"La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos": Nacho López, Mass Culture, and Modernity

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“La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos”: Nacho López, Mass Culture and Modernity

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INTRODUCTION

Quotidian life in a poor barrio in Mexico City took a turn towards the spectacular in the summer of 1953 as a deliveryman took “Venus,” a nude, white, female mannequin, “partying in the poor quarters.” In Nacho López’s photoessay, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos” (Figures 1-5), published in the illustrated magazine *Siempre!* in July of that same year, this odd couple became the center of attention for two dozen or so spectators in the heart of one of Mexico City’s most poverty stricken communities.

Under Mexican photojournalist Nacho López’s direction, the deliveryman carried Venus from an artisan’s shop in a poor neighborhood to a boutique in a wealthier part of the city, provoking reactions from the crowds the couple encountered along the way. Throughout the course of the thirteen interconnected images that develop this photoessay, Venus serves as a provocative embodiment of one pole of a series of binary oppositions between herself and the *mestizos*, the racial category used to define the half-indigenous half-white (Spanish) Mexican people who inhabited the neighborhood. The mannequin’s inanimate nature sharply contrasts with the liveliness of her partner. Her painted blonde hair and white skin further distinguishes her from her darker skinned company. Her nudity conflicts strikingly with the fully clothed onlookers. And perhaps most significantly, Venus, unlike the population that surround her, is on her way to an upscale boutique a long way away from where she had originated. While the pair received mixed reactions -- some laughs, some looks of confusion, and the scorning gaze of serious disapproval from an elderly woman (Figure 6) -- this stroll irrefutably transformed the couple into an urban spectacle.
López’s entire photoessay might at first seem peculiar, insignificant, and too trivial to warrant serious consideration. However, I want to suggest that its publication serves as a critical glimpse into the “ unofficial” side of modernity, and in doing so recalls Mexico City’s huge intermediary population of urban poor who were virtually eliminated from the pages of popular mass-circulation illustrated journals such as Impacto, Mañana, Siempre! and Hoy that served to promote the politics of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

When the Partido Revolucionario Mexicano (PRM) dissolved into the PRI under President Manuel Ávila Camacho in 1946, the political goals of former President Lázaro Cárdenas, which embodied the objectives of the 1910 revolution and aimed to create a socially just society, dissipated as well. In 1946, under the presidency of Miguel Alemán, the PRI took Cárdenas’ model of a centralized government and used it to re-route state goals. It moved away from Cárdenas’ socialism and increasingly embraced consumer capitalism in order to improve the economy. With its focus on a centralized state and the economic policy of import-substitution industrialization (ISI), the PRI advocated the replacement of imports with domestic production. This policy of modernization, known as the “Mexican Miracle,” produced sustained economic growth that lasted through the 1970s. Yet, this national growth came at the expense of large swaths of the population who remained marginalized from its benefits; it also prompted massive migration to cities, resulting in an explosion of the urban population, and the social turmoil such upheavals engendered.

The rise of the mass media in Mexico coincided with the beginning of the “Mexican Miracle” and was both a function, as well as an effect of import-substitution
industrialization. Mass media proved itself a crucial factor in both the state’s program of modernization as well as its political and economic management of Mexico. This new “official” deployment of mass media backed by the PRI relied on the state’s control of the culture industry, particularly the production of mass culture (film, television, and especially the illustrated journals), to standardize middle-class desires and construct a seamless image of modernity throughout Mexico. It is against this context that López’s work becomes significant.

Published in Siempre!, one of veteran editor José Pagés Llergo’s most “independent” publications, López’s “Venus” made her debut in the journal’s fifth issue. Unlike Impacto, Siempre! was neither financed by the PRI nor committed exclusively to forwarding its “official” image of modernity, as embodied by images of the president and industrialization. Nevertheless, the journal remained a proponent of PRI modernization through its ties to industrial and consumer capitalism vis-à-vis its constant focus on mass culture interests. Instead of celebrating modernization through photographs of the president and his official “accomplishments,” Siempre! took another route. It indorsed modernization and mass consumption by focusing on images of film stars, celebrities and advertisements for consumer goods. Within this more popular imaging of Mexico’s modernization, appealing to middle-class preoccupations with popular culture and mass consumption, López’s quirky photoessay was afforded the space to depict an altogether different notion of modernity against the one contrived by “official” images affiliated with the PRI.

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My thesis will compare the “official” state mandated view that imagines Mexico City as an emblem of progress, modernization, and culture of modern middle-class consumption, with López’s counter-narrative of a spontaneous, humanist and sympathetic image of the city’s “invisible” population, the urban poor. I will examine the circulation of these two different, yet simultaneous, depictions of Mexican modernity and their visual currency in their circuits of consumption; that of the rising middle-class in Mexico City in the 1950s.

The production, circulation and consumption of López’s “Venus” in Siempre!, I will argue, are best analyzed as part of a broader visual transaction; a system of visual exchange through which images derive and generate meanings. Divorced from this visual context, “Venus” loses its immediate polemical traction. But when considered as a transaction with a wide range of other images disseminated throughout Mexico’s growing bourgeois society—in journals, newspapers, illustrated magazines, television- López’s photoessay operates within what anthropologist Deborah Poole terms a modern “visual economy.”¹ This concept highlights the network of social and material relationships through which images acquire meaning and value, a process where, art historian Griselda Pollock has argued, “the efficacy of representation relies on a ceaseless exchange with other representations.”² For Poole, this process of visual and material exchange is crucial to understanding the social functions of images. The visual field, she argues:

is organized around the continual production and circulation of interchangeable or serialized image objects and visual experiences, […] this organization has as much to do with social relationships, inequality, and power as with shared meanings and community [and]…bears some—not necessarily direct—relationship to the political and class structure of society as well as to the

² Ibid., 7.
production and exchange of material goods or commodities that form the life blood of modernity.”

The way in which images are interpreted and assigned value is thus contingent upon their movement and consumption across social and cultural boundaries.

The vision of modernity that López’s photoessay produced for *Siempre!* responded in many ways to the “official” version projected by the PRI sponsored *Impacto*. Although the former journal held a much less “official” place in PRI politics than the latter, both strongly advocated mass consumerism and utilized visual strategies of the culture industry to achieve this goal. And both, it must be emphasized, were produced for the same readership, the Mexican middle-class. While both journals appealed to different interests and concerns within this middle-class, neither really alluded that poor or intermediary social groups existed outside of the bourgeoisie. Thus, in order to understand López’s photoessay fully, we need to situate “Venus” within the framework of the other articles and images these journals published at the time. The visual transactions that “Venus” performed, both within and against both journals’ representations of modernity, industrialism, the state and consumer culture, reveal the critical interchange—that is, the critical dialogue—that López’s photoessay set in motion.

The formal differences between the photoessay format that López adopted in *Siempre!* and the single image photographic format implemented by *Impacto* are paramount to this study. For while “Venus” produces a narrative that engages the reader as it guides her through the multiple stages of an encounter with modernity, commodity culture and the particular visual tactics of the culture industry, *Impacto* deploys an

3 Ibid., 8.
4 *Impacto* depicts “official” images of the president and modernization, while *Siempre!*, broader in scope and less official in content, focuses on images of consumer culture and the entertainment sphere. These differences are discussed further in Chapter 2.
entirely different strategy. Against López’s unfolding narrative that invites the reader to actively engage with the production and movement of commodities across time and space, culture and class, Impacto’s single-frame images present the commodity as a fait accompli: a finished product ready-made to satisfy consumer desire. In the PRI journals, the commodities pictured constantly represent the state, as embodiments of the state’s accomplishment to industrialize and modernize the country. Thus we see presented in a new glamorous and seductive form images of the beautiful national cinema actress, the steel office material produced by DM Nacional, hydroelectrical power, agricultural modernization, and industrialization, all as objects of desire. In contrast to Siempre!, Impacto’s reader is passively presented with state politics imaged as commodities, and her active engagement with the production processes is sacrificed to an image of passive consumption. These images of finished products ready for use do not afford the viewer an opportunity to realize that there were indeed intermediary stages, and intermediary social relations, in accomplishing production.

Generally, the way in which illustrated magazines positioned the viewer rendered Mexico City’s urban poor invisible, leaving little space for recognition and critique of their conditions. What makes Nacho López’s work so important is that he not only depicts the urban poor, but through the format of the photoessay, positions the viewer into a more active encounter with what we see depicted in the magazine. It is this combination of the content of López’s photographs and their form – their ability to actively solicit viewer response—that makes “Venus” unique among the photojournalism published in the sphere of modern Mexico during the 1950s.
This thesis develops as follows: Chapter 1 will lay out the historical and economic circumstances in which the urban poor were born. It will examine the centralized government’s shift from socialist goals to an increasing focus on consumer capitalism under President Miguel Alemán, and how the state made this transition so “seamlessly” by adopting a rhetoric of “revolutionary nationalism” to promote the ideology of the “social inclusion” of the masses. It will also explore how this shift in political alignment coincided with the rise of mass culture, and how the state used its monopoly over the culture industry, especially the illustrated magazines, to standardize the values of the rising middle-class and suggest to the readership, both at home and abroad, that modern Mexico was uniformly bourgeois.

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on Impacto and Siempre!, two of the illustrated magazines that produced an image of middle-class consumerism and forged middle-class identity in Mexico City in the 1950s. I will look at how these two journals were configured by two critical thematic elements of the state’s management of the masses: presidentialism and modernization, on one hand, and consumer capitalism –on the other.

Chapter 3 will examine López’s photoessay, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” itself, and explore how it circulated within the larger mass media framework established by Impacto and Siempre! discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter will analyze the ways in which López’s narrative both propelled state sponsored philosophies of consumption (through emphasizing buying luxurious items and referencing the larger theme of shopping), yet simultaneously took a critical distance from such themes (through the use of humor and irony). I will suggest that this tactic provided the viewer
with a glimpse into the underside of the “Mexican Miracle” revealing López’s critique of the social exclusion of the urban poor.
CHAPTER 1: PRI MANAGEMENT OF THE STATE AND THE RISE OF THE URBAN POOR

Economic Circumstances

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) brought to the fore the socio-economic, class, and racial inequalities that existed in the country, and made addressing those circumstances an imperative of the state. This imperative continued to exist and exert pressure on subsequent political regimes throughout the entire course of the “Mexican Miracle.” The revolution, generated out of countless years of racial and class conflicts between the popular masses and the elite,\(^5\) drew attention to the vast social and economic disparities between the rich and the poor in such a way that the state had no choice but to offer a politics of social inclusion\(^6\) against the politics of exclusion that had marked the late nineteenth century Porfiriato\(^7\) and most of Mexico’s post-conquest history. Yet the problem of how to modernize the country and at the same time include the masses that

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\(^5\) Some triggers that likely generated rebellion of the peasant class may include events spanning all the way back to the Spanish conquest, most however, probably arose during the Porfiriato, the thirty-five year dictatorial regime of President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). Such causes include but are not limited to: foreign investments and exports, commercialization, land concentration, increased stratification, proletarianization, state building, the centralization of power, caciquismo, military repression, the monopolization of political power, and economic repression. See Alan Knight, “Weapons and Arches in the Mexican Revolutionary Landscape,” in Everyday Forms of State Formation, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994); John Womack, “The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920,” in Mexico Since Independence, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jean Meyer, “Revolution and Reconstruction in the 1920s,” also from Bethell.

\(^6\) The state quickly turned to a system of cultural management and a rhetoric of “revolutionary nationalism” that urged the symbolic incorporation of the peasant classes and indigenous peoples into the nation. I will return to this shortly. See Robin Greeley, “Muralism and the State in Post-Revolution Mexico, 1920-1970,” in Mexican Muralism: a critical history, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, Robin Greeley, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Claudio Lomnitz, Deep Mexico Silent Mexico (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 151.

\(^7\) The Porfiriato is marked by economic monopolies and oligarchic land systems. See Alan Knight, “Weapons and Arches in the Mexican Revolutionary Landscape,” in Everyday Forms of State Formation.
formed the majority of the national population proved difficult for the post-revolutionary state to resolve.  

However, in order to trace the rise of an urban poor in Mexico City in the 1950s, one must look to the two decades following the Mexican Revolution, which witnessed the centralization of the government. An unstable project at first, the centralization finally coalesced under President Lázaro Cárdenas in the late 1930s. Yet, while Cárdenas relied on the centralized state to focus on agrarian reform, post-Cárdenas governments focused on turning that same centralized state away from agrarian reforms towards industrializing and modernizing the country within an overtly capitalist framework. While the Cárdenas administration sponsored programs of labor and agrarian reforms, economic nationalism, socialist education, and progressive foreign policy, the subsequent regimes of Manuel Ávila Camacho and especially Miguel Alemán rerouted Cárdenas’ corporatized state and transformed its populist policies into an engine of “capitalist development and capital accumulation.”

The Cárdenas government, as Alan Knight and other historians have argued, was the closest to a true socialist administration Mexico had ever come. Cárdenas redistributed more land than all of his revolutionary predecessors combined (a 400% increase), promoted the collective ejido land system, and nationalized oil. Cárdenas accomplished all of these programs by fomenting new ties between the state and

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11 Ibid., 74.
12 Ibid., 82.
corporate social groups from *campesino* organizations to workers’ unions.\(^{13}\) Knight describes this relationship between the state and the popular classes during the 1920s and 30s as one of mutual necessity. Regarding the 1930s, he writes, “the state needed popular support; popular causes needed state champions.”\(^{14}\) While the centralized government under Cárdenas was still essentially one where policy originated from the top down, it also, for the first time in a long time, was influenced by voices, tensions, and needs from below.\(^{15}\)

*Cardenismo*, while successful socially, was not as effective economically, and by the 1940s, it had left the country in great debt. Knight argues that *Cardenismo* was in reality a much weaker medium for change than its idealized popular reputation would suggest. Although great social modifications -- such as agrarian and labor reform, the nationalization of oil, and the centralization of the government -- were indeed made, the outcome of these transformations did not accommodate powerful national and international business interests. Cárdenas’ centralized government, while it remained bureaucratically in place, was ideologically eviscerated in 1946 and redirected away from socialism towards capitalism.\(^{16}\) As Knight writes, “The institutional shell of *Cardenismo* remained, but its internal dynamic was lost. In other words, the jalopy was hi-jacked by new drivers; they retuned the engine, took on new passengers, and then drove it in a quite

\(^{13}\) See Jean Meyer, “Revolution and reconstruction in the 1920s” in Bethell, *Mexico Since Independence*, 203.

\(^{14}\) Alan Knight, “*Cardenismo*: Juggernaut or Jalopy?,” 92.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 90.

different direction.”17 This new direction led ever increasingly toward industrial and consumer capitalism and the birth of the “Mexican Miracle.”

The “Mexican Miracle”

The presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-46) commenced the turn away from Cardenista social policies toward a state policy of industrialization. But it is the Alemán sexenio (six year presidential term) that really marks the sharp transformation from Cárdenas’ socialism to capitalist modernization. As sociologist Sarah Babb argues, “the end of the Cárdenas presidency in 1940 launched the definitive incorporation of different social sectors within the ruling party, which cleared the way for the government to redirect its attention from distributive issues to the business of fostering economic development.”18 The kinds of industrial and economic programs put into place under Alemán, specifically his encouragement of private enterprise through the development of infrastructure and the backing of private investment, prompted rapid urban growth and a sharp rise in migration from the countryside to the city. Alemán’s overwhelming investments in industrialization and urbanism, combined with his dismissal of Cardenista agrarian reform, depleted the population of the countryside, for country people looking for work had no choice but to move to the city. These rapid rural – to - urban migrations quickly swelled the city beyond its capacity to accommodate new residents and created the population of the urban poor that Nacho López photographed. For many like the urban poor, the reality of the “miracle” was not what the state claimed it to be at all.

17 Ibid., 107.
Rather, this new shift to PRI capitalism sponsored the same inequality and social injustice that it purported to eradicate.

Yet state control of the political system, combined with new opportunities for Mexico’s rising middle-class, meant that social tensions generated by economic inequality were masked under a rhetoric of opportunity and progress.

The rapid circulation of Mexican political elites provided numerous opportunities for social mobility, and economic development and the expansion of the Mexican government substantially enlarged the Mexican middle-class; thus, although those at the bottom may have been worse off, discontent was defused by expanded possibilities of moving up. At the same time, the political system provided few opportunities to question and change the existing order; political demands were limited. Formal political pluralism was a mask for an actual one party system that precluded government policies from being undermined electorally.\(^1^9\)

Alemán and subsequent presidents bolstered a new system in which the centralized state would first focus on the creation of wealth via increased ventures with consumer capitalism, and only secondarily (at best) worry about its just distribution in society. This new order undermined the objectives set forth by the revolutionary peasant and working class for, as historians Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer argue, “nobody set a date for this second stage, and public and private leaders of the country seemed interested only in the first stage: to accumulate capital.”\(^2^0\) Emphasis was placed on industrialization which dominated state investments as Alemán, especially, poured money into developing infrastructure, communications and energy programs. This drive to industrialize the country was the main factor contributing to the great rural – to urban migrations after 1940. While only 20 percent of the population lived in urban centers in 1940, by 1977

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\(^{19}\)Ibid., 80.

this number had grown to 50 percent. On paper, the “Mexican Miracle” triumphantly proclaimed great economic achievements over the country as a whole. Yet when examined more closely, the same data reveal that while urban middle-class wealth grew at an accelerated rate, the new urban poor did not benefit financially. The PRI’s priority of creating wealth first and just distribution second was thus more an economic plan aimed at consolidating the middle-class than it was as a social project for the nation at large. The increasingly uneven distribution of national economic resources intensified inequalities in income distribution and had a substantial impact on Mexico’s social structure.

The process of modernization ruptured the older social economic and political emphasis on the agrarian economy, and threw the country into social turmoil. As a direct result, Mexico City experienced a population explosion. The state needed to manage this situation. On one hand, it had to balance coping with the social tensions generated by massive migrations to the city, while on the other hand, it needed to continue reinforcing the very industrialization that had prompted those migrations.

Yet, the state could not return to older political models of simply excluding the marginalized classes. The Mexican Revolution had made that impossible by providing

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21 Ibid., 161. See also all of Chapter 5.
22 The period of 1940 through 1960 marked a production increase of 3.2 times and between the years of 1960 and 1978, 2.7 times totaling an average annual growth of six percent. A structural change accompanied this numerical one, for in 1940, agriculture represented around 10 percent of the national production, whereas in 1977 it only represented 5 percent. While agricultural production decreased over the years spanning the “Mexican Miracle,” manufacturing increased. In the scope of these same years, it went from less than 19 percent to more than 23 percent. The rise of the middle class was key to the success of the “Mexican Miracle.” Thus, needing to be considered here is the fact that 90.5 percent of the population during the Porfiriato was estimated to belong to the lower class, while the middle-class barely consisted of 8 percent of the population. By 1960, however, these numbers regarding middle-class percentage of the population had more than doubled those of the Porfiriato to total 17 percent. See Héctor Aguilar Camin and Lorenzo Meyer, In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), chapter 5.
the popular classes – especially the peasantry – with an historical voice and agency. Consequently, the state turned to a rhetoric of “revolutionary nationalism” which, according to art historian Robin Greeley, was a form of “nationalism based on symbolic inclusion of the masses.” Since the masses could not be ignored for fear that they might revolt again they were “included” emblematically in order to keep them from growing rebellious. As anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz has argued, however, this symbolic inclusion came at a political price:

thanks to the political strings that were attached to land reform, peasants were effectively incorporated in the state’s “masses.” Thus we get a relatively weak presence of these two classes in the nationally articulated public sphere. This meant that these collectivities maintained arbitrated and ritualized relationships with the state that were in some respects comparable to those that existed in the colonial era.  

Whereas under Cárdenas, “revolutionary nationalism” was equated with social justice and the implementation of agrarian reform, after 1940, the state equated “revolutionary nationalism” with modernization and consumerism; a rhetoric of progress purportedly aimed at everyone, but in actual practice only tangible for the middle-class.

Alemán’s industrial program focused more on the production of capital than it did on labor, which caused job scarcity in the countryside as Mexico urbanized. Unemployed campesinos migrated to the city in search of work; more often than not, they and their families settled into rapidly expanding city slums and took on the economic classification


of “urban poor.” The existence of the urban poor living cheek – by – jowl with the rising middle-class was incongruous with the “miracle” that was the new Mexican economy. In order to maintain a modern image of growth and prosperity both nationally and transnationally, the state sought to mask the existence of the urban poor. The most efficient way to accomplish this was through its control of the mass media and the culture industry.

**The PRI and the Culture Industry: Politics as Consumption**

In 1946, Ávila Camacho changed the name of the ruling party from the *Partido Revolucionario Mexicano* (PRM) to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). Including the word “institutional” in the name of the party itself suggested to a new generation of Mexicans that the contemporary state still represented the ideals of the revolution, particularly that of just distribution of wealth even as it moved away from socialism and increasingly towards consumer capitalism. Outlining the importance of this shift, President Ávila Camacho stated in his inaugural speech in 1940 that:

> The Mexican Revolution has been a social movement, guided by historical justice, which has been able to satisfy, one by one, all essential popular demands…Each new era demands a renovation of ideals. The clamor of the Republic demands now the material and spiritual consolidation of our social achievements, by means of a powerful and prosperous economy.  

Camacho here relies on revolutionary rhetoric, moving from the actual goals of the revolution all the while appealing to its history and its address to the popular.

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The new “official” collaboration of mass media with the PRI, notably through the illustrated magazines disseminated in Mexico City, constructed a seamless image of Mexican modernity. The rise of the mass media coincided with the beginning of the “Mexican Miracle.” It was both a product of the “miracle” (a capital investment in the culture industry of film, television, and especially the illustrated magazines), and a facilitator of the “miracle” by imaging its triumphs. The PRI managed this large-scale industry of culture that also worked to standardize middle-class desires. Movies, television and the illustrated magazines created the visual “blueprints” for constructing bourgeois life and forging middle-class identity. This “official” deployment of mass media was underwritten by an ideology of conformity to middle-class values, such that this conformity replaced consciousness of a state outside of bourgeois modernity. The journals acted as a means to standardize habits, expectations, and ambitions, proclaiming the middle-class as the norm and creating the illusion of national identity as modern and homogenously bourgeois. It is against this context that López’s work becomes meaningful.

The PRI’s use of the mass media, especially illustrated magazines, relied in great part on the high levels of literacy established under Cárdenas in his socialist schools of the 1930s. The notion of a national readership linked with the concept of citizenship was one of the most strategic structures established by the former president and, much like his centralized government, was eventually commandeered by the PRI and used towards completely different ends. Millions of Mexicans became literate under

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Cárdenas.28 And, even more importantly, began to understand themselves as political subjects. The PRI transformed this newly learned literacy into a crucial factor in both the modern political and economic stabilization of Mexico via the illustrated magazines.

The PRI’s ability to control the mass media relied on Mexico’s chronic lack of a fully functioning public sphere. Without a space separate from the church, the private sphere, and above all from the state, weaker social groups were systematically deterred from participating in independent public dialogue. The media, newspapers and illustrated magazines particularly, did not provide a space for public discourse. Rather, as Claudio Lomnitz argues, they replaced political ritual as arenas of open democratic discussion and argumentation.29 That is, the national press became an active agent in disseminating political opinion leaving little room for public deliberation. Media like television and the press—operating on a national scale—replaced public deliberations at the local level with a uniform top-down discourse presenting politics and political decisions as already made.

This becomes significant for Nacho López in that the space to criticize the state’s claim to be socially progressive had by this time, become extremely limited. The narrow limits within which one could actually challenge the state were pre-determined. While the PRI did not mandate authoritarian control over the media, it was, however, an authoritarian populist government, so there was some small room on the mass media’s part for manoeuvre. In other words, a small amount of space allotted for criticism was put in place by the state itself under the objective that this limited forum for critique would help ease tensions and preempt any large-scale uprisings in the future. In this way, López’s series could be published, for it appeared in an implicitly controlled

28 Ibid.
29 See Claudio Lomnitz, Deep Mexico Silent Mexico, chapter 7 and especially page 164.
environment. Any social criticism that “Venus” alluded to was not, in the end, all that threatening as it did not blatantly denounce the government but existed within limits that were deemed acceptable.

**Impacto, Siempre! and PRI Management**

*Impacto* and *Siempre!* were two of many mass produced illustrated magazines during the 1950s circulated in Mexico City. At this time, the majority of the journals depended heavily on government subsidies, rather than on commercial advertising or sales. *Impacto*, for example, received direct patronage from the PRI, and in return provided unrelenting devotion to the president and the “official” image of an industrialized modernity. *Siempre!* on the other hand, while not directly patronized by the PRI, nevertheless happily supported the same economic program of capitalist modernization. However, unlike *Impacto*, it placed its emphasis on media spectacle, such as celebrities and other interests of mass culture. Neither journal really supported the “freedom of the press” that is fundamental to a true working democracy.

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Regenio Hernández Llergo and his more well known cousin, José Pagés Llergo founded many of the Mexican illustrated magazines together, including *Hoy* and *Mañana*, but pursued solo endeavors when launching *Impacto* and *Siempre!* respectively. A comparison of the two cousins will reveal some of the editorial control that the PRI exerted. The model that becomes clear, I argue, is that of state management rather than blunt authoritarianism. The PRI did not dictate outright: rather it tacitly engineered and

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30 Hernández Llergo was constantly afflicted with money problems which required him to pursue direct patronage from the PRI. See John Mraz, *Nacho López: Mexican Photographer* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 43.
orchestrated the media. Editorial differences, distinctions in content, and flexibility existed, but within limits that were implicitly understood by all.

Hernández Llergo demonstrates the kind of economic controls the PRI was able to assert. Like his cousin, he was both politically conservative and a devout anti-Cárdenas Catholic who opposed the secularization of Mexico. In the early 1940s his journal Hoy published sixty-two studies conducted by the Instituto de Estudios Económicos Sociales, a right wing think tank, that criticized Cárdenas’s presidency and exposed the financial debt he bequeathed to successive presidencies. Constantly afflicted with money problems, Hernández Llergo was obliged to seek funding from the PRI to keep his publications afloat. Art historian, John Mraz\textsuperscript{32} recounts Mexican journalist Blanco Moheno’s testimony regarding both Hernández Llergo’s money problems and his overall desire to live a life of luxury. With PRI money funding an opulent lifestyle, Hernández Llergo willingly abandoned “true journalism.” Mraz, recounting Moheno’s words, states that,

because of the money problems that constantly afflicted Hernández Llergo, Maximinio Ávila Camacho [Manuel Ávila Camacho’s brother] entered into Hoy in the early 1940s. A corrupt, ruthless caudillo and a fervent anti-leftist, Maximino was the secretary of communications and public works during his brother’s presidency. Having desires to follow Manuel in office, Maximino attempted to acquire influence through dallying in the press. His presence transformed Hoy’s oppositional position under Cárdenas into an unconditional support for the presidency and, says Blanco Moheno, it also changed Hernández Llergo from “a journalist into a businessman whose only interest was ‘living opulently’.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{33} John Mraz, Nacho López: Mexican Photographer (Minneapolis: Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 2003), 43.
Regenio Hernández Llergo thus readily sold out the opportunity to cover “real” news and replaced that with the “official” news he was paid to propagate in order to secure both his own financial and political position.

Pagés Llergo was also anti-Cárdenas in many ways: conservative, Catholic, and committed to the established order. And while he operated under the same constraints imposed by the government, he was not directly financed by the PRI, thus maintained some independence regarding the editorial direction his publication pursued. Although by no means radical, Pagés Llergo’s journals did, however, take a more “popular” as opposed to “official” stance in, for example, that they were not opposed to nudity, sensationalism, celebrity coverage and the like. Nevertheless, Pagés Llergo functioned within the confines that the state tacitly placed on the media. SIEMPRE! thus gave viewers a glamorous, celebrity studded glimpse of the world whose reality lay masked by the same spectacularized culture industry that governed Impacto.

34 SIEMPRE! did, however, take a more racy attitude and fit into an “entertainment” niche in the mass media, whereas IMPACTO’s tendencies to depict the “official” confined it to a more serious niche. For example, in 1953, immediately before he founded SIEMPRE!, Pagés Llergo worked at HOY where he published a “scandalous” photo of the very recent ex-president Miguel Alemán’s daughter on her European honeymoon. She was photographed at a cabaret in Paris along side her new husband whose eyes were glued to a naked dancer. The photographer sent this image to many of the illustrated magazines, but only Pagés Llergo chose to publish it. When HOY’s owner discovered what had been published, he informed Pagés Llergo that from that day forward everything he wanted to publish would need to be censored. Pagés Llergo resigned from the magazine immediately at the notion of such restriction and founded SIEMPRE! The first issue of SIEMPRE! featured the same photo banned from HOY just months before. Interestingly, Pagés Llergo claims he did not publish this photo to denigrate Alemán. Pagés Llergo was afterall friends with most of the presidents and claims he never intended to dirty their image. The caption that accompanied the photograph in SIEMPRE! read, “But What’s Wrong With This Photo? We only publish this photo because the birth of SIEMPRE! is closely linked to it. If a photographer had not been present at the precise moment in which this scene occurred, this magazine would never have seen light.” However, SIEMPRE! desires to make it clear that, in publishing this photo, José Pagés Llergo does not have the slightest desire to slander anybody. Mraz quotes Pagés Llergo when he writes, “If someone wants to judge with political criteria what is merely a journalistic document, that’s something outside the jurisdiction of he who was yesterday the director of HOY and is today the director of SIEMPRE! To Doña Beatriz Alemán de Girón and Don Carlos Girón, our respects.” This example functions to illustrate the occasional light “slap” to the government found in SIEMPRE! done to sell magazines, but is followed by Pagés Llergo covering himself saying he is not really against the government so he will not be shut down if questioned. Overall, I feel this scenario demonstrates nicely the extent to which Alemán’s regime had control over the content of the journals in the culture industry. See John Mraz’s Nacho López: Mexican Photographer, 57-58.
The PRI’s governing style can therefore be read as one of “managed conflict.” The PRI dedicated a certain amount of room or space for the public to register mild criticism of the system itself so it did not look oppressive. The conflict requiring management centered around the rising social tensions resulting from the economic inequalities perpetuated by the “Mexican Miracle.” One way the PRI navigated these tensions was by making a unilateral claim that the policies of modernization were a complete success, and that the benefits they brought were to the nation as a whole. This cohesive image of Mexico, which acknowledged no other interpretation of state policies, appears to have been Impacto’s singular editorial agenda. Siempre!, on the other hand, did not give modernization such a triumphalist image. Therefore, Nacho López was able to show marginalized people and those who did not benefit from the “miracle.” Through Lopez’s photographs, Siempre! acknowledged the existence of the “miracle’s” underside but in a way that ultimately absolved the bourgeoisie from needing to address the poor’s demands. The journal showed that the poor existed, right along with the working-class, they did not appear to be destitute, miserable, ragged, or begging. Rather, López photographed urban poor and working-class men at leisure, playing pool, drinking, gathering, laughing, and carrying out their daily lives. In this way, the state literally marginalized the economic and social conditions of the urban poor through the visual tactics of mass culture. “Managing conflict” for the PRI proved synonymous with finding a middle ground: a means of admitting the existence of the urban poor without acknowledging either the gravity or responsibility for their social condition.
CHAPTER 2: ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINES - FORGING MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITY

In order to understand how Nacho López’s photoessay might have been read in the summer of 1953, this chapter examines how Impacto and Siempre! forged an image of modern middle-class identity through the visual strategies, the articles, the people, and the types of activities they portrayed. Aimed at a decidedly urban middle-class audience, Impacto and Siempre!, like other illustrated magazines in Mexico, explicitly addressed a literate urban readership as opposed to the rural population. This is demonstrated in two ways; first the fact that rural people were simply not as literate, and did not have the same access to printed publications as did city people. Secondly through the journal’s content, which clearly articulated middle-class ideals and interests. Photographs centered around the president, urban consumerism, travel, purchasing power, department stores, cinema, sports, alluring screen stars, and the modern home as a sanitary hygienic environment, among other things. Considered together these images can be read as visually “educating” readers about the behaviors, values, and attitudes that comprise “middle-class-ness.” Of the countless ways that middle-class experience could be conceived, the magazines proposed a limited number that closely corresponded to the economic and political policies that were shaping the “new” Mexico. These were, above all, linked to policies that favored and incentivized the development of the new consumer

35 According to John Mraz, circulation figures for the illustrated magazines in Mexico City are inexact and unavailable. See John Mraz, Nacho López: Mexican Photographer, 208. While circulation cannot be tracked, the magazines’s costs might indicate what type of people could afford them on a weekly basis. Impacto in 1956 cost one peso per issue and was printed weekly. A year long subscription cost $50.00 pesos and a six-month subscription cost $25.00 pesos. Siempre! in 1953 cost $1.50 pesos per issue and was printed weekly. A year long subscription cost $60.00 pesos and a six-month subscription cost $33.00 pesos.

36 See Mary Kay Vaughan, Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940 for data on literacy rates and education in peripheral parts of Mexico especially the graphs on page 81.
class. Although both journals were firmly a part of the culture industry and supported, to different degrees, the PRI, each articulated the image of modernity and bourgeois life differently. While *Impacto* represented the modern state through the figures of presidentialism and images of modernization, *Siempre!* put greater weight on imaging consumerism that promoted the “promise” of consumer capitalism.

Contrived by the mass media, presidentialism was a visual tactic that transformed the figure of the president into a “media spectacle” relying on the glitzy use of photo opportunities, often commanded by the president himself, in order to establish his image as a signifier for the nation and the nation’s progress. This type of media coverage showed the president participating in events that showcased economic improvements and modernization programs fostered by the state. An abundance of images depicting technological and industrial advancements -such as irrigation canals, factories, and machinery- were published as visual “proof” of the continuous successes of the PRI’s regime. The intersections between PRI funding, the president, and modernization became *Impacto’s* “official” editorial agenda.

*Siempre!*, on the other hand, while appealing to the same urban middle-class readers spoke to altogether different aspects of middle-class preoccupations. Its editorial strategy operated on the assumption that PRI policies were already built into middle-class consciousness. *Siempre!* therefore took a more “soft” human interest approach concentrating on the mass-culture and entertainment sphere: the Miss Universe Pageant, *Lucha Libre* wrestlers, cinema, theater, music, television, and love advice, among other topics. By propagating the image of civil society as a “consumer democracy,” *Siempre!*
used a different means to reach the same end as *Impacto*: promoting modern Mexico as a seamless bourgeois society.

**Impacto: Presidentialism**

Official PRI journals like *Impacto* deployed a rhetoric of presidentialism as one means of promoting the “social inclusion” of all of Mexico’s population in the process of modernization. Much like “revolutionary nationalism,” an ideology that symbolically “included” the masses, the ability to collapse the nation’s well being into the figure of the president exemplified what historian Michael Miller refers to as the “genius” of presidentialism’s ability to link the popular culture of personalities to the goals of the state.  

Modernization was represented as the president’s personal political and economic platform and as a program that would help all citizens. Although state modernization projects were financed by the government and carried out by the Mexican working class, all of these industrial and economic achievements were ultimately credited only to the president. Modernization may have taken thousands of working people to accomplish, but it was presented as having been realized by one man who would live on posthumously through his association with his successes.  

A long standing tradition in Mexico, presidentialism, took a new direction in the 1950s as it merged with the culture industry to mediatize the cult of the president and cement his image as the embodiment of the modernization of Mexico.  

Presidentialism in the ‘50s, therefore, relied unconditionally on the PRI’s control of mass culture to transform the president into a

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“media spectacle.”\textsuperscript{40} Photo opportunities scripted for the public eye promoted the benefits of modernization and industrialization for Mexico and its people.\textsuperscript{41}

The cult of the president produced and disseminated in the magazines, left little room to question the “Mexican Miracle.” Photograph upon photograph provided “proof” that this one man was responsible for the nation’s economic and social growth. \textit{Impacto}’s April 11, 1956 issue contains nearly seventy pages, of which six articles (eighteen pages) focus directly on the president, crediting him personally with projects that improved the country. One paramount example is a four-page article concerning foreign relations between Mexico and the United States. The article shows President Ruiz Cortines waving and smiling as he stands strategically flanked by two seminal heads of state, President Eisenhower on his left and secretary of state, Foster Dulles, on his right (Figure 7). It is Closely cropped, the image appears spontaneous in attitude, posture and gesture, emphasizing all three leaders’ emphatic smiles. The accompanying text describes the weekend the three spent in White Sulpher Springs as “friendly.” The article recounts that the conference Ruiz Cortines attended with the leaders of the United States and Canada had no political agenda and no serious policies were agreed upon, it was, nonetheless, a monumental occasion because it marked the first time that all three leaders of North America had come together in a collaboration of amnesty and friendship “entre pueblos vecinos” (“among neighboring communities”).

\textsuperscript{40} Alemán, in particular, links the cult of the presidency to “media spectacle” in support of this platform of modernization. Thus, the figure of the president becomes both the leader and caretaker: leader of Mexico’s modernization and progress, and the caretaker of Mexico’s citizenry. And he is literally the face of the “Mexican Miracle.” But what gets erased from that are precisely the social inequalities and political tensions fostered by this process of modernization and the alleged “Mexican Miracle.” See Lomnitz, \textit{Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico}, chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
Of the four full pages covering Ruiz Cortines’ trip to the U.S., text fills a very small portion of the space, no more than one-fourth of the space allotted for the reportage. While the article notes that the president was only away for sixty hours, the extensive photographic coverage of his homecoming suggests a different story. A small, yet powerful image of Ruiz Cortines descending from the airplane (Figure 8) appears on the left hand side of the two-page spread. The president is positioned ahead of the other military and government officials who accompany him as they proudly descend the stairs.\(^{42}\) He holds his hat close to his chest and, backed by his men, pauses to listen to the national anthem being played in his honor. Three other men stand on the ground facing the plane, frozen figures rigidly posed as if saluting the president. Everyone is dressed in full military attire or in formal wear signifying that this is indeed a ceremonial event. To the right of this image are a series of half page photographs of women and children lined up on the airport runway and at the National Palace with signs ready to receive and welcome the president home after his journey (Figure 9). Under the picture of the women and children is a photograph depicting thousands of people awaiting Ruiz Cortines’ return to the Plaza de la Constitución (Figure 10).\(^ {43}\) The photographs are triumphant images depicting the president as if he were a war hero. They narrate a sense

\(^{42}\) The military, for the first time with Alemán, and continuing with Ruiz Cortines, is physically displaced by a businessman president. Alemán was the first modern Mexican president who was not a military general. Ruiz Cortines followed Alemán in this tradition. Presenting oneself as a military head was not important to Alemán. His focus was commerce and he took presidentialism in another direction away from the war hero and toward an image of a capital businessman. The military ritual of presidential power is now transformed into a different kind of power, that being the power of capital. The first few decades after the Mexican Revolution the state was not settled. Not until after Cárdenas (the closest Mexico ever got to a socialist government) is there enough stability to stop requiring the president to be a military general and allowed for the nation to have businessmen as presidents. In this image, the military is literally and physically in the background behind Ruiz Cortines. See Enrique Krauze, *Mexico Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997).

\(^{43}\) Oftentimes, during a presidential tour state officials would transport peasants to the proper village or city in truckloads to show their support. If they refused to come, they could lose their land. If they did come, they would be paid and fed. See Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power*, 613.
of grandeur and accomplishment that transforms a short trip into an image of momentous presidential victory.

This extreme presidentialism is also demonstrated in Impacto’s article titled, “Ruizcortinismo” (Figure 11), which lists all of the accomplishments Ruiz Cortines made for the good of Mexico. A two page, purely textual spread consists of an excessive and detailed list of the president’s achievements. The opening paragraph states:

Ruiz Cortines, el ruizcortinismo, es productor por excelencia. Produce en los campos, vivificando la tierra, multiplicando el alimento del pueblo. Produce en la economía, sacándola de su postración y lanzándola inconteniblemente a un futuro cuyo esplendor ya nadie pone en duda.

In other words, the president produces the country. He is responsible for enlivening the land, and multiplying the food of the people. He creates a vibrant economy by pulling out its weaknesses and driving the state toward a future whose splendor nobody can doubt. The article then lists dozens of Ruiz Cortines’ accomplishments: increasing production of mining, petroleum, and electricity, tourism, agriculture, and Mexican exports, along with numerous other developments. The final paragraph reads, “En resumen, las críticas de los descontentos eternos pueden ir y venir; apagarse o resurgir. Pero los HECHOS quedan ahí incólumes, enhiestos, y el Ruizcortinismo es eso: HECHOS,” (“The criticism of Ruizcortinismo, which is eternally discontent can come and go; extinguish itself or resurge. But the FACTS remain intact, standing upright, and Ruizcortinsim is exactly that: FACTS.”) Ruizcortinism, in the end, is reduced to “objective” facts --data showing percentages of industrialization and economic improvement-- that “prove” that the president was successfully steering Mexico toward a modern future. Here statistics calculate the nation’s progress as a whole; they comprise
the new language of national success and are made part of the everyday life of the new middle-classes.

Praising the president through images that showed him participating in patriotic deeds is another avenue by which Ruiz Cortines became a celebrity. An article in *Impacto* titled, “Monumento a Carranza en Villa Juárez,” (“Monument to Carranza in the town of Villa Juárez”) (Figure 12) is a prime example of the notion of presidential glorification via an association with the revolutionary past. The article focus on Ruiz Cortines’ recent purchase of the house in which the body of Venustiano Carranza, one of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution and president of Mexico following the implementation of the 1917 Constitution, lay on view after he was assassinated.⁴⁴ Five portraits appear across the article’s first two pages. A little more than one third of the left page is filled with a portrait of Carranza. A second, half body photograph, of the president himself, occupies an identical amount of space on the right page. While both photographs are black and white, these images appear in stark contrast to one another. Carranza’s light gray figure jumps out against its solid black background. By contrast, in Ruiz Cortines’ photograph, his dark black hair, black eyebrows, and the black suit he wears distinctly diverge from the white negative space that surrounds him. The two are further differentiated by their body language. Carranza wears military garb, was photographed head on, and makes direct eye contact with the viewer; Ruiz Cortines,

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⁴⁴ Much of the symbolic importance of Carranza is that he was the leader of the Constitutionalist Party during the Revolution, which was basically a bourgeois party that sought solely political -not economic- change. Carranza advocated a constitution that would rid the possibility of presidential re-election (a response to Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship) and dissolve the Porfriian army. Carranza was by no means interested in radical economic reform or a proponent of agrarian reform like Villa and Zapata. Therefore, Ruiz Cortines’ symbolic link to and preference of Carranza underscored the “institutional” aspects of the PRI ensuring the middle-class that he would not return to a Cardenista-Zapatista socialism, all the while still affiliating himself with revolutionary rhetoric. See Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power*, 334-373.
dressed in a business suit and tie, is photographed from a three quarter profile and looks beyond the viewer and off to the side at something beyond our field of vision. The three remaining portraits are significantly smaller. Two depict the government officials who helped Ruiz Cortines with this project, and the third is a photograph of the man who owned the house that the government purchased and dedicated to Carranza.

The title, “Monumento a Carranza en Villa Juárez,” leads one to expect the accompanying texts and pictures to report on the conversion of the house in Villa Juárez into a monument for Carranza. If this is a story covering the government purchasing the house where Carranza’s body rested on view, one might wonder why then, does President Ruiz Cortines’ photograph appear just as large as Carranza’s? The first sentences of the article clarify any confusion:

El Señor Presidente de la República, don Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, poniendo de manifiesto su devoción por los héroes de la Revolución Mexicana dispuso que la nación compre la casa en donde los días 21 y 22 de mayo del año de 1920 fue velado el cadáver del prócer de la Revolución don Venustiano Carranza.

The fact that the president of the republic, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, highlights his devotion to Carranza, the most conservative figure of the Mexican Revolution, underscores the symbolic nature of the purchase. In making a national monument of Carranza’s house, Ruiz Cortines effectively allied the PRI’s political project with bourgeois agenda. That is, he merged revolutionary rhetoric and an act memorializing the revolution and its goals with his own incentives to steer the state increasingly towards engagements with consumer capitalism. This “gesture” by the president to memorialize Carranza represented the symbolic inscription of the Carranza regime into that of Ruiz Cortines, to

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45 Again we see a businessman as president and no longer a military general. Picturing a businessman as president who is actively honoring the military appears much like the PRI’s agenda to “institutionalize” the Mexican Revolution even though presidents beginning with Alemán move the nation away from the socialist ideals of the revolution and increasingly towards consumer capitalism.
propose a continuity between the two, linking Ruiz Cortines to the revolutionary ideals that Carranza embodied. The deed provides historical legitimacy for Ruiz Cortines’ move away from agrarian reform and toward consumer capitalism. This becomes increasingly clear when one examines the captions under the headshots of both Carranza and Cortines. While the caption under Carranza reads, “Un nuevo monumento erigido por el Gobierno de Ruiz Cortines,” (“a new monument erected by the government of Ruiz Cortines”), the caption under Cortines’ own picture reads, “Devoto de los heroes de la Revolución,” (“devotee of the heroes of the Revolution”). Like Alemán before him, the current president sought to institutionalize the revolution as part of the agenda set forth by the PRI. While the revolution aimed to yield a socialist Mexican state, the economic inequalities concealed behind outward prosperity of the “Mexican Miracle” actually created a mixture of very poor, middle-class, and rich. Thus one can also view Ruiz Cortines’ attempt to institutionalize the revolution by dedicating monuments to certain of its leaders but not others; (e.g. Zapata) as an attempt to justify the current economic inequalities in Mexico.

“Nuestro futuro está en el mar,” (“our future is in the sea”) (Figure 13) is an additional strongly presidentialist article, that focuses on what Ruiz Cortines calls “la marcha del mar,” (“the march of the sea”). The four-page article leads with a full page and a quarter photograph of the ocean and details the modern technologies of transportation along sea routes that link the peripheries of Mexico to its economic centers increasing national profitability. More importantly, it credits the president as the man with the force and the power behind this operation, repeating Ruiz Cortines’ slogan “la marcha del mar” many times throughout the article. Similar to the tactics demonstrated
in how the Carranza commentary associated Ruiz Cortines with “upholding” the ideals of
the revolution, this article credits Mexico’s search for more effective means of
communication to an initiative made by no one other than the president. The article
highlights Ruiz Cortines driving Mexico forward into modernity, both literally and
figuratively, in one wave.

Linking state economic and political goals to popular culture representations of
the president’s personality, Impacto published numerous photographs imaging
industrialization as the “proof” of the success of the president’s modernization program.

After the revolution, the state developed a rhetoric of social inclusion. “Inclusion” meant
that all marginalized sectors had to be made to feel that they were part of a national
discourse. After Cárdenas, what continued in terms of “inclusion” was simply the rhetoric
of everybody’s enjoying the fruits of the nation, and reaping the benefits of
modernization, while the reality was quite otherwise. As historian Aguilar Camín makes
clear,

Data on a monthly family income reveal that, after the Revolution, income
increased in absolute terms for all social groups. These data show increases in the
middle class, but they also show that the income increase was not proportionally
equal for all sectors, and that Mexico was not on the path to social justice, if by
social justice we understand balance and equity in the distribution of national
wealth.”

Impacto visualized this “inclusion” in several ways. Most apparent is the representation
of the benefits of hydroelectric energy, expanding infrastructure, technological efficiency
on a national scale and, on the individual scale, enjoying the movie star, the typewriter or
washing machine, among other consumer goods. Thus in “official” journals like Impacto,
photographs of peasants and workers disappear, and are replaced by images of the

46 Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary
finished product ignoring the actual labor that went into the production. Even though peasant, proletariat, and bourgeois were supposedly all “recipients” of these finished products imaged, all the viewer sees is the end result or the product of technology. In this way, the culture industry masked the inequalities and political tensions that modernization ignored in the process of urban expansion.47

**Impacto: Modernization**

The second major axis along which *Impacto* represented the PRI’s seamless regime of modernization is the way it pictures the relationship between center and periphery in Mexico. Rather than showing the rural people who live and work in the countryside, *Impacto* focuses on the urban technologies that demonstrate the progress of modernizing the country as a whole. Thus the urban and rural poor who the “Mexican Miracle” excluded were subsumed by images of the new machinery, technologies, and industrial advances put forth by the centralized state. Pictures of irrigation canals, factories, machines, and state fairgrounds “proved” that the president’s project of modernization had reached even the most backward regions of the country. In the few instances in which *Impacto* does address the rural, it does so only in terms of the urban, registering the state’s interests and the economic, political, and social concerns of the middle-class.

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47 See Adrián G. Aguilar and Peter M. Ward, “Globalization, regional development, and mega-city expansion in Latin America: Analyzing Mexico City’s peri-urban hinterland,” *Cities* 20, no. 1 (2002): 10. Aguilar and Ward discuss how ISI policies, designed to promote the rapid growth of urban capital up until the 1970s, also promoted a large proportion of migrants to Mexico City. During the “Mexican Miracle,” the city experienced the highest growth rates in its history, increasing in population over 5 percent per year throughout the 1950s and 60s.
The country was only useful to the city in as much as it produced a profit and improved the overall economy. Thus, numerous multi-page articles appear throughout this April issue of *Impacto* publicizing the industrialization of the country making it exponentially more profitable. One such article of this nature is titled, “La Feria de Sinaloa: La siembra es ahora…La cosecha es el futuro,” (“The Fair of Sinaloa: the sowing is now…the harvest is the future”) (Figure 14). The very first sentence of the text reads, “Gran significado para la economía nacional tiene esta gran Feria de Sinaloa, en la que serán expuestos sus recursos agrícolas, ganaderos, industriales, comerciales y culturales” (“This Grand Fair of Sinaloa, which will put on view Sinaloa’s agricultural, livestock, industrial, commercial and cultural resources has a huge significance for the national economy.”) It proceeds with a long list of names of people, “están seguros de que la organización resultará todo un éxito,” (“who insure the fair will be a total success”). The photographs that accompany the article show the empty stands ready to be filled with the products to be sold at the fair. As one turns the page, the article continues onto a third page which highlights the shiny, new, modern machinery used to make the beer sold at the fair (Figure 15). The title above the four different pictures of this modern industrial machinery reads, “Una industria de prestigio: La cervecería del Humaya es sólido cimiento de la Feria de Sinaloa,” (“An industry of prestige: the brewery is the solid foundation of the fair of Sinaloa.”) The article continues: “…es la principal industria cervecería del estado y que sus productos son los mejores…sus instalaciones y maquinaria son de los más moderno que existe no solo en el estado sino en toda la República” (“This is the state’s chief industrial brewery and its products are the best. Its equipment and machinery are of the most modern and exist not only in this state, but
throughout the rest of the Republic as well.”) We read that the principal objective of the first grand Fair of Sinaloa, “es atraer el capital exterior para que se hagan inversiones en este bello estado que tiene todo lo que requiere un inversionista,” (“is to attract foreign capital to invest in the beautiful state of Sinaloa which has everything an investor would want”). In summary, a vast amount of money and publicity went into industrializing Sinaloa to support this fair with the sole purpose of promoting a modernized state in the hopes of gaining foreign investment.

The 300,000 tons of wheat grown in Sonora (Figure 16) due to the construction of a new irrigation system is the subject of a second article referencing increased production in the countryside credited to modern technology. One full page, and a quarter of another are fully covered by an aerial view of the new irrigation system in the Río Yaqui in Sonora. The picture itself also celebrates another new technology: aerial photography. This massive project, formally mimicked in size by the massive scale of the image documenting it, serves to emphasize the triumph of technology over nature. The water bleeds off the edge of the picture space through the veins that carry it to the farms indicating the vast territory of land that now receives water due to the PRI irrigation projects in the country. The introductory paragraph of the article states,

Las obras que se realizan en el Distrito de Riego del Río Yaqui-en Sonora-son de primera importancia no solamente para aquella entidad sino para toda la República, ya que significan una definitiva base de prosperidad para la agricultura nacional, que precisamente en Sonora encuentra terrenos ampliamente fériles y eternamente productivos.

(“The construction being carried out in the wheat district of the Yaqui River in Sonora is of first importance not only for Sonora but also for the whole Republic, as this means a definitive basis of prosperity for national agriculture, for precisely in Sonora one can find
amply fertile and eternally productive land.”) Before the industrialization project for irrigation took place, the area surrounding the River Yaqui was not nearly as productive in terms of yielding profitable crops. It is only as a result of accomplishing this technical feat, the construction of a modern irrigation system, that this rural land becomes important to the city. One must keep in mind that Impacto circulated to city people, not country people. When city people saw the photographs of the irrigation canals and read text accompanying the photographs such as, “Lo de Sonora es otra hazaña de los técnicos mexicanos, para bien de México.” (“this irrigation is another technical feat accomplished by Mexicans for the good of Mexico”) it became increasingly harder to acknowledge that modernization was not such a seamless reality.

Not straying far from the topic of improved agricultural production in Sonora, the next article focuses on a factory established in Sonora, which uses machines to select the seeds most appropriate for growth in that region. The headline in the journal reads, “Avanzada Agricultura: La Abastecedora de semillas del Yaqui, factor esencial en Sonora.” (“Vanguard Agriculture: the supplier of seeds of the Yaqui, essential factor in Sonora”) (Figure 17). This article associates this seed-supplying factory, which deciphers the best types of seeds to use in different terrains with yielding a successful crop in Sonora.48 The machine is not just associated with success; it is now “essential” for success. Land was seeded by hand for centuries, but now with this agricultural advancement there is no reverting back to a time without machines. The article goes on to say, “La Abastecedora de semillas del Yaqui es una institución que ha contribuido grandemente al desarrollo agrícola de esa región del Estado de Sonora…” (“This seed

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48 Many Mexican presidents were from Sonora so it would naturally be a geographic concern for the PRI.
supplying factory is an institution that has contributed immensely to the agricultural
development of the region…”). Once again the only interest the country has for the
urban bourgeoisie are on the order of economic advancements. This is seen in countless
other articles in this same issue of Impacto, with topics ranging from the government’s
“rehabilitation” of the ejido model to organize “better use” of country land to yield the
most potential profit, to advertisements promoting the use of the Mexican railroad and
newly operating air routes to help connect the city to the periphery and ship and export
Mexican products to help the economy.

Advertisements published in *Impacto* carried on its themes of modernization and
technology. Ads created for the National Industrial and Electrical boards of Mexico, for
example, promote the industrialization of Mexico and function in a similar manner to the
images of machinery modernizing the countryside. The *Confederación de Camaras
Industriales*, for instance, published a full-page ad featuring a large black and white
drawing of a pensive and determined Beethoven who we, the viewers, have caught right
in the middle of composing at his piano (Figure 18). Different shades of black and gray,
highlighted by hints of white light, outline a charcoal sketch of Beethoven’s figure. His
facial features are sharp, rigid and dark; his brow furrowed, eyes deep-set, and his jawline
is heavily shadowed. The only thing preventing Beethoven’s figure from becoming
totally encompassed by the solid black background behind him are white patches of light
strategically placed against his body to help outline it. He has his left hand placed on the
piano while the right steadily turns a page of his music. His eyes never leave the notes on
the page. The composer does not acknowledge the viewer; he refuses to break
concentration in order to make eye contact with us. It appears as though an invisible wall
separates us from Beethoven, and we are looking in on him through a window.

Determined and concentrated, Beethoven and his piano tower over a tiny silhouette of an industrial landscape that sweeps across the bottom of the ad. Despite its small scale, the factory landscape shows a huge array of rhythmically placed abstract shapes mirroring the keys of Beethoven’s piano. Outlined in reverse tone (white on black), are pictured vast sprawling groups of factories with silos and chimneys.

Beethoven is not only anachronistic here (late 18th early 19th century German), but, as a composer, has no direct connection with the Mexican board of Industry. The caption reads, “Lo que más cuenta es la voluntad.” (“What matters most is will power.”)

In summarizing the rest of the text in the ad, the Industry Board’s objective and relation to Beethoven becomes clearer. The paragraph of text under the image of the piano reads,

Beethoven es uno de tantos ejemplos de que la capacidad de crear, de producir es, ante todo, fruto de la voluntad y no simplemente de las facultades físicas...Señores industriales: al contratar a un trabajador no tomen en consideración si está o no lisiado del cuerpo, pues lo que más cuenta es su voluntad de trabajar.

In other words, Beethoven is an example that the capacity to create which, above all, is the fruit of his own volition. The determination with which Beethoven focuses on his music is equated here with the intensity with which Mexico focuses on industrialization. The ad addresses the industrial workers specifically, and claims that the board does not discriminate against hiring one whose body is crippled, for what matters most is the will to work. The notion that Beethoven’s genius and success came from dedicated hard work above all else is the message that the National Board for Mexican industry wants to equate with its practices. This advertisement supports the national movement championed by the PRI and the president to modernize Mexico via industrialization. It
tells readers that with hard work and a strong will to complete the job, Mexico is modernizing seamlessly.

The ad for the Camara Nacional de Electricidad, (the National Board of Electricity) (Figure 19) follows similar premises. It features a black and white cartoon drawing of a bicyclist, cycling uphill with great speed. The cyclist’s velocity and power are indicated by the white motion marks jumping off of the otherwise dark page like little lightning bolts around his pedals. Blurred is the background as he propels himself so quickly and with so much force that we cannot even make sense of his surroundings. His body, a compilation of black and gray lines, is defined with broad strokes. Little attention is paid to delineating the body underneath the shirt that blows in the wind pushing against him as the bike climbs up the hill. The cyclist balances his weight evenly over the center of the bike. His back, perfectly parallel to the upward angled motion lines, creates a visual line that draws the viewer’s eye up the invisible hill. Our eye follows the slight tilt of the bike up toward the right side of the image, indicating the intensity of the upward climb exhibited here. With hands firmly grasping the handlebars, his legs take turns alternating, one straight and one bent, like a machine repeating the same movement over and over again ritualistically. The overall composition of the picture is very sharp and geometric. The white, horizontal motion lines in the background are sharply intersected by some of the harsher more vertical angles of the bars of the bike, especially those holding the wheels in place. Further rifting the sharp angular pattern of the image are the three circles created by the two wheels and the chain in the lower half of the image. Rather than make eye contact with the viewer, the cyclist, his head held high, looks up straight ahead, fixed on his goal and the future. We are removed from his field
of vision and might as well be located on the sidelines, or watching the race on television. The cyclist is self-motivated and determined. A bottle of water attached to the bike indicates that he can refuel himself along this journey: fatigue will not hinder his performance. Injury will also not slow him down, as suggested by his use of a helmet.

While at first glance the biker appears to carry the visual weight of the advertisement, one should not overlook the small horse in the sky intersected by a lightning bolt located at the bottom of the ad. The image is white on gray, in direct contrast to the black on white/gray biker and is significantly smaller in scale. This color contrast was a deliberate choice associated with thunder. A white horse in the sky serves as a direct reference to Pegasus, the winged horse who sprang from the head of Medusa. This ad’s broad chested horse, with its head held high and bent legs indicate its readiness to move quickly with a second’s notice. Zeus, the supreme deity of the Greeks, used Pegasus to carry thunder and lightning bolts. The Mexican National Board of Electricity is very clearly trying to associate itself with the immortal and all-powerful Pegasus in order to comment on the power of electricity and the speed at which Mexico can modernize if it is electrified.

The text gives the reader the necessary clues to make the connection between the cyclist and a reference to Pegasus more concrete regarding their relationship to the National Board for Electricity. The text reads,

El ciclista tiene que desarrollar un gran esfuerzo para llegar a la meta. El progreso agrícola y la industrialización del país son metas que también requieren grandes esfuerzos. Para alcanzar estas metas, es indispensable la fuerza creadora de la electricidad.

In other words, the cyclist has to develop tremendous effort to attain his goal.

Agricultural progress and the industrialization of the country are objectives that also
require great efforts. To reach these goals, electricity is an indispensable force. Electricity is powerful and has helped develop agriculture and industrialization during the past few years; but in order to maintain the upward scale of development, Mexican electricity must remain a steady force. On either side of Pegasus, we read “electrificación es progreso” (“electrification is progress”) which, once again, promotes the idea that industry is synonymous with modernization.

_Siempre!_: “Consumer Democracy”

The “freedom” that José Pagés Llergo experienced from not being funded by the PRI allowed him the liberty to produce a magazine that did not overtly forward the “official” view as did _Impacto_. Nevertheless, Pagés Llergo’s editorial choices, even though more “frivolous” than his cousin’s accomplished many of the same state objectives but in a different manner. For the most part, _Siempre!_ took presidentialism and modernization for granted. Rather than referring to them as a main focus, the journal operated under the assumption that these two elements functioned as the foundation of middle-class consciousness. Focussing instead on celebrities, entertainment, sports and Hollywood gossip, _Siempre!_ operated on a much more cosmopolitan level, to help “Americanize” modern Mexican culture and, in doing so, to “integrate” the Mexican middle-class into a modern international sphere. Such integration reassured the middle-class that they were not isolated, provincial, or cut-off, but part of the modern international world and on par with their former colonizers.

In striking contrast to _Impacto, Siempre!_ placed very little emphasis on the cult of the president. One of its few references is a full-page photograph, published in 1953,
with no text apart from a small caption that reads, “Recordando al Caudillo” (“Remembering the caudillo”) (Figure 20). Reporting on a similar theme as Impacto, the image lacks an “official” presidentialist air. The photograph is black and white, and shows dozens of Obregón’s supporters, including the then president Ruiz Cortines, on the steps of a monument dedicated to the deceased revolutionary general on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his assassination. Unlike Impacto’s coverage of Carranza’s monument, Siempre! does not highlight the current president. Ruiz Cortines is pictured as simply one of many men on the steps. While the overarching shape of the figures mimics the triangular design above them --which may be loosely interpreted as a hierarchical scale--this reading is undermined by the fact that all of the men are more or less equal in size, and dressed in either dark military uniforms or dark business suits. While Ruiz Cortines may be the peak of the smallest triangle of individuals in the photograph’s foreground, he is certainly not singled out as a celebrity. Neither standing on a balcony, nor on the steps above the others, he is placed at the same level as two of his peers. This is a more candid photograph and far less contrived than those published in Impacto; some men look off in different directions while others casually sport sunglasses. Some stand up straight upright, others have bent knees and angle their bodies to the sides. This is the antithesis of Impacto’s image of Ruiz Cortines descending the plane while the national hymn plays and everyone salutes. In fact, one has to read the caption in order to discern the photograph’s presidentialist theme:

Hace veinticinco años que el general Alvaro Obregón fue asesinado en “La Bombilla” precisamente un diecisiete de julio. El último viernes, en el monumento que se levanta en su memoria en San Angel, se celebró una brillante ceremonia, que fue presidida por don Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Presidente de la República…
The text informs the viewer that it has been twenty-five years since Álvaro Obregón was assassinated, on the seventeenth of July. Last Friday, at the monument erected in his memory in San Angel, a ceremony was held in his honor chaired by Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, President of the Republic. Unlike Impacto’s tireless presidentialism, here, Ruiz Cortines figures as just one of dozens of people photographed at the monument. While the caption notes his presence, it certainly does not convey the high level of presidential propaganda that Impacto’s evenly matched portraits of Carranza and Cortines did a couple of years later.

In place of the overt glorification of the president, Siempre! publishes articles that appeal much more to civil society than to the state.49 It continually engages the middle-class in dialogues about their own involvement in the future of Mexico. One example, an article entitled, “Habla usted un poco tarde, señor Corona!” (“You speak a little late Mr. Corona!”) (Figure 21) concentrates on Luis G. Corona, Minister of the Supreme Court of Justice, who dissented during Alemán’s six years in office (1946-52) over what he describes as Alemán’s “patriotic fervor” aimed more at making the president popular than at helping the national citizenry. Corona, however, maintained his silence while Alemán remained in office, only voicing his criticism once his term had ended. The article describes his main concerns:

El Señor licenciado Luis G. Corona, Ministro de la Suprema Corte de Justicia, desde las alturas de su magisterio conmovió a la nación al lanzar un juicio vitriolico sobre el régimen del licenciado Miguel Alemán. México vivió-dijo el nuevo catón, poseído de patriótico fervor-en una inmunda cloaca.

Such vitriolic judgment against Miguel Alemán’s regime startled the nation. Corona claims that under Alemán, Mexico lived in a filthy sewer possessed by patriotic fervor.

49 See Claudio Lomnitz, Deep Mexico Silent Mexico, chapters 4 and 7.
The biggest problem however was not Alemán’s regime, but the fact that it took so long for even one of the most respected and educated men in Mexico to speak out against what he found objectionable. How then, questions the journalist, are the more humble Mexican people supposed to have the confidence to voice their opinions? Such criticism of any president’s regime by anyone other than a ranking PRI official voicing a personal opinion would never have been published in Impacto. While this article does not explicitly denounce Alemán’s sexenio, José Pagés Llergo’s inclusion of a commentary of this nature would have been far too risky for Impacto to publish.

The third article from Siempre! resembling one taking a presidentialist standpoint in Impacto is a four-page article following Frank Severin, an American man from Florida who works with fish in the sea. The first two pages are titled, “Aventura en el fondo del mar!” (“Adventure at the bottom of the sea!”) (Figure 22). Pictures occupy two-thirds of these first two pages; the largest image showing the Florida man dressed in his scuba gear, swimming in the ocean, and feeding a fish resembling a dolphin. The smaller images on the bottom of the pages are separate photographs: one shows Frank educating his children on scuba diving, while the other pictures Frank injecting vitamins into a fish. The second two pages are called, “El Hombre Pez!: Su misión en la vida es ser amigo de los peces” (“The Fish Man!: His mission in life is to be friends with the fish”) (Figure 23) and show Frank petting fish and cleaning the bottom of the sea. When Impacto covered the sea, it was strictly concerned with crediting Ruiz Cortines with improving Mexico’s communication from the city to the peripheral states. Siempre! however did not laud the president’s modernization programming, but took a humble human-interest approach instead.
Similarly, *Siempre!* differs significantly from *Impacto* in its coverage of the president’s modernization policies. There are no photographs of industrial machinery, no mention of any factories in the countryside, and no discussions regarding improvement of the *ejido* land system to make farming more profitable. Furthermore, there are no stories about new railroad lines, airlines, or sea routes. One of the only instances in which *Siempre!* mentions the Mexican economy is in a question and answer interview called, “Visión económica de México: Licio Lagos, Presidente de la confederación de cámaras industriales contesta 5 preguntas de *Siempre!* sobre la situación del país.” (“Economic vision of Mexico: Licio Lagos, President of the board of industry answers five of *Siempre!’s questions about the situation of the country”) (Figure 24). *Siempre!* presents the economic situation in Mexico in the form of a dialogue as opposed to bestowing upon the viewer a photograph of a finished product representing the success of modernization. Economic growth and productivity in *Siempre!* are not prepackaged for the viewer’s consumption as they appear in the images of the damn or the beer factory in *Impacto*.

**Siempre!: Consumerism**

*Siempre!* focused its articles and photographs on mass culture: cinema, radio, theater, music, television, opera, celebrity weddings, sports stars, and coverage of the Miss Universe Pageant. Articles on love and personal relationships, on how to communicate with one’s spouse, appear along side “scandals” highlighting, for instance, a recent marriage between the chief of an African tribe and the daughter of an ex-chancellor of the treasury of England. Furthermore, *Siempre!’s* covers promoted such
icons of popular culture as Walt Disney whose drawings one finds in a four-page article accompanied by a detailed intimate interview with his wife.

Articles or photographs in *Impacto* pertaining to mass culture are few and far between. Aside from the seductive fishnet-wearing national film actress Martha Ross (Figure 25), posed on the cover but never referred to again inside, mass culture is hardly paid any attention. One small graphic depicts a still from a movie, another quarter page is dedicated to the eight candidates vying for the title of the Queen of the first corn fair of Guadalajara, a third segment reports on the *Lucha Libre* fighters, and a tiny column on the opera are the only references to popular culture in the entire seventy-plus page magazine.

*Siempre!*’s focus on mass culture celebrities and events, and its fascination with consumerism as spectacle turned all news into entertainment. Its advertisements especially gave the illusion of Mexico as a “consumer democracy,” where class mobility could be attained through consumption. In reality, such claims of class mobility and the overcoming of social inequality through consumerism was mere rhetoric.50

As the Mexican Revolution made the social “inclusion” of the masses an imperative of the state, all Mexicans regardless of class were now ideologically incorporated in the new rhetoric of “consumer democracy” disseminated through advertisements featured in such illustrated magazines as *Siempre*!. While the post-Cárdenas shift towards capitalism relied on a revolutionary language of inclusion, in actual practice it perpetuated the long-standing history of social and economic exclusion that had prompted the revolution in the first place. The state used its control over the

50 See Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don’t Go Home*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 146.
culture industry and the mass media in particular to present modern industrial and consumer capitalism as an outcome of the revolution that would improve the standard of living of all Mexicans. According to Julio Moreno, “State intervention in Mexico’s commercial and industrial growth was presented as a service to the public and a measure that was necessary to implement revolutionary ideals.”

The advertisements in *Siempre!* perpetuate the myth of a “consumer democracy” in Mexico and also suggest that products of consumption were within the reach of the common person, while the reality was very different. Advertisements gave the impression that Mexico was more homogenous in terms of economic classes and opportunities for class mobilization than was accurate. *Siempre!,* unlike *Impacto,* contains no ads for national government funded boards of industry or electricity or any other sort of large scale modernization projects. Instead, however, in its July 25, 1953 issue, it contains six advertisements for mass produced consumer goods promoting the illusion of modernization and class mobility via the consumption of products. Such advertising “reassured” citizens into thinking that their (largely fictitious) ability to buy consumer goods (participate in a capitalist structure that effectively reinforced social inequality) was somehow “liberal” and “democratic.” A full-page color ad for *El Águila sanitarios* (Figure 26), a brand of Mexican bathroom/kitchen tiles, is one of these ads. It features a beautiful, light skinned, classical ballerina in the top right corner next to the words, “Belleza..y calidad siempre unidas,” (“beauty and quality always together”). The bottom portion of the advertisement displays samples of the individual tiles for sale. The background is colored sky blue and the ballerina appears to float in space completely.

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51 Ibid., 44.
ungrounded by any anchor; her dress plump and full like a cloud. The roundness of her
right arm mirrors the roundness in her skirt as she gracefully bends it down towards her
toe. The curvature of the dancer’s body and costume are sharply contrasted by the sharp
and angular image of the background, which even in overall shape is rectangular. The
image of the bathroom is itself like a window onto the world in which the viewer is
almost a voyeur. The composition is neatly divided into three distinct sections: red and
black checkered floor tiles in the foreground, pink wall tiles in the middle ground, and
green rectangular stripes divided by chunky black horizontal lines in the background.
The toilet, sink, and tiles glisten and reflect light from an unknown source. The mirror
over the sink, rectangular in shape, reflects the green wall before it. A tiny line drawing
of an elephant sitting on a toilet in the bottom left corner of the ad next to the word
“resistencia,” (“resistance”), alludes to the fact that these tiles are of excellent quality and
are impervious to even the most extreme circumstances (much like an elephant’s weight
on them). An image of an eagle (located at the opposite corner as the elephant) along
with the repeated use of the colors green, red, and white throughout the ad allude to the
Mexican flag and remind the viewer that these tiles are produced domestically. The
ballerina may be read as a figure used to tell the prospective customer that, much like
herself, these tiles are of excellent quality. They have beautiful modern, highly geometric
designs, and if one has them in her home she will become modern and high cultured just
like the ballerina. This is the ideology behind the idea of “consumer democracy.” If one
can afford to buy the tiles, she can change her social position and move up in economic
class. The ad tells the viewer that she has a choice, and if that choice is *El Águila*
*sanitarios* there is nowhere to move but up further perpetuating the myth that class mobility is possible through consumption.

Remington Rand adding machines are also marketed in a similar manner in *Siempre!* (Figure 27). An ad printed in black and white pictures the metal Remington Rand adding machine being marketed. It is compact, clearly portable, and modern. If one traces the arrows drawn in the ad, the viewer begins to comprehend that this sleek adding machine has made five “leaps” into the hands of five different people since it entered the office through the open back door. As indicated by the arrows demonstrating its trajectory, carrying the machine from one desk to another is easy. Its sixth leap is onto the imaginary desk of the viewer and is placed at such an angle that it feels as though we can just move our hands up to the top left corner of our desk and reach into the picture’s frame to grab the machine ourselves. The woman in the polka dot dress whose desk the adding machine was last on makes eye contact with us indicating that it is now our turn. Her satisfied and happy face tells us that our calculations will be quick and easy, without struggle or frustration. The young woman --attractive, light-skinned, and blonde-- wears an expensive necklace and a fashionable outfit. As the viewer follows the arrows from the woman’s desk to all of the others, she is introduced to one modern businessperson after another. All of the men wear suits and the women wear blazers and business skirts. While there is no doubt that the picture of the route the adding machine takes throughout the day speaks to the machine’s portability, it also highlights the fact that all of the employees’ desks are clutter free. There are no stray pens or pencils or pieces of paper anywhere. Everything in the office appears neat, orderly, and calm. No one shows signs of stress trying to add figures or do math by hand. There is also no indication as to who is
in charge is in this picture. Is he even in the office? It is very possible that the boss does not need to micro-manage his employees as he himself has so much faith in this machine’s ability to accomplish the job by itself. Clearly, the message here is that if the viewer purchases this product, she too can mobilize her economic skills and class position to become a modern businesswoman. The advertisement’s headline reads, “¿Cuántas sumadoras cree usted que hay en la oficina?” (How many adding machines do you think are in the office?) and the response given is, “¡Sólo una! Pero es un Remington Rand Portátil” (“There is only one, but it is a Remington Rand portable”!)

Siempre!’s viewer finds another very similar ad for DM Nacional (Figure 28) which the journal gives prime real estate. It appears within the first two pages of the issue, and is allotted a full page. The overall style of the drawing consists of smooth, straight, thin lines. The series of drawings on the upper right side of the ad establish the long history of the company and show a set of vertically stacked images (to be read from the top down) that indicate what the desk looked like in 1908, 1923, and in 1936. Listing the years next to the different models quickly establishes that this domestic company has long been in the business of making quality products since even before the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The first desk, from 1908, is the most intricate in design. It consists of six equally sized drawers: three stacked one above the other on either of the sides, and a drawer for pens and pencils just above the lap. These are common features that all three desks appearing in the illustration share. The 1908 desk is unique, however, because it is the only desk that has organizing shelves and compartments that sit on the desktop as well. Shelves and compartments of this nature indicate that all of that worker’s
belongings would not be tucked away and organized into hidden compartments, but rather that some clutter might appear on the exterior as well.

The biggest change in design one sees from 1908 to 1923 is the elimination of those exterior surface shelves. The desk from 1923 has a clean flat surface with nothing on it. Six smaller shelves, still equally sized, line either side of the desk. The shelves are smaller and do not span all the way down to the floor like those in the previous model. Their diminished depth also makes them less adequate to hold larger files and appear as though they would be better suited for holding pens, pencils and other small office supplies. The overall appearance of the desk is still very flat and angular. As the viewer’s eye moves down to the third model, this one from 1936, she notes only subtle differences in comparison to the one above it. The exterior surface shelves are still removed. The same number of drawers exists and they are located in exactly the same places. The drawers have grown in size, however, and now look as though they can hold larger objects. The desktop is still flat, sharp and rectangular, yet the bottom has become more rounded. This desk does not sit firmly on four perfectly rectangular posts, but seems to rest its weight on two three-dimensional trapezoid shaped pieces of steel.

It is the newest model from 1956 advertised in the bottom left of the ad however, that is most innovative and exhibits adaptations to its predecessors that help organize the office even further. Like the prior two, the desktop is still flat and rectangular. While the top has more of a rounded edge look, there is no shelving up there, which is congruent with the past two models. This desk, much like the last, also sits on two legs instead of four. Differing from the entire trajectory, however, this desk includes different sized drawers. Drawers in the drawing include: four that are equally sized, one for pens and
pencils, and a new one that is much larger and made especially so that files might stand up inside of it. A desk drawer allowing files to be filed right at one’s personal desk furthers office efficiency. The company name, *DM Nacional*, prominently appears next to the newest model in reverse white on black coloring at the bottom of the ad. One also notes the fact that this office furniture is 100% “Industria Mexicana.” The header reads, “No se fie de las apariencias…” (“don’t just go by the looks” because, while this furniture is great looking, it is also of superior quality”). Words like “aerodinámico” (aerodynamic), and “acero” (steel), help associate this furniture with modern times via the consumption of mass-produced domestic goods.

A fourth advertisement in *Siempre!* reinforcing the ideology of class mobilization based on consumption is yet another color ad, this time for *Carta Blanca Cerveza*, (Carta Blanca Beer) (Figure 29). The image shows a beer being poured out of its bottle into a wine glass as opposed to a beer mug as one would expect. The words, “cerveza exquisita,” (“exquisite beer”) are spelled out across the product’s label further elevating the status of the person who would drink this beer to the stereotypically higher status of the wine drinker. The beer bottle itself functions formally in the ad as a line that draws the viewer’s eye upward from the base of the tilted bottle to its skinnier neck eventually leading to the wine glass it is being poured into. The line ends with the lobster dinner in the top right corner. While there is no clear sense of how these objects are arranged in space (no table exists to ground them, the objects almost seem to float in the air) there is, however, an attempt at perspective. The base of the beer bottle is forshortened. It appears to be the largest object in the viewer’s field of vision because it is also the closest to her. The wine glass looks as if it sits squarely on an invisible table. These objects
make some sort of sense to the viewer as she tries to wrap her mind around the idea of how they appear in space; the same cannot be said, however, regarding the lobster dinner. The way the plate the lobster is on appears slanted to such a dramatic angle (much higher on the left side than the right) is not consistent with how the wine glass is positioned flat on the invisible tabletop. If it were on the same plane as the beer just set farther back, its base would still be at a similar angle to the wine glass. Since it is not grounded by anything concrete, the lobster dinner appears to float above the dinner table. It seems to hover over the beer more like an idea as opposed to any concrete entity. The fact that the beer bottle points to the floating lobster suggests that the lobster serves more of an ideological purpose here. The goal of the advertisers is to elevate the beer via the idea of its association with the lobster. The picture equates the idea of the lobster, a high class sophisticated meal for cultured people, with the beer itself. Thus, placing the two together in the same picture frame strategically raises the status of the beer by association.

Also alluded to here is the idea that this beer is fresh in taste much like the shellfish would be. The headline reads, “Conserva la calidad y frescura de origen” (“conserve the quality and freshness of the source”). Considered a fresh food cooked for someone personally, shellfish is the complete opposite of prepackaged or processed food with preservatives sold to the masses. Paralleling the beer with such an elegant meal elevates the beer even higher, for while the beer is pre-packaged and sold to the masses this ad tells the viewer that it is still executed at the same level as a dish prepared and served uniquely to one individual. Furthermore, the word “exquisite,” in combination with the wine glass and the lobster dinner, promises to improve the class status of the person who buys and drinks this product and makes him or her that much more
sophisticated and modern. Once again this ad appeals to the rhetoric of social “inclusion” based on “consumer democracy.”

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In very different ways, both magazines are visual embodiments of the same state agenda regarding modernization through industrialization and a shift towards consumer capitalism. The images in Impacto focus on the cult of the president and visually reinforce the president as the embodiment of modernization and the “Mexican Miracle.” His economic agenda was tied to the spectacle that the culture industry’s glitzy media representation made of his character. Siempre!, on the other hand, while it relied neither on presidentialism nor images of industrialization, supported the same culture industry tactics, through its repeated circulation of pictures of celebrities and advertisements giving the illusion of social inclusion. However, while both of the magazines circulated within the confines of the same culture industry, there existed a small amount of latitude within Siempre! to publish something as ironic as a photoessay following a man on a “date” with a mannequin. This was, in effect, as scandalous as a magazine could get for the time. Nacho Lopez’s “Venus” photoessay surely functioned more to make readers pause and laugh, than it did to raise any overt social critique of the culture industry’s erasure of the urban poor. Yet, as I will argue in Chapter 3, social critique was exactly López’s intention. However one chooses to read the photoessay, even if only on this most playful level, Nacho López nevertheless managed to re-insert into the visual sphere what had been “officially” covered over by the state.
CHAPTER 3: “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos”

In order fully to understand Nacho López’s photoessay, we need to situate it within and against Impacto and Siempre!’s representations of modernity, industrialism, the state and consumer culture in the 1950s. This will reveal how López’s photoessay both propelled state sponsored philosophies of consumption and, at the same time, took a critical distance from them. This chapter argues that López’s use of humor and irony provided him a small space to negotiate and to slip a critique of consumer culture into the circuit of mass media sponsored by the state itself. I will suggest that this subtle manoeuvre afforded López a discreet position from which to acknowledge some of the undersides of the “Mexican Miracle” while continuing to have his work published.

One of Lopez’s stylistic manoeuvres resides in the formal differences between the photoessay format he adopted and the standard single-image photographic format typical of Impacto and Siempre!. Against Impacto and Siempre!’s single-frame images that present the commodity as a finished product, ready-made to satisfy consumer desire, López’s unfolding narrative invites the reader to actively engage with the production and movement of commodities themselves. In the PRI journals, the people, events and activities pictured are constant embodiments of the state’s ability to industrialize and modernize the nation. Thus, the reader is passively presented with state politics imaged as commodities, and her active critical engagement with the production processes is sacrificed to an act of submissive consumption.

Nacho López, on the other hand, actively involves the viewer in the production and transportation of the commodity itself, as Venus moves from the artisan’s shop to her
final destination -- the uptown boutique. This is, in fact, reflected in Lopez’s very format which mirrors visually a process of production. The thirteen photographs are integrated onto a carefully structured sequence where each frame progresses logically to the next and propels the story forward in an undeniably filmic manner.\textsuperscript{52} There is a clear beginning, middle, and end to the narrative of Venus’ journey as it unfolds through space and time. It starts, stops and reaches high points that structure an overall coherence to a personal drama that unfurls within the narrative of Venus transported from the artisan’s shop to the boutique window.

The production of the “Venus” series required López himself (along with his deliveryman and mannequin) to move physically from one barrio to another. Of the thirteen images, the first two pages feature horizontal photographs that require the viewer to read them from left to right just as she would a text. The first set of images (Figure 2) document the labor process involved in making the mannequin’s torso, arms, and shoe soles. Artisanally crafted rather than mass-produced in factories, the production environment for these objects is clearly a small workshop located in a working-class district of Mexico City where small manufacturers are shown to be thriving. This is clearly not an industrial area nor even one of light industry where machines do the work, but rather an environment heavily dependent on individual social interactions.

The framing, composition and attention to lighting that characterize these photographs indicates that López spent considerable time conceptualizing the varied photographic styles he would adopt to produce these images. These range in appearance from the deliberately structured and staged, to images that are casual and spontaneous, in

\textsuperscript{52} In its formal qualities this photoessay references various facets of the culture industry such as the photonovella and film as it promoted consumer capital in the 1950s.
stark contrast to those published in *Impacto* whose aerial-like, mechanical shots sacrifice the viewer’s consciousness of the photographer’s physical presence for a more technologically abstract and seemingly authorless mechanical form. López’s photographs are categorically not cold, glossy and automated in appearance, but are idiosyncratically framed, casually cropped and made under natural (often poor) outdoor lighting conditions. His is a more humble style of photography: his pictures, shot with a twin lens reflex camera held waist high, have a decidedly spontaneous, often accidental and instinctive appearance. The first, and most carefully composed photograph, captioned “Artista,” captures an artisan’s workspace, organized by the strategic use of a natural light source which enters the scene from somewhere outside and to the right of the frame. Light move gradually across the backside of the prone mannequin’s torso, onto the back wall and, most purposefully, illuminate the centralized hands of the craftsman, which feature his tools and emphasize his skilled hands. Frames two and three, “Maniqui” and “Planes” also have carefully arranged compositions, but lack the calculated lighting effects the shop’s interior provided López. Both are outdoor photos that, taken from a middle-distance, include full-length body shots of the mannequins. In the former, the mannequins rest propped up against a brick wall next to a rhythmically arranged sequence of carved arms, and in the later, Venus stands stationary in the foreground while her deliveryman sits and waits to get new soles for his own shoes. In either view, streets are not overly populated, which provided López the opportunity to back up, plan and casually stage his shot without the interruption of passers by.

“Juerga,” the fourth frame in the series, marks the beginning of where López’s photographs start to appear less contrived and, while he is still conscious of framing,
composition and lighting, his images become increasingly casual and candid. “Juerga” is more of an action-shot than any of the previous images, for the deliveryman has been caught mid-stride in a more congested urban space. However, the fact that he is pictured sandwiched between two men on the street who walk perfectly parallel beside him indicates that López’s timing had to be more precise.

The next page’s images, from “Compañera” through “Ladys Bar,” (Figure 3) indicate that López and his “friends” have moved into a more commercial sector of the city. The first photographs show a more bustling urban environment than any of the previous images, but we are still by no means in the city center, for there are no bourgeois city shoppers pictured. Here, López transitions into taking overtly candid shots. Note the young man in “Compañera” photographed with his head turned downwards, and in “Afortunado” the deliveryman who has his eyes shut. López utilizes the landscape format of the photograph to imply to the viewer that the couple is now in a more populated urban area where their presence will become a bigger spectacle in the public eye. Thus, in “Ladys Bar,” an oblique interior shot taken from a downward angle slightly above his subjects, López willingly sacrifices some of the deliveryman’s head to make sure the three seated spectating men are included within the picture’s frame.

The last two pages (Figures 4-5) signal López’s move from horizontal landscape shots to the vertical portrait format. This group of photographs denotes a sudden shift in aesthetic choice, as López moves to a tightly cropped image where we see three-quarter shots of the figures suddenly very close to our viewing space. With the exception of “Un Sueño,” these are intimate, close and narrowly framed shots. “La Novia Soñada” is the first time a full page is given to one single image. Here, one detects a new focus on the
couple with less emphasis given to the public’s reaction, for bystanders are more or less cropped out of these scenes. The verticality of the frame further highlights the intimate relationship between Venus and the deliveryman, and opens up a new chapter from the previous eight images in which the “romantic” relationship between the two figures develops. As the narrative comes to an end, the pair arrives at “Casa Aurora,” the boutique where the deliveryman will finally leave Venus so that she may be displayed in the front window to entice middle-class women to buy the clothes she wears. The word “casa” strategically suggests that Venus is finally “home.” The caption accompanying this photo tells the reader that it is her “destino,” (destination but also destiny), to stand in the window of this boutique.

While the filmic references in the photoessay are certainly strong, one must remember that López’s actual medium was photography, itself a contemporary urban tool and particular process of modern visuality in the 1950s. López relied on the intersection of two axes peculiar to photography to make his social critique: first, photography’s seemingly evidentiary capacity, and second, his own ideological stance behind the lens. Photography’s evidentiary capacity involves the indexical registration of objects before the camera that the medium purportedly records as a “pure” truth, free of ideology. López’s own ideological stance however, guides and frames this first axis in the “Venus” series. Thus, while the series at first appears to simply –and objectively-- “document” the unfolding of an event, López himself directed the “Venus” photoessay. The sequence of images is the result of a pre-conceived idea and the construction of a visual event that was fabricated by the photojournalist rather than accidentally found. López directed the

deliveryman to walk down the streets of Mexico City with the nude Venus mannequin. He photographed the encounters between the couple and the urban poor bystanders in the city that his scenario provoked. Thus in the “Venus” series López pushes the notion of a photograph as document against the notion of a photograph as ideology (what happened in front of the lens verses behind the lens) into a dialectical confrontation. There is, in the work, a productive tension between the supposed facticity of what the images record and the contrived manner in which they do so. And it is evident in this photoessay that López makes sure we know this; it is factored in as part of the way meaning is constructed in this sequence.

One of the techniques that López relies on to bring this dialectical confrontation to the fore is the implementation of a small block of text that accompanies each frame of the photoessay. The captions, written by López himself, help to push the photographs away from the association with documentation and indexical truth and increasingly towards adding additional information that the photographic registration itself fails to make visible. For example, the first set of captions works to entertain rather than document. They create a fiction that propels a comic narrative. Rather than using words to describe what is actually present in the picture, López’s captions purposefully add a fictive dimension to what is seen. They change and augment how the photoessay is understood. Although documentary images purport to be visually objective, López’s photographs contrast this notion by bringing in a subjective narrative that is visually unclear or indiscernible without textual explanations. The photoessay thus follows the mestizo deliveryman at work, yet we see him doing everything but working. We only

54 John Mraz, Nacho López: Mexican Photographer, 14.
know his profession because of the text. Without the captions anchoring the photographs to a specific storyline it would be easy for a reader to read any narrative into the individual pictures and their sequence. Yet because of the context the text gives, we know the deliveryman’s job to transport Venus from the artisan’s shop to the upscale boutique. Once we understand this, we notice that all he seems to be committed to doing is taking a detour from this “work” and showing Venus a good time around the city.

López’s focus on the deliveryman avoiding work pulls the narrative out of registering an actual “truth.” The fantastical nature of the captions helps to further push it away from any documentary impulse. For example, in the very first frame, “Artista,” which depicts the artisan in his shop using hand tools to sculpt Venus’s backside, López writes, “De las expertas, hábiles manos del artista, va surgiendo la Venus. Las formas adquieren movimiento y vida. Sólo falta ahora el rostro y el alma. Claro, también los brazos para que sea una mujer completa” (“From the skilled, capable hands of the artist, Venus emerges. The forms acquired movement and life. She only lacks now a face and a soul. Clearly, also arms to be a complete woman.”) This text works to entertain the viewer. It describes this inanimate mannequin in such a fanciful manner that one might nearly think she were a real person. All she is missing to be a complete woman is soul, a face, and arms. López obviously does not intend to document the creation of a real person but rather to charm the viewer with this whimsical story of a mannequin coming to life. One is immediately reminded of the tale of Pygmalion and Galatea, in which an artist creates such a perfect statue of woman that she comes to life.

On a similar note, in the frame labeled “Juerga,” which depicts the beginning of the deliveryman and Venus’ journey across town, López writes, “Su misión es entregarla
en una casa de modas. Pero en su mente bullen las ideas. ¿Y si me la llevo de juerga? ¿Y si le enseño a esta dama cómo se diviertan las gentes en los barrios bajos de la gran capital?” (“His mission is to deliver her to a boutique. But in his mind bubble ideas. And what if I bring her partying? And what if I teach her how people from the poor parts of the capital enjoy themselves?”) Once again, the caption functions to amuse the viewer. It stirs in her a curiosity to find out what kind of adventures the “couple” is about to embark upon. The text engages the reader in this fantasy and lures her further away from the typical documentary format of captions accompanying images in the press and illustrated magazines. In the image associated with this text the deliveryman’s head is turned downwards towards the pavement under his feet and the reader cannot help but imagine what types of fun he mulls over in his head.

Some captions in the photoessay also overtly allude to the theme of entertainment. This can be seen in the frame called “Compañera,” where López’s deliveryman positions himself and Venus in front of advertisements for different entertainment options. The text reads, “‘Mira, Reina, podríamos ir al cine. O si prefieres, al teatro. Tú escoges’. Frente al frío silencio de la dama, los sentimientos del hombre crecen. La siente ya como su novia de siempre, como la compañera ideal” (“Look, Queen, we can go to the movies. Or if you prefer, to the theater. You choose”. In front of the cold silence of the woman, the man’s feelings grow. He feels that she is now his lifelong girlfriend, like an ideal companion.”) Here the deliveryman, with a rolled up newspaper in his pocket (presumably opened to a page displaying more options for entertainment), asks Venus how she would like to spend the afternoon. López directly references two different types of entertainment (the cinema
and the theater) both allusions to the larger rising consumer society and consumption of culture of the period.

The entire photoessay, in effect, can be read as entertainment of a similar sort to a romantic movie or soap-opera, for the photoessay’s filmic tendencies provide the viewer with a peculiar narrative. The captions could never pull the photoessay back into the sphere of documentation, for the whole concept of the story is imaginative. The photoessay could have easily been read as simply following the exploits of a bumbling *mestizo* as he avoids his job. On this level it would have fit into *Siempre!*’s model of entertainment without raising doubts or issues about underlying social relations and inequalities.

Yet, I want to argue that on a deeper level, other captions function to anchor the photographs in a much more subtle social critique and may be read as a criticism, albeit gentle on López’s part, of the social and economic inequalities that existed in 1950s Mexico City. While López himself grew up lower middle-class, his Cardenista socialist schooling profoundly marked his social convictions as an adult and the topics he chose to photograph and publish in the illustrated journals in the early 1950s. Without captions, however, one could nevertheless draw on elements like the visual binaries between the white mannequin and the darker skinned *mestizo* deliveryman, to speculate that López might have wanted to comment on issues such as the economic and social class differences of Mexico City’s people. López uses this very cliché story about a young man trying to get a girl to help him to delicately map out the social geography of Mexico City

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55 The comedic trope of the bumbling *mestizo* was common during Mexico’s Golden Age. The deliveryman is similar in many ways to the public persona of the great Mexican film comedian Cantinflas. See John Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*, 121-129.

56 One of López’s claims about the position that his work takes is that he “saw photography as an instrument to denounce social injustice.” See *Luna Córnea*, Número 31/2007, 439.
in the 1950s. Embedding this banal storyline in a fantasy was eccentric and entertaining enough to get him published in Siempre! But, I suggest, López’s intentions went much deeper than simply wanting to publish an amusing photoessay. I maintain that he intended the essay to be a more forceful critique of social and economic inequalities.

López’s “Venus” photoessay can be seen to reveal a social issue without claiming to reveal anything at all. Relying on humor to lodge his critique, López saw to it that his chances of being published would not be jeopardized. Yet, while the essay’s fictional nature does not threaten to divulge anything of significance, it nevertheless discloses the social and economic inequalities of life in modern Mexico City on a strictly visual level. It is my argument that López uses the eccentric exterior shell of the “Venus” narrative to sneak in his social critique under the PRI’s radar. By working ostensibly within the confines for social representations allowed by the state itself, López could continue to avoid censorship and earn a living as a photojournalist, all the while poking his readership to recognize the inequalities that underpinned the “Mexican Miracle.”

The captions towards the end of the photoessay make López’s critical intentions clear. One image titled “Afortunado,” depicts the deliveryman and Venus in a crowd of mestizos where the men gaze, amused at Venus and an old woman stares at the couple with disapproval. For this frame López writes, “¿Por qué la mirarán así? ¿Qué les llama la atención?” El galán –nadie más afortunado que él, piensa-, se siente lastimado, quisiera ser rico y cubrirla de pieles y joyas. La anciana se alarma ante tanta inmoralidad.”

57 Although López does not take an overtly critical standpoint with his narrative does not indicate that he was complicit. López worked within the limits allowed by the state and the culture industry itself and generated a level of criticism that would not jeopardize the publication of his work. Other photojournalists contemporary with López, like Héctor García, had to go underground after publishing overtly critical images of the Mexican labor strikes in 1958 and 1959. Thus when it came to critiquing the city, Nacho López had to be discrete. See John Mraz, Looking for Mexico, 185-186.
will they watch her like this? What catches their attention? The man—he thinks there is nobody more fortunate than him-, he feels that it is a shame, he would like to be rich and cover her with furs and jewelry. The old woman is shocked at such immorality.”) This is a clear reference to issues surrounding class inequalities disguised in a fantastic story. The deliveryman laments the fact that he cannot afford his white blonde girlfriend, but this is not an overt critique of Mexico City for his girlfriend is not even alive. The critique was most likely taken in jest rather than being viewed as outright dissidence because, once again, Venus is an inanimate object. This would have been exactly López’s intention.

The reader finds a similar instance of López carefully commenting on race and class in “La Novia Soñada” where the viewer sees a photograph of the deliveryman having lunch with Venus. López’s caption reads, “En compañía de una mujer así, la vida es otra cosa. Hasta la copa sabe distinta. En la imaginación del hombre este sueño va adquiriendo perfiles de realidad largamente ambicionada que nunca había llegado. ¿Será el sueño de un hombre de los barrios bajos?” (“In the company of a woman like this, life is another thing. Even the cup (water) tastes differently. In the imagination of the man this dream acquires largely ambitious profiles of reality that had never come true. Is this the dream of a man from the poor quarters?”) With this caption, López foregrounds the sharp turn away from the image of the indio campesino (the post-revolutionary ideal

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58 López’s work during the 1950s serves as evidence of his devotion to social concerns. López could not blatantly critique the social situation in the city, however, if he wanted to be published and earn a living. During this decade he stayed committed to the photoessay format. Some of his more overt critiques focused on rural indigenous people, and rural jails. John Mraz highlights the fact that, since the state mediated culture and the culture industry, it was much less of a threat to the state’s autonomy for López to portray Indians in the countryside than it was to document misery in modern city itself and there was more paid work doing the former. See John Mraz, Looking for Mexico, 185-186.
Mexican type) as the national icon to the new white embodiment of the nation. López reacts to this shift in the photoessay through the character of Venus. Gender, for López, is used as a mediator between class and race in his critique of this transition from revolutionary Mexican national icon of indio campesino to the post-revolutionary one of white and middle-class.

López’s ideology is brought to the fore via his critique of the absurdity of the white female. This is the same female we see in all of the advertisements as the unquestioned ideal to which the female middle-class viewer aspires to become more like. López, unlike the advertisements (Remington Rand in particular) which present the blonde white woman as an ideal to which the middle-class women should aspire to be more like, both notes this but also simultaneously steps back to a position of humor and implements an ironic critique. Thus his photoessay mobilizes this new national ideal in a sense, but simultaneously shows its absurdities.

“La Novia Soñada” is the largest photograph in the entire photoessay and is given its own full page in Siempre! unlike the quarter page given the other twelve photographs in the essay. It, even more than the other photos, constructs the idea of a reading of this photoessay as a form of gendered consumption that simultaneously mobilizes the notion of the shift in Mexican ideal and critiques its absurdities. This particular image shows Venus and her deliveryman out on their date as they stop for lunch. The deliveryman is seated at a table in the lower right hand corner of the picture and raises his glass to drink. He faces his date, who stands next to him in the space where her chair would have been had she been able to sit down. Venus is clearly the focal point of the picture as she stands

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nearly double the height of her seated “boyfriend.” López could have easily gotten the message across that the couple was out to eat using half of the space that he did. However, his choice to position the picture vertically and include a portrait of a man hanging above Venus’s head on the otherwise empty wall is noteworthy. The man, dressed in a sports coat, button down shirt, a tie, and a hat has his gaze fixed downward toward Venus. While none of the three figures in the photograph make direct eye contact, a visual triangle is formed by following the downward angled eyes of the man in the portrait that lead to just above Venus’ head, which then lead the viewer down to the deliveryman.

Both men look at Venus, but in very different ways. The name “Venus” itself is a contributing factor to understanding these divergent gazes as well as another strategic choice on López’s part. The mannequin could have been called anything, but López purposefully chose to call her “Venus.” This calculated effort references first the ancient Greek goddess of love, sexuality, and fertility and second, a female icon in the art historical canon that is traditionally painted in the nude. This image of an urban poor man seated deliberately lower than Venus so that he would have to look up at her to make eye contact formally suggests that this white, blonde, bourgeois woman is the type of woman he dreams about attaining. The caption López wrote for the photograph supports this idea as it reads, “La Novia Soñada,” (“The girlfriend dreamed about.”) It goes on to question, “¿Será el sueño de un hombre de los barrios bajos?” (“Is this or is she (Venus) the dream of a man from the poor quarters?”) Wouldn’t he be lucky if he could make her his girlfriend?
While the deliveryman idolizes Venus, the man in the portrait visually devours her with his gaze and reminds us once again that she is without clothes. This emphasizes the embodiment of the sexual side of the goddess Venus. The painting’s position over the mannequin and the man’s downward gaze suggest his visual consumption of her body. Venus, herself, is not on an equal playing field. Her head is turned slightly downward and her body faces another direction. She could never make direct eye contact with him, but this is exactly the point. The man consumes Venus with his eyes, almost as though she were a piece of meat. This is one of many references to a pure carnal consumption of Venus’ body throughout the photoessay, for the first two images also focus on the white female body as something to be visually consumed. The backside of a mannequin dominates the first image (“Artista”). She lies face down with no head, which denies her any agency. The next consecutive photograph (“Maniquí”) continues along these same lines. Now we see two naked mannequins lined up and leaning against a wall outside the shop waiting for the artisan to attach their arms. The arms, however, hang on a clothesline like meat in a butcher’s window once again exhibiting the women’s flesh for the viewer’s enjoyment. Thus in one sense, López propagates this new white national icon by showing how everyone desires to consume her, however, he also critiques the absurdity behind this idea as well. The fact that this living, breathing, deliveryman takes the inanimate Venus on a date with him is, according to López, just as absurd as the fact that this exact same type of person (only breathing) is the new national icon.

Continuing with this investigation of captions anchoring the images in subtle, yet deeper critiques of the social and economic inequalities that existed in Mexico City in the 1950s one should note the image labeled “Curiosidad.” This is a photograph of the
deliveryman and Venus taking public transportation on one of the final legs of their journey to the boutique. López’s caption states, “Y a enfrentarse otra vez a la malsana curiosidad y morbosidad de las gentes. ¡Ah!, si él tuviera para alquilar un taxi, la llevaría a cubierto de las miradas indiscretas del público. Pero ni modo, hay que viajar en un humilde autobús.” (“And to face once again the morbid curiosity and morbidity of the people. Ah! If he could have gotten a taxi, he could have carried her covered and spared her the public stares. But never mind, they have to travel in a humble bus.”) This caption reiterates the economic class difference between the couple that is mirrored all across Mexico City on a larger scale. The text indicates that the mestizo deliveryman cannot afford to take a private taxi (just as he could not afford to buy Venus furs and jewelry). He has no choice but to take his white girlfriend on a lowly city bus.

The narrative begins to come to an end in “Un Sueño,” where we see the deliveryman carry Venus up the steps of the “Casa Aurora” boutique. The accompanying caption reads, “Ha llegado la hora terrible, la separación definitiva. La Venus va al encuentro de su destino. Todo había sido un sueño, un dulce sueño que comenzó en el barrio, en el billar, en la cantina y terminó en la ‘Casa Aurora’” (“The terrible hour has arrived, the definitive separation. Venus goes to find her destiny/destination. Everything has been a dream, a sweet dream that began in the poor quarters, in the pool hall, in the bar, and ended in the Casa Aurora.”) “Destino” further solidifies the class separation that accompanies the literal separation of Venus and her mestizo beau in this final scene that shows Venus in the storefront window. The caption reads, “¡Encerrada para siempre tras los cristales de un aparador! Hasta ahí llega de vez en cuando, su eterno enamorado. Mira a la Venus de sus sueños, la mujer-maniquí que un día, allá en su barrio, lo hizo
sentirse el hombre más feliz.” (“Locked forever behind the glass of a showcase! Until there arrives occasionally, her eternal lover. He looks at the Venus of his dreams, the mannequin-woman that one day, there in his barrio, had made him feel like the happiest man.”) The couple is separated, literally, by a glass window, which allows the deliveryman to see Venus, but not to touch her or be with her in any real capacity. They exist in the same world, but are separated by clear yet invisible confines.

In captions such as these, López refers to the larger social and economic reality of Mexico City in the 1950s. The urban poor did not have the economic means to engage in the same types of consumption that, in theory, led to upward mobility as experienced by the rising middle-class. The urban poor were not simply a marginalized group living among the modern middle and upper classes. Rather they were considered an entity in and of itself, entirely segregated into its own peripheral and “antiquated” world separate from any concept of what was becoming modern Mexico.60

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60 John Mraz, *Looking For Mexico*, 16.
CONCLUSION

It is this notion of the urban poor’s exile to an entirely detached domain far from modernization and the middle-class that Nacho López takes up in the “Venus” photoessay and much of the other work he completed throughout the course of the 1950s.⁶¹ According to John Mraz,

These essays are about what I would describe as “worlds apart”; obviously, they were worlds apart from those of the magazines’ middle-class readers, but they were also remote from the homogenous vision constructed by Alemanism. The worlds captured by López were those of the poor, the caged, the dispossessed, those who live from dangerous and unusual work…those who were invisible in Alemán’s universe. And they were presented as worlds, not marginal existences.⁶²

The urban poor were quarantined in their own realm because the image of Mexico that the state wished to project both domestically and abroad could not afford to acknowledge that such people existed, even as a marginalized sector. The PRI’s control over the mass media and the culture industry standardized middle-class values. Spectacular images of the president, celebrities, industrialization, and consumerism made difficult acknowledging the existence of any state outside the image of the bourgeois modernity projected by the state. Beneath its appearance, however, the “Mexican Miracle” did not bring uniform progress to all sectors of society, as the illustrated journals would have viewers believe. In fact, modernization’s inherent intersection with many discourses in Mexico at this time, most significantly with consumption, ensured the exclusion of the urban poor. The Mexican context of modernity and modernization raised many large-

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⁶¹ See John Mraz, Nacho López: Mexican Photographer.
⁶² John Mraz, Looking for Mexico, 16.
scale questions about what it meant to be a modernized country trying to function within both an increasingly international and transnational milieu.

The importance that López’s narrative places on the viewer following the journey of a mannequin as she makes her way from the artisan’s shop to the boutique window visually underscores the rise of the large-scale culture of consumption in Mexico City. It elucidates the new national trend in the growth of consuming goods and the rising culture of consumerism in post-1946 Mexico which found itself in sharp opposition to the prior post-revolutionary decades that promoted the socialist ideals carried out by President Cárdenas in the 1930s.

While capital had previously been associated with imperialism and exploitation, under Alemán, its negative associations were re-routed to promote the illusion that capitalism would help accomplish the social reformations for which the revolution had been fought. After the Depression and World War II, Mexico had to industrialize along with other countries in order to be considered modern. The country had to leave its past behind and jump on board with commercial growth if it wished to contend with its modern neighbors, particularly the United States. In order to minimize chances of a societal upheaval, post-Cárdenas presidents, especially Alemán, presented capitalism as the first phase, a temporary phase necessary to fix the economy, after which would be addressed the problem of equal income distribution across all sectors. Thus, consumerism arrived on the scene as a way to suggest another means by which to negotiate class differences without resorting to the revolutionary violence of only a few decades prior. The state presented consumerism as a different means to the same “democratic” ends that
the revolution strove for, or as Julio Moreno writes, the state “presented material progress and modern industrial capitalism as the solution to, not the cause of, social in-equality.” 63

Each individual testimony to consumption and a rising consumer culture read in “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” whether alluding to straightforward consumption, visual consumption, gendered consumption, or that of leisure activities, references the much larger sphere of the culture industry and its intersections with the state to both forge and propagate the image of a modern Mexico. In picturing all of these traversing levels of consumption, López’s “Venus” photoessay both propels the state’s mission to promote consumerism, yet simultaneously takes a critical distance from this goal and offers a critique of that culture by re-introducing an image of the urban poor into the same circuit from which the culture industry prompted its erasure.

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Figure 1: Nacho López, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 2: Nacho López, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” *Siempre!*, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 3: Nacho López, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” *Siempre!*, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 4: Nacho López, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 5: Nacho López, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” *Siempre!*, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 6: Nacho López, “La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos,” “Afortunado”.
Figure 7: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 8: *Impacto*, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 9: *Impacto*, 11 April, 1956.

Figure 10: *Impacto*, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 11: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.

Figure 12: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 13: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.

Figure 14: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 15: *Impacto*, 11 April, 1956.

Figure 16: *Impacto*, 11 April, 1956.
AVANZADA AGRICULTURA

LA ABASTECEDORA DE SEMILLAS DEL YAQUI, FACTOR ESENCIAL EN SONORA

Figure 17: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 18: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.

Figure 19: Impacto, 11 April, 1956.
Figure 20: Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.

Figure 21: Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 22: Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.

Figure 23: Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 26: *Siempre!*, 25 July, 1953.

Figure 27: *Siempre!*, 25 July, 1953.
Figure 28: Siempre!, 25 July, 1953.

Figure 29: Siempre! 25 July, 1953.
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