deployment of a metaphor. In classifying all these areas of ability under the category of "strength", the supporters of the YMCA's philosophy symbolically subordinated these attributes to the primary foundation of masculinity which they took to be bodily might. Physical strength provided the terms of reference by which all other areas of ability were to be understood.

Pure potential, however, was not the final goal of the Association or its members. Evident in Babcock's assertion is the conceptualization of strength as the ability to do work, to achieve, and to accomplish. As the strong man could carry out a greater amount of physical labour and dominate others by force, so too could the intelligent or educated man achieve greater things in

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<sup>29</sup> "Association Claims" *MH* June 21, 1902, p.5

<sup>30</sup> "Association Claims" *MH* June 21, 1902, p.5.

the realm of thought and leadership. Consequently, the development of these faculties amounted not simply to the cultivation of desirable qualities, admirable in themselves, but the production of the ability to get things done. The conceptualization of strength as ability demanded the productive application of all one's talents for potential alone remained worthless. Without the requisite sustained action, ability alone counted for nothing as it lacked direction and risked dissipation.

Strength and weakness related in turn to the pairing of dominance and submission. Implicit in the definition of strength as competence and ability lay the further assertion that weaker individuals accomplished less. Strength both enabled and required a man to do things. Those who did less were consequently marked as the weaker specimens, obviously lacking in ability. Unable to handle the figurative exertion of carrying out activities, the weaker were destined to follow the leadership of the strong, who in turn held the position of authority by virtue of their inherent capability. By the association of strength with male identity, weakness also connoted femininity. Less robust males approached "effeminacy" and earned reproach for their transgressions. This stricture applied to the moral and spiritual realms as well, where immorality (conceived as a lack of "power" or self-control) received condemnation as unmanly and weak. Inability, effeminacy, and immorality consequently marked the subordinate individual.

Babcock's statement further revealed the naturalization of a dominant male role in society through the implicit assumption that all men aimed to "accomplish most." Though the assertion is made in the conditional tense ("would"), suggesting a possibility for choice, the sanctions applied against the other options make this apparent question more rhetorical than real. Striving for achievement beyond that of one's peers, competition, and continual struggle are all implied as

universals of masculinity in his usage of the term "most." He held out the promise that the development of the various male energies would enable the individual to accomplish, and this would in turn enable them to achieve outstanding things. The more developed these abilities, the more powerful one was, the more manly the man, the greater the reward.<sup>31</sup>

This series of assumptions explains Babcock's further assertion that the YMCA "aim[ed] to supply the opportunity for the exercise and growth of the man in these three ways." Since physical, mental, and spiritual development all amounted to aspects of strength, the pervasive metaphor of muscularity suggested all three areas could be improved by means of exercise. The Association consequently followed upon the formula of physical training in offering its members a broad package of self-improvement in the form of "character building." The program amounted to strength training for the male persona in which the development of "Christian character" built the qualities of masculinity in the same way as regular training increased physical prowess. Through the programs of the YMCA, the "young man" was encouraged to build towards the idealized (and naturalized) image of the powerful male.<sup>32</sup>

Physical work alone could not meet the goals to which YMCA members aspired, especially since bodily might offered only a metaphorical platform for the other elements of strength and masculinity. Thus, though the physical department was the most popular aspect of the Mexican YMCA, educational work ran a close second. On June 8, 1907, the *Mexican Herald* reported 122 Mexicans registered in night classes at the Patoni YMCA. The Association at that

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<sup>31</sup> "Association Claims" *MH* June 21, 1902, p.5

<sup>32</sup> "Association Claims" *MH* June 21, 1902, p.5

time offered seven courses, three in English, two in shorthand, one in bookkeeping, and one in Spanish grammar. Seventy five percent of those enrolled were taking English.<sup>33</sup>

Like the gymnasium program, educational work aimed at the development of ability, primarily work-related skills. From the association's earliest days in Mexico, it offered languages (English and Spanish regularly, German or French when instructors were available), as well as trades math, book keeping, short hand, and some drafting. After the establishment of the Mexican Association branch, all business courses were available in English or Spanish. Some members apparently chose to pursue a night school business education in their second language.<sup>34</sup>

The YMCA presented its courses, mostly night classes directed primarily at young single men, as a highly effective means to increase income and improve social station. As mentioned earlier, the Association advertised its educational work with the promise of greater earning power.<sup>35</sup> This promotional technique drew its persuasive power from the images of strength and capability which defined the proper attributes of manhood for those accepting this particular vision of sexual identity. Educational work improved the mind much as gymnasium work did the physical body. The primary focus on skills bore out the accuracy of this comparison. Topics such as book keeping and shorthand were hardly intellectual fare. Instead, the Association discounted purely academic pursuits and put its efforts into building business competence, a form of strength and centred upon the ability to achieve.

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<sup>33</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* June 8, 1907, p.12

<sup>34</sup> "Y.M.C.A.'s Progress" *MH* Nov.30, 1902, p.8; "Week at Y.M.C.A." *MH* May 1, 1905, p.2, "Mexican Branch of Y.M.C.A. is Opened" *MH* May 2, 1905, p.3

<sup>35</sup> "Night School is Open" *MH* Jan. 10, 1909, p.7

Even spiritual work contributed to "Christian character" as another type of strength incorporated into the construction of male identity. Though in Mexico, Babcock was a keen advocate of religious proselytization and John R. Mott, the director of the International Committee's foreign work, remained committed to revivalism, the Association's programs no longer pursued such a specific objective. Religious services carefully avoided areas of religious doctrine and focused instead on the actual text of the Bible and those aspects of Christian belief that all agreed upon.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, the president of the association was not a Christian at all, but a self-proclaimed positivist. In response to their elite supporters and the preferences of the membership (whose values, by the necessity of survival, the Association as much reflected as created) the spiritual work increasingly adopted a moral and ethical tone rather than a specific religious doctrine. This new tone, in fact, well established among the North American YMCA's by 1900, amounted to the extension of the metaphor of strength to the area of morality, creating a link between moral discipline and masculinity.

Morality became principally the imposition of self-control over the energy of powerful manhood. Since these abilities had to be channeled productively, simply releasing the energy of masculinity chaotically into the surrounding environment without focus invited dissipation and the eventual forfeiture of one's powers. True masculinity demanded ability bent towards some constructive end through the cultivation of the discipline necessary for precise self-regulation of those efforts. For Mexican members of the YMCA, manliness consequently implied the imposition of rational control over the energies of the body.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Sept. 7, 1903, p.5

<sup>37</sup> George Mosse finds the same preoccupation with control over the energies of the body in Europe, see *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p.23

The development of strength of character, a crucial element of manliness, to a large extent overshadowed the religious program of the association. Association organizers rationalized this tendency through the assertion that the development of the body, mind, and spirit towards the masculine ideal could in fact become a new form of worship. Pursuing perfection in the human mind and body, perceived by advocates of athleticism as the image of a muscular, male God, transformed athletic ability into a reverence for the almighty and sport itself into prayer. One speaker at a banquet in Mexico referred to the YMCA as "the young man's house of worship," much as some in the United States went so far as to assert that the Association's integrated program epitomized the future form of all religious activity.<sup>38</sup> In effect, since perfection of the self equaled the worship of God (in whose image man was supposedly created), members were essentially free to enjoy themselves without specific thought as to the religious content of their activities. The result was that while a set of moral and ethical considerations permeated social relations around the Association, this body of values increasingly lost its overtly religious overtones in favour of a generalized secularization. The Mexican membership appear to have seized upon sport and with it precisely those aspects of the program which reflected not a specific religious doctrine, but a broadly Christian system of values.

Strength of character also implied not only the cultivation of competence, but the resistance of innumerable temptations and unproductive directions in which the man's inherent ability could be turned. The principle threats perceived by the YMCA and its followers arose from spaces of unstructured time and posed the greatest danger to young single men. The identification of these men as the "young men" (or occasionally "professional men"), as opposed to married or

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<sup>38</sup> "Sunday Services" *MH* Sept. 15, 1902, p.5; Hopkins *History of the YMCA* (1951) p.151

“business” men, points out the crucial role of marriage and the nuclear family in this system of morality.<sup>39</sup>

The primary fears of the YMCA leadership lay in the separation of the young man from the home and the consequent loss of its civilizing influence. From its inception, the Association had been concerned with the risks to morality created by the large industrial city. Principally in danger, they felt, were the numerous young men who had left the parental home to seek employment in the economic centers and had not yet married to create a new household.<sup>40</sup> These young men possessed both the capability and energy deemed to accompany manhood, and through their employment, a source of disposable income. Though their work day was structured by the regimen of their employer, their free time outside of working life lacked such regulation. To the adherents of Association ideology, unstructured time appeared to encourage vice and sin. In the absence of the civilizing influence of the home, and without the strict discipline of truly masculine self-control, the “young man” might be tempted to spend his leisure time in violation of the codes of morality.

Transgression in this context resulted from the crossing of culturally defined boundaries which restricted the range of acceptable behaviours. The central features of this system were the dual constructions of public and private spheres.<sup>41</sup> These domains stood as two opposite realms bound together in binary opposition. The public provided a forum for visibility and the platform

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<sup>39</sup> “The Contest Continues” *MH* Oct. 28, 1902, p.8

<sup>40</sup> “Y.M.C.A. Notes” *MH* Oct. 19, 1902, p.2, “Y.M.C.A. Thanksgiving for Men Away From Home” *MH* Nov.29, 1902, p.5

<sup>41</sup> The concepts of public and private spheres is here adapted from that suggested by Jurgen Habermas in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry in a Category of Bourgeois Society* trans. by Thomas Burger and Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).



for speech to the community at large. The private, by contrast, was closed to the attentions of outsiders, shielded from the "public gaze", and defended by territorial concepts of intimacy and personal space.<sup>42</sup> Each of these realms authorized certain categories of activity while prohibiting those ascribed to the other domain. The close association of activity and setting generated the perception that certain categories of behaviour were almost unimaginable outside of their proper realm.

The ascription of activities to one realm or the other provided the basis of a system of morality in which the nature of an action depended not so much on the act itself as on the authorization provided for it by the selection of an appropriate setting. Activities such as sociability between unmarried men and women gained approval through its conduct in the open where the "public gaze" ensured the freedom of such encounters from sexuality. Alternatively, scandal could be created by the transport of activities authorized only within the private sphere into that of the public.<sup>43</sup>

As is apparent in Association rhetoric, being "away from home" forced the "young men" to live their lives entirely within the space of the public sphere. This meant that a significant population of men within the industrial city lived without the proper domain for the expression of the private aspects of the male character, most notably sexuality. Lacking an outlet for these energies, the life of the young man became incomplete and unsatisfying. Such an unbalanced life consequently encouraged the transference of behaviour appropriate only to the private realm into

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the "public gaze" in a somewhat different context see Pamela Voekel "Peeing on the Palace: Bodily Resistance to Bourbon Reforms in Mexico City" in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 5:2 (1992), pp. 183-208.

<sup>43</sup> I have adopted the basic idea of "scandal" in relation to visibility from a lecture given by John B. Thompson as part of the Cecil Green Lecture Series at the University of British Columbia, February, 1995

the public. Indeed, the visible public world possessed all the features of the private realm, but in debased form. Prostitution offered the public parallel to the conjugal home. The fellowship of the tavern and pool hall matched that of the parlour and family life. To combat these temptations, the YMCA attempted to create a community in the public sphere which would, through fellowship and sociability provide support and compensate for the lack of a "home."

Though the ultimate objective of all the men was still marriage and the completion of the journey towards true masculinity (and a life balanced by self-expression in both spheres of existence), in the meantime, the fellowship of friends within the "social home" of the association provided the comforts of a surrogate family. The Mexican YMCA, like others elsewhere, offered dormitories which were almost always full. The 1910 building had three floors completely dedicated to dormitories and these were so immediately successful that some members suggested adding two more. Members reserved most of the rooms even before the opening of the building. Though a principle income earner for the Association, these rooms also served an important role in creating the desired community of men. A special committee regularly organized dormitory socials, with the young men gathering to provide their own entertainment.<sup>44</sup> As with other holidays, the Association celebrated Thanksgiving (admittedly not an important holiday in Mexico) with a special dinner for the men living alone in dormitories and other accommodations throughout the city. The meal, prepared in the Association kitchens, was put on by the wives of YMCA staff and supporters (once employed and safely married the member was expected in turn to serve other "young men"). The Association's role as a sort of foster family is made clear by the

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<sup>44</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Aug. 29, 1910, p.6; Hopkins *YMCA* p.

*Mexican Herald's* report that "many were heard to say it was as good or even better than mother used to make."<sup>45</sup>

### **Making Sport a National Matter**

Throughout its first eight years in Mexico, the activities of the YMCA reflected a desire to promote social and cultural reform on the part of its Mexican membership. Athletics became the most prominent instrument in this campaign. Yet, encouraging sporting activity itself was not the ultimate objective of this work. Instead, the promoters of athletics sought in sport a means to implement broad cultural change intended to place Mexico in a new position within the community of nations. Improvement of the quality of athletics in Mexico consequently became a familiar refrain of YMCA members, reflecting their desire to spread not only recreational activities but a code of behaviour among the "young men" of Mexico.

Rather than simply imitating the cultures from which they adopted the new sporting activities, the Association members sought to appropriate those cultural elements which they believed made Europe and the United States strong and successful in the interest of shaping a new and more powerful Mexico. To its advocates, adoption of these practices appeared to promise the creation of a new national identity through the cultivation of desirable traits. The general public's acquisition these attributes of character would transform Mexican national identity into a masculine one as defined by the Association members' concepts of gender. Such a collective identity would provide evidence supporting national assertions of power and prestige.

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<sup>45</sup> Thanksgiving dinners for Association members began in 1902, see "Y.M.C.A. Thanksgiving for Men Away From Home" *MH* Nov. 29, 1902, p.5

With the objective of national cultural transformation in mind, Mexican Association members held great funding drives in support of new branches opening elsewhere in the country. Citizens of Monterey and Chihuahua soon availed themselves of this "progressive institution."<sup>46</sup> Supporters and sponsors planned for further expansion, hoping to encourage the organization of YMCA's throughout the country. Mexicans also gave their support to sportsmen's banquets and receptions held by the Association. Such events frequently aimed to generate interest in the organization of an amateur athletic league. Members donated money for prizes and built an attractive sense of excitement around their activities. Bowlers, for example, each donated small sums to purchase the gold, silver, and enamel pins given out to the highest and lowest scorers in their matches.<sup>47</sup>

In another example of this enthusiasm, in August of 1909 the Mexican chairman of the members' athletic committee, Alberto B. Cuellar, announced his intention to organize an annual sports meet in the Fronton Nacional featuring teams from all over Mexico. Cuellar, recently returned from the United States and himself a prominent Association athlete, hoped that this would provide sufficient encouragement to induce the formation of teams and athletic clubs throughout the country. In the accompanying article, the *Mexican Herald* explained,

"He holds that although athletics are not national to Mexico in their interest, they are still a subject universal enough in their appeal to stand a strong propaganda throughout the country. Beginning with Mexico [City], he hopes to awaken the republic to do what can be done towards making scientific exercise and sport a national matter."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette *World Service: A History of the Foreign Work and World Service of the Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States and Canada* (New York: Association Press, 1957) p. 226

<sup>47</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Dinner" *MH* Mar 15, 1904, p.5, "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* April 7, 1909, p.9

<sup>48</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Sports being Pushed Ahead" *MH* Aug.8, 1909, p.1

Later in the same year Cuellar arranged a run through Mexico City (originally planned for Sept. 8, Covadonga day) carried out by himself, another Mexican, and two Americans. The runners drove out to their starting points in cars and a group of friends on bicycles accompanied them back to the Association headquarters on Puente de Alvarado. Cuellar organized the event to generate publicity in the hope of inaugurating a regularly held athletic meet.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, Mexican volunteers and committeemen played a crucial role in organizing and promoting the Association. Owing to a shortage of trained YMCA professionals willing to work in Mexico, members frequently assumed the duties of paid staff.<sup>50</sup> The physical department of the Mexican branch ran on such a provisional basis for some time. In 1910, the Association still experienced difficulties securing permanent gymnasium staff. As a result, volunteer Alejandro Garrido Alfaro took over the program, leading combined Spanish and English gymnasium classes while General Secretary Babcock attempted to recruit a new physical director in the United States. With the subsequent arrival of Percy K. Holmes from the United States, Garrido Alfaro continued on in service to his peers as the assistant physical director.<sup>51</sup>

This early enthusiasm for the promotion of cultural transformation through sport influenced Mexican Enrique C. Aguirre, who replaced Holmes as Physical Director in 1916. Aguirre joined the Mexico City branch at the age of nineteen and spent two years there in the Leaders' Corps, an important YMCA training and recruitment program. Holmes, also the director

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<sup>49</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Sports Being Pushed Ahead" *MH* Aug. 8, 1909, p.1; "How's This For Breaking Records" *MH* Aug 12, 1909, p.4

<sup>50</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Needs More Secretaries" *MH* Aug.1, 1909, p.4; "Y.M.C.A. Will get New Athletic Director" *MH* May 4, 1910, p.4

<sup>51</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Will Get New Physical Director" *MH* May. 4, 1910, p.4; "Seek Director For Athletes" *MH* May 10, 1910, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" Aug. 22, 1910, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" Oct. 3, 1910, p.5

of the Leaders' program, persuaded Aguirre to attend the Association's training college in Springfield Massachusetts. During his time at the Mexico City YMCA, Aguirre greatly increased gymnasium attendance and began an extensive program to promote athletics, not only among Association members, but throughout the City. Even after leaving the Association, his promotion of sport and recreation influenced the eventual adoption of physical education into the national curriculum for Mexican schools. Aguirre continued to promote athletics on a national level into the 1920's when he participated in the formation of the first Mexican Olympic team, serving as its coach in 1924.<sup>52</sup>

Further promotion of the sporting movement in Mexico involved YMCA organized athletic meets to mark almost every conceivable occasion. State holidays and celebrations were an obvious favourite for the scheduling of such events (the Association was unwilling to use church holidays for secular celebrations). Once organized, these events became established as an annual occurrence. The practice of yearly repetition generated a momentum of publicity around Association athletic meets as they became eagerly awaited events in the social calendar. In a notable example, meets held on the Fourth of July became a regular feature of the YMCA program. In these events, the Association challenged other clubs and schools in a track and field competition. The Americans of the Reforma Club remained the Association's most frequent adversaries, though the entry of a team from the *Escuela Magistral de Esgrima* (Magisterial School of Fencing) in 1910 attested to the expanding popularity of the meets. After the division of the branches, the Alvarado and Patoni Associations entered separately with Mexican and foreign Association members competing against each other.<sup>53</sup> The 1909 inter-city bowling tournament

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<sup>52</sup> Latourette *World Service* (1957) pp.227-228; Elmer L. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education* (Chicago: Association Press, 1979) pp.165-166

saw competition among various local clubs, several railroad teams, and representatives from Association branches in Chihuahua and Monterey. YMCA bowlers also traveled to outlying districts to play teams of American miners on their own lanes.<sup>54</sup>

While annual events generated enthusiasm for the scheduled competitions, it also served a purpose beyond publicity and promotion. By incorporating sporting meets into the annual calendar of events anticipated by the public, the Association built its activities into established tradition. Athletic meets offered Mexico a new rite of celebration, a new tradition which ironically emphasized not its antiquity, but its novelty and break from past practice. In creating tradition, the YMCA supporters hoped to graft their borrowed activities onto existing cultural life, establishing in the process a new norm of conduct. The deep symbolism of events displaying athletic activities derived from the attempt to replace existing practice with a new tradition in keeping with the values of the YMCA and its Mexican members.

The use of celebrations such as Cinco de Mayo as the occasion for celebration according to the new technique revealed the strong connection Association members made between the development of new cultural practices and the production of national identity. In a similar spirit, Centennial week celebrations organized in September of 1910 featured an ongoing program of gymnastic and track meets, as well as demonstrations from all other areas of the YMCA program. All sought as their objective the promotion of sport throughout Mexico.<sup>55</sup> Such events aimed to create a climate of enthusiasm for newly introduced activities and, in so doing, stimulate the

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<sup>53</sup> "Full List of Entries for Sports of Fourth" *MH* July 2, 1910, p.5; "Fourth of July Sports Were good" July 5, 1910, p.5

<sup>54</sup> "Akers Totalled 1415 . . ." *MH* Feb.9, 1909, p.7

<sup>55</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Building Dedicated Today" *MH* Sept. 10, 1910, p.1; "New Y.M.C.A. Building Officially Dedicated" *MH* Sept. 11, 1910, pp.2,3

emulation of the Association's example by newly converted amateurs throughout the country. With this objective achieved, the Association's *empleado* members could point to ready evidence in the substantiation of claims to a masculine national identity, satisfying their desires for a powerful new Mexico.

The 1905 inauguration of Patoni branch also points out the close association the YMCA Mexican members perceived between cultural transformation and the creation of national identity. For the opening ceremony, the Association invited Ramón Corral, who addressed a capacity audience of members and friends crowded into the main parlour. Behind Corral stood a large portrait of Benito Juárez, flanked on either side by the national colours. Association members had decorated the hall lavishly and the Mexican flag hung over every doorway and window in a room strewn with bunting. The anniversary celebration the next year featured music and a poem on independence by Judge Alvarez León. Four years later, the YMCA succeeded in obtaining President Díaz himself to preside over the opening of a new Association building, in a ceremony neatly incorporated into the 1910 centennial week celebrations.<sup>56</sup> The implications were unmistakable. Through such symbolism, the Mexican membership claimed the Association as their own, incorporating the institution and its philosophy within their program of cultural reform.

The YMCA's Mexican members promoted sport as a vehicle for cultural transformation based on their belief in the efficacy of athletic activity in achieving their desired ends. This faith derived from a particular symbolism which they placed upon sporting activity. The outline of the

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<sup>56</sup> "Inaugurated Tonight" *MH* Sept. 21, 1905, p.8; "Y.M.C.A. Festivities" *MH* Sept. 21, 1906 p.5; "First Anniversary Fetes at the Mexican Y.M.C.A." Sept. 25, 1906, p.5 ; "Diaz to Dedicate Y.M.C.A. Building" Sept. 1, 1910, pp.2,3, "To Open New Y.M.C.A. Building Saturday" Sept. 9, 1910, p.3, " Y.M.C.A. Building Dedicated Today" Sept 10, 1910, p.1, "New Y.M.C.A. Building Officially Dedicated" Sept. 11, 1910, pp.1,3



ideology which supported these perceptions can be seen in the rhetoric which surrounded the Mexican YMCA. For example, General Powell Clayton spoke at an Association gathering on the importance of male fellowship and camaraderie in securing cohesion among soldiers and, by extension, the creation of a strong military force. Similarly, British envoy Grant Duff gave a lengthy speech before an audience of Mexicans and foreigners in 1909 which centred on the leadership role of the Anglo-Saxon race and its inherent dominance of its weaker neighbors. Ability and strength, characterized by the image of muscularity, not only authorized, but demanded this leadership role. The businessmen of the foreign colony, such as H.P Morton and W.W. Blake, also frequently referred to cleanliness, purity, and "the elements of true manhood" as prerequisites for success in business.<sup>57</sup> An imagery which closely associated masculinity with power informed all of these assertions. Supporters of the YMCA consistently described strong and successful nations in terms rich with the supposed symbolism of masculinity. Descriptions of those they dominated contained allusions to femininity and submission.

Following the pattern of these assertions, Mexicans took upon themselves the cultural transformation of their society in an effort to create a masculine (and therefore powerful and successful) nation. In order to claim such an identity, Mexicans sought to adopt those practices and traits (including sports and "manliness") which substantiated the assertions of Europeans and Americans. In particular, the Mexican members perceived in sport a useful means to instill self-discipline and encourage the controlled release of male energy. One of the ultimate lessons said to be learned from sport was discipline and self control. This could be learned both in the patient

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<sup>57</sup> "Sunday Services" *MH* Sept. 15, 1902, p.5; "Is Formally Opened" *MH* Sept. 21, 1902, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Dinner" Mar.9, 1904, p.4, "Y.M.C.A. Dinner" Mar. 15, 1904, p.5, "Y.M.C.A. Banquet a Noted Success" Mar. 16, 1904, p.1

development of athletic skill and in the conduct of various games. YMCA training guides repeatedly emphasized the inculcation of values as the "bedrock" underlying all programs at the Association. Every activity contained some aspect directed towards the development of "Christian character" which implied not only undisciplined power, but focused strength.<sup>58</sup> Sport seemed to its advocates to possess a clear moral element which brought home to its practitioners the necessity of control.

For those able through enculturation to perceive this particular symbolism in athletic activity, sport appeared to teach those values most important to manhood and thereby encouraged the ideal traits of masculinity.<sup>59</sup> The actual educational value of these activities relied primarily on the creation of a layer of ideology surrounding sport and not the activities themselves, which provided only a useful medium. Consequently, within the supportive context of the Mexican YMCA, sport became a powerful educational device particularly in its seeming ability to transform numerous relative criteria into an easily perceivable object lesson. Ability (a combination of strength and skill) if sufficiently focused on a specific task translated into victory in games structured to provide a clear winner and loser, and, thus a hierarchy of achievement. Sporting events consequently provided a means to measure individuals' correspondence to the ideals of manhood.

As individual training progressed, instructors encouraged participants to assess their development towards the ideal of strength and skill. January of 1904 saw a special appeal to the

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<sup>58</sup> James Mangan notes a similar perception of the symbolism of sport in the Victorian public school in *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Albert M. Chesley, *Social Activities for Men and Boys* (New York: Association Press) 1910, pp. vii-xii

<sup>59</sup> Mangan also makes a similar point regarding England in his *Athleticism and the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (1981). See for example pp.69-70, 180.

members for subscriptions to facilitate the purchase of an "anthropometric outfit." This "appliance" enabled "physical examinations of a standard scientific kind."<sup>60</sup> Systematic and quantitative assessment of physical attributes promised an objective measurement of the elements of fitness. The results would transform a living body from an abstract to a precise and concrete sum. Such a transformation enabled further assessment, facilitating the comparison of men to one another and of each one to the ideal of strength. Like the score in a sporting event, such measurement enabled the simplistic visual comparison of relative qualities. The nature of the assessment also took into account those factors considered most indicative of the proper "development" of the male form. By this means, made available in February of that year with the arrival of the "outfit," members could chart their progress towards the destination of true masculinity and plan their program to reflect best their various strengths and weaknesses.

As a further element in the cultivation and measurement of masculinity, athletic competition took place constantly around the Association. When the gymnasium, games room, and bowling alleys proved too limiting, the Association leased land for a playing field and tennis courts. Some members even sought out land for a rifle range.<sup>61</sup> This element of continuous competition provided the critical means of measuring one's athletic ability, a type of strength based on the combination of physical power and cultivated skill. Sporting success also demonstrated the effectiveness of such abilities as courage and concentration, all of which represented aspects of "strength of character." As a result, training for sporting events forced and inspired participants to build up the various elements of strength in themselves. In so doing, they

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<sup>60</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Jan. 25, 1904, p.5

<sup>61</sup> "Field is Rough" *MH* Feb. 15, 1904, p.2; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" Oct. 17, 1910, p.5

cultivated those traits which provided evidence of a masculine identity. This applied to nations as well as individuals, in that the sum of personal behaviours served to substantiate assertions of a masculine collective identity symbolic of political power. The desire to build a powerful nation consequently gave the program of reform a sense of urgency in that a new, stronger Mexico waited as the final outcome of the cultural transformation.

### **Displaying Masculinity: Field Day at the Plaza de Toros**

As the Mexican members of the YMCA pursued the transformation of cultural practices they utilized their own participation in the newly adopted sporting events to demonstrate a masculine collective public "persona." Maintaining this masculine identity enabled the Association's Mexican membership pursue recognition as a distinct social group, visible as a collective agent within the public sphere. Through the creation of a masculine (and therefore visible) collective presence, the YMCA's *empleado* members asserted their power in an effort to situate their social group as a discrete entity within the political domain. The cultivation of this publicly perceived presence balanced the Association members' adherence to a pattern of relations in the domestic realm, which, though an equal element in *empleado*'s assertions of identity, offered no platform for visibility within the public sphere.<sup>62</sup> The contrast between two events organized by the Association and the publicity of newspaper coverage of YMCA athletic reveals the utilization of certain highly visible forums as the setting for assertion of a masculine collective identity conveyed through the symbolism of strength and ability which Mexican YMCA members built around sport.

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<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that women were entirely hidden from view, or that the private sphere offered no potential for visibility. The possibility of a society possessing two different forums of visibility, one through the public and the other through the private, is explored in the context of the United States by Mary P. Ryan in "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth Century America" in Craig Calhoun ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992)

The first event occurred in September of 1910 when the members of the Chihuahua YMCA marked the centennial of Mexican independence by holding a "field day" at the Plaza de Toros. At the invitation of the Chihuahua YMCA members (most of whom were Mexican), a large crowd of spectators, including the state governor José María Sánchez and other prominent officials, gathered in the bull ring that day.<sup>63</sup> Despite the location, the event was not a bull fight, but an athletic meet in which young Mexican and foreign men wearing YMCA uniform engaged in newly imported sporting practices. A number of Mexicans and foreigners, men and women of the Bohemia and Sorosis clubs, served as race marshals, time keepers, referees, and other officials. Supervision of the events by these volunteers ensured strict adherence to "the rules of the athletic league of the Y.M.C.A. Association of North America."<sup>64</sup>

The Plaza de Toros meet featured individual, relay and pursuit running races, as well as high jump, long jump, pole vault (in which only one man participated), and shot put. Organizers planned the range of diverse events to test competitors' strength, stamina, and skill. The day concluded with the awarding of prizes to the best athletes. Silver and bronze YMCA medals recognized first and second place finishes in the individual events. Those in third place received recognition through the granting of rank, but no prize for their achievement. In addition, officials utilized a system of points to determine which athletes had managed the best overall performance. The first and second best overall received special prizes provided and awarded by the women of

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<sup>63</sup> Jose Maria Sanchez was interim governor of Chihuahua, holding office following Enrique C. Creel's appointment as Ambassador to the United States and prior to Alberto Terrazas assumption of power in 1911. See Mark Wasserman, *Capitalists, Caciques, and Revolution: The Native Elite and Foreign Enterprise in Chihuahua, Mexico, 1854-1911*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p.20

<sup>64</sup> "Chihuahua Will Hold Big Field Day" *MH* Sept. 12, 1910, p.4; "Chihuahua Holds A Field Day" *MH* Sept. 19, 1910, p.6; the Mexican membership of the Chihuahua YMCA is described by Latourette, *Serving With Youth* (1957), p. 227

the Sorosis club. These women also presented all participants in the meet with an "appropriately inscribed" ribbon in recognition of their efforts.<sup>65</sup>

In contrast to the serious competitions of the Plaza de Toros "field day," the Mexico City Association's annual excursions adopted a more festive tone. These events, which began in 1903, marked All Souls' Day with a recreational excursion and the Association's obligatory sporting events. The outings resembled large picnics and members brought their families or friends. For the 1909 excursion, a group of 120 Association members and their guests traveled by train to the small village of Amecameca at the base of Popocatepetl. There they spent the morning playing baseball and running races. In the afternoon they took advantage of the fine weather to climb the Sacromonte, go horseback riding, and explore the picturesque town.<sup>66</sup>

The 1910 excursion stood out as a particular success with a attendance many times larger than the preceding year, the demand for tickets far exceeding the organizers' initial expectations. For the outing that year, a special member's organizing committee chose Xochimilco from a range of proposed destinations. This location held particular appeal as the lake was the site of Association president T. Phillips' private estate. Organizers planned the event as a picnic, and made meal tickets available for those members "so unfortunate as to not have a wives to put up the lunch." To transport the excursionists, the General Manager of the street rail company agreed to provide three carriages, each with a capacity of two hundred people. Tickets sold so well the

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<sup>65</sup> "Chihuahua Holds A Field Day" *MH* Sept. 19, 1910, p.6

<sup>66</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Oct. 18, 1910, p.13; "Holiday Picnickers Went To Amecameca" *MH* Nov. 3, 1910, p.9

Association decided to charter a second train to accommodate those members unable to attend due a lack of adequate transportation.<sup>67</sup>

At 8:30 on the morning of November 2, the first three cars left the Zocalo bound for Xochimilco, packed well beyond capacity with 225 persons each. The second train departed twenty minutes later, making stops at Churubusco and several other stations to gather those excursionists living in outlying districts of the city. After traveling about an hour, the railcars reached Xochimilco where the passengers transferred to barges for the trip across the lake. Rather than passing directly on to Phillips' "private reserve," however, the excursionists made a two hour tour of the lake. A brass band from Xochimilco provided entertainment along this leg of the journey, accompanying the excursion on a special barge.<sup>68</sup>

Arriving finally at Phillips' estate, the excursionists enjoyed their picnic lunches or turned in their tickets for a Mexican meal. After lunch, physical director Holmes and his assistant Garrido Alfaro organized a program of sporting events including contests on the land and in the water. The day also included women's and children's races as well as indoor baseball for everyone. As a diversion, local indians gave canoeing and swimming demonstrations before Association men and boys tested their own skills in the boats. Finally, after traveling back across the lake by barge, the excursionists boarded the train for the return trip shortly after five o'clock that evening. The departure was delayed slightly by the discovery that two boys had disappeared and some time was lost while locating them.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Oct. 10, 1910, p.6; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Oct. 17, 1910, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Oct. 20, 1910, p.6

<sup>68</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Oct.24, 1910, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Oct. 31, 1910, p.2; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Nov.2, 1910, p.4

<sup>69</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Excursion to Xochimilco a Success" *MH* Nov. 3, 1910, p.8

The Plaza de Toros "field day" and the Xochimilco excursion provide an interesting contrast. The most obvious difference between the two events appeared in the choice of setting and the level of visibility this conferred upon the proceedings. The "field day" occurred in the bull ring, a location designed to facilitate the observation of the events occurring on the ground below. The ring was itself symbolic of visibility, being a kind of theater for the observation of sport. In Mexican society, the Plaza de Toros stood out as an important feature of social life and its central space remained one of the foremost platforms for visibility. By appropriating this arena, the Association members drew attention to themselves in both symbolic and literal fashion. Consequently, even though the lower classes were not actually present to observe the "field day," they would nonetheless have been aware of it and the powerful symbolism of the Association member's chosen location. In addition, the direct challenge offered to "traditional" society by the filling of the space of the bull ring with a non-traditional activity could hardly have been ignored.

By contrast, the Association members leaving Mexico City on the annual excursion made a show only of their departure. After a grand send off from the Zocalo, those who boarded the special cars withdrew from the visibility of public settings and retreated into the security of a privately held domain. Though the newspapers made an issue of the event, the actual action took place in a secluded area and out of sight of the rest of society. Furthermore, the terrain of Phillips' private estate held no symbolism comparable to that of the Plaza de Toros. The Xochimilco excursion was consequently not a public event in the same manner as the "field day." Instead, the members avoided confrontation with the mainstream of society and retreated from locations which would put the events of the day on public display.



These events also differed in overall tone. Particularly noticeable was the differing degrees of competition and sporting seriousness involved. The Plaza de Toros "field day" offered pure competition and little else. The events of the day were strictly rule bound and highly structured. Time keepers and clerks recorded precise scores and took exact measurements. To enable this competitive rigorousness, a volunteer bureaucracy managed all aspects of the events from the staging of individual heats to the tallying of an overall score. An awards ceremony brought the day to its dramatic conclusion, recognition of top athletes being the primary focus of the entire event.

By contrast, the excursions to Amecameca and Xochimilco revealed an altogether different attitude towards competition and sport. Though organizers recorded the results of the various events, the overall spirit of the outing emphasized participation over competition and amusement over seriousness. None of the excursion events required the apparatus necessary for high jump or pole vault. Instead, the program included a wider range of less formally organized events. Each match tended to be short rather than long and grueling. In addition, a running baseball game, open to everyone, gave the day the atmosphere of a summer camp or church picnic. The excursion also featured food and music combined with a good deal of general amusement, elements absent from the Plaza de Toros "field day."

Most significantly, only Association members (young, reasonably athletic men, and members of a particular social class) competed in the track and field meet at the Plaza de Toros. Within the public setting of the bull ring, women appeared only as spectators to male activities. The only women to achieve recognition for their role in the event were those who presented prizes to successful male athletes at the end of the competition. By contrast, the organizers of the

annual excursion planned the recreational activities of the day to include and entertain everyone in attendance. Though most races remained segregated by age and sex, the organizers held contests for all in attendance. Men, women, and children all participated. Indoor baseball offered an opportunity for all excursionists to play together in a single sporting event regardless of age or sex and the organizers made no effort to keep score.

As the contrast between these events reveals, the Association members utilized public forums such as the Plaza de Toros as the settings for highly visible displays which asserted their collective masculinity through sporting prowess and strenuous competition. In these public demonstrations of manliness, the Mexican members of the YMCA held up athletics as a male preserve and sporting ability as a symbol of masculinity. While in private women and children joined in sporting activities organized more as games than serious competitions, public visibility prohibited their participation. Sports in these settings consequently became for the Association's Mexican members a symbolic demonstration of masculinity.

A similar pattern is evident in the newspapers, whose continuous coverage created a type of visibility for Association athletics. In the English-language *Mexican Herald*, which usually ignored all but the highest ranking Mexicans, the names of YMCA athletes regularly appeared next to their scores in rank order. Participation in YMCA events consequently resulted in a high degree of public visibility for all players. A few, such as A.B. Cuellar gained extensive individual recognition (Cuellar received his own article, complete with a small photograph).<sup>70</sup> More frequently, group activities gained the players a publicity which at once displayed them as individual participants and as members of a select group. For example, following a 1909 Fourth of July meet, the *Herald* published a photograph of the winners from the various events. The YMCA

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<sup>70</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Sports Being Pushed Ahead" *MH* Aug. 8, 1909, p.1

dominated the competition and the majority of those pictured wore the Association athletic uniform - white pants, belt, and singlet top with the triangle crest (symbolizing the three-part conception of man) prominently displayed.<sup>71</sup>

The *Mexican Herald* directed most of its attention towards the English-speaking Alvarado branch, but many Mexicans, such as the bowlers Arriaga and Palacios, played there also. Ultimately, almost all Association events of gained coverage. Even when the event itself was not a publicly staged spectacle, the results nonetheless appeared in the newspaper. In this way, the every day events and minor competitions within the Association became a continuous display of manly ability as attested to by the numeric scores of sporting matches. Regular tournaments, which ended with the awarding of prizes, added a further element of recognition to practices already aimed at selecting and rewarding those closest to an ideal of behaviour. However, while the Association offered both women's gymnasium classes and occasionally reserved lanes for female bowlers, no equivalent attention accompanied their activities. The newspaper never reported the score of women's bowling matches and the gym classes, once mentioned, received no further attention (By contrast, women's participation in musical performances and the Association auxiliary gained frequent recognition).<sup>72</sup>

As a ritual based on the metaphorical elision of physical strength with the other areas of ability considered essential to the male identity, athletic displays served as an expression of masculinity. The skilled and successful athlete could, through the demonstration of sporting victory, convey a message to the audience which had little to do with the topic of sport. Since the realms of appropriate male strength were closely associated metaphorically, success in one area

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<sup>71</sup> "Mills Is Star Performer" *MH* July 5, 1909, p.7

<sup>72</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" Oct. 17, 1910, p.5; "Y.M.C.A. Notes" Nov.5, 1910, p.8

easily stood as a symbolic representation of ability in others. In this way, players asserted their masculinity. Cumulatively, such individual acts served to substantiate claims to a separate class identity among the Association's *empleado* members, in the process creating a masculine collective persona. Assertion of this collective identity through highly visible events such as the Plaza de Toros "field day" and through the forum of newspapers gained the Mexican members of the YMCA visibility within the public sphere.

## Conclusion

The YMCA's new facility offered the benefits of the Association's program to the young men of Mexico on a much larger scale than before. This costly expansion, however, created financial difficulties for the Association to which the directors responded by raising fees and pressing the Mexican membership for 100 dollar subscriptions.<sup>73</sup> The increased expense of membership combined with a national political crisis and economic collapse temporarily ended the YMCA's popularity among the *empleados* of Mexico City. by the end of 1910, only the elite could afford to attend. Evidence of this decline appeared in 1911 with the failure of members' meetings to achieve quorum.<sup>74</sup>

Between 1902 and 1910, however, the YMCA provided Mexican *empleados* with a useful means to pursue their social objectives. In joining the Association, Mexican *empleados* found a ready vehicle with which to encourage mass cultural transformation. The promotion of sporting activity provided the central technique in effecting the alteration of cultural practices. Such efforts had as an objective the encouragement of behaviours taken to reflect adherence to a package of

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<sup>73</sup> Schell, "Integral Outsiders," 1992, p.253

<sup>74</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Notes" *MH* Sept. 1911

values favoured by the YMCA and its Mexican members. Promoters of the Association program believed instilling these values in the general population would cultivate those attributes taken as indicative of a masculine identity. Collective adoption of these attributes of character would substantiate claims to a new national identity and provide Mexico with a more powerful place in the community of nations.

But, while the Association members held up an ideal of manhood which they encouraged all to adopt, they simultaneously claimed this male identity as their own in displays which asserted their collective power. The concept of masculinity promoted with such enthusiasm through the public events of the YMCA provided one of the principal criteria for *empleado* self differentiation. Demonstrations of adherence to this set of values which delineated male and female roles provided evidence for the Association members' claims to belong to a separate social class distinct from both the workers and the elite. The same ideal of conduct which Association members desired all of Mexico to emulate served also as the restrictive device which denied the majority of Mexicans society membership in *empleado* society. The assertion of a masculine collective identity also created a public presence for the Association members and enabled their expression of political power.

Ultimately, the pursuit of the dual objectives of national and class identity involved the YMCA's Mexican membership in the ongoing dialogue on sexual identity. The discourse of power and identity which they elaborated from the platform of the YMCA consisted of assertions which drew much of their rhetorical appeal from Mexican Association members' concepts of gender. In order to deploy the symbolic potential of this imagery, the Association's *empleado* members needed to utilize their collective power in an effort to assign and stabilize the meaning of

the categories of gender. Undoubtedly, large segments of Mexican society saw in the YMCA's athletic demonstrations only inappropriate behaviour and not the display of male prowess which the Association members intended. Nevertheless, the persistence of the YMCA's *empleado* members in their displays of masculinity through sport enabled them to offer their conception of the meaning of manhood in the continuous social process of constructing gender.

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