

The Bisexual Erasure of Emiliano Zapata: Obscenity and Censorship in Postrevolutionary Mexico

Introduction

On 10 December 2019, roughly 200 protesters from various *campesino* [peasant farmer] organisations, including the Frente Auténtico del Campo (FAC), the Coalición de Organizaciones Democráticas Urbanas y Campesinas (CODUC), and the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Agrícolas (UNTA) stormed Mexico's Palace of Fine Arts to denounce Fabián Cháirez's 2014 painting *La Revolución* [Figure 1].¹ The image depicted the revolutionary icon Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919) – the *mestizo* [mixed race] general who rose up during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) to demand land redistribution – with several artistic liberties. While normally portrayed with a thick moustache, pistols, and large sombrero, Cháirez painted Zapata with a seductive feminine figure that was mostly nude except a pair of revolver-shaped high heels and a pink sombrero, sitting astride an aroused horse. Though painted five years earlier and familiar to patrons of the gay discotheque “Marrakech” in Mexico City, *La Revolución* gained

¹ ‘Campesinos Se Enfrentaron Con Activistas LGBT Por Pintura De Emiliano Zapata Desnudo y Con Tacones,’ *infobae*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/12/11/campesinos-irrumpieron-en-bellas-artes-y-amenazaron-con-quemar-polemica-pintura-de-emiliano-zapata/>

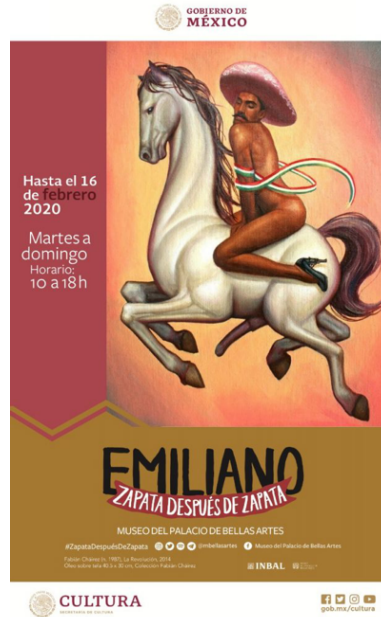


Figure 1. Advertisement for *Emiliano. Zapata después de Zapata*. Courtesy of the Museo Palacio de Bellas Artes

notoriety when it was featured on the promotional materials for the exhibit *Emiliano. Zapata después de Zapata* [Emiliano. Zapata After Zapata]. The exhibit, which opened on 27 November 2019 to commemorate the centenary of the revolutionary's death, contained one hundred and forty-one paintings of Zapata created over the course of the century that sought to interrogate 'the irrepressible nature of Zapatista images' while exploring the 'diverse and often contradictory transformations' of his appeal as a revolutionary symbol of Mexico.²

Though Zapata's face can be found on merchandise ranging from t-shirts to tote bags, *La Revolución* catalysed an explosive debate about obscenity and censorship in the depiction of national heroes. 'This isn't freedom of expression, it is debauchery! It's degrading. They can't exhibit

² Luis Vargas, 'Emiliano. Zapata después de Zapata,' *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura*, 1 January 2020, <https://inba.gob.mx/actividad/8056/emiliano-zapata-despues-de-zapata>

our history that way,' declared a spokesman for the protesters.³ Family members and descendants of Zapata also weighed in on the controversy. 'We are not going to allow this,' stated Jorge Zapata, grandson of the revolutionary. 'For us as relatives, this denigrates the figure of our general—depicting him as gay.'⁴ The libidinal energy that sparked the protest soon devolved into physical violence. Tenant farmers holding flags printed with the face of Zapata blocked the entrance of the museum for hours demanding that the painting be burned. When confronted, they proceeded to attack and injure photographers, journalists, and supporters of Cháirez [Figures 2 and 3]. The museum's director, Miguel Fernández Félix, was able to calm the mob and prevent the destruction of the piece, but only after he was told by the protestors to strip his clothes and dress as a woman.

After the confrontation, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador denounced the violence. 'Artists have total freedom and we cannot have censorship,' he stated at a news conference. 'What is all this about entering the Palace of Fine Arts and punching people? We totally reject this.'⁵ Though the descendants of Zapata threatened to sue the museum, they eventually arrived at an agreement with the Ministry of Culture. The painting could be exhibited, but its use in any promotional material was barred. Zapata's family members were also permitted to place a plaque next to the work that stated their disapproval. The curator of the exhibit, Luis Vargas Santiago, expressed his concerns about such censorship: 'We have created a dangerous precedent for freedom of expression in this country. What the president did was give

³ David Agren, 'Nude portrait of Emiliano Zapata in high heels sparks fury in Mexico,' *The Guardian*, 11 December 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/11/emiliano-zapata-nude-painting-mexico>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Zachary Small, 'Curator of Controversial "Gay Zapata" Painting Decries "Dangerous Precedent for Freedom of Expression"', *ARTnews*, 18 December 2019,

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/zapata-painting-free-speech-controversy-1202673336/>



Figures 2 and 3. Protesters and Counter-Protestors at the Fine Arts Museum.
Photos courtesy of Getty Images.

credit to one interpretation over all others.’⁶ In response to the censure, hundreds of artists came together on social media in support of Cháirez, posting their own ‘gay’ drawings of Zapata. The protest, meanwhile, gave the painting even greater notoriety, and it was acquired soon after by the Spanish businessman Tatxo Benet to join his private collection of censored artwork.⁷

Cháirez’s painting reignited familiar class, racial, and geographic tensions in Mexico that found their expression in debates over the erotic legacy of Zapata. Contestations around the memory and image of Zapata have been a distinct feature of Mexico’s cultural history since his death in 1919.⁸ These debates have largely been defined by binaries. Popularly depicted in peasant clothing, Zapata’s actual self-presentation during his life was in the dandified charro style reflective of his landed background. Meanwhile, the Mexican government’s appropriation of Zapata has been

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ‘Empresario español compra el polémico cuadro de Zapata desnudo y con tacones,’ *Pulso*, 15 January 2020, <https://pulsoslp.com.mx/cultura/empresario-espanol-compra-el-polemico-cuadro-de-zapata-desnudo-y-con-tacones/1053387>

⁸ Samuel Brunk, *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory, and Mexico’s Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 31.

challenged by feminists, indigenous communities, and insurgent anti-capitalist and decolonial movements such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

Zapata's long-contested sexuality follows a similar dichotomy. The protestors of Cháirez's painting were largely mestizo and indigenous campesinos – many of them women – who asserted that a 'gay' Zapata disturbed the sanctity of his heterosexual masculinity. Whereas defenders of *La Revolución* were primarily drawn from circles of urban intellectuals and the LGBTQ+ community of Mexico City – a community often characterized as existing outside of a "real" or 'authentic' Mexico – who celebrated the painting as a symbol of gay pride and queer liberation.⁹ In these polemics, Zapata is either a homophobic symbol of mestizo nationalism or a transnational queer icon whose relationships to indigenous and mestiza women are overlooked. I argue that these binary camps censure interrogations of Zapata's potential bisexuality and elide the intersections of gender, race, and class that are central to his erotic legacy.

The split over Zapata's sexuality constitutes what the legal scholar Kenji Yoshino has termed the 'epistemic contract of bisexual erasure' that requires heterosexual and homosexual investment in the stability of a binary system of sexual categories that excludes bisexuality.¹⁰ In this article, I take up bisexual erasure as a conceptual tool to understand the libidinal tensions undergirding Zapata's legacy. As Juana María Rodríguez notes, bisexuality's slippery signification of varying romantic interests has often been characterized as apolitical, nefarious, and unrestrained. As such, bisexuality elicits suspicion and skepticism, resulting in its dismissal as a

⁹ Ryan M. Jones, '¡Viva the Queer Zapata! The Sexual Politics of Defining Mexican Identity and Icons in Fabián Cháirez's "La Revolución"', *Nursing Clio*, 25 March 2020, <https://nursingclio.org/2020/03/25/viva-the-queer-zapata-the-sexual-politics-of-defining-mexican-identity-and-icons-in-fabian-chairezs-la-revolucion/>

¹⁰ Kenji Yoshino, 'The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,' *Stanford Law Review* 52 (1999): 399.

sexual category. These characterizations, furthermore, are most often applied to racialized minorities who are seen as ‘premodern’ and resistant to a ‘true’ sexual identity.¹¹ Bisexuality, thus, exceeds and subverts regimes of sexual desire, encompassing what Deborah Vargas terms *lo sucio*: the lewd, obscene, and undisciplined behaviours that oppose normative respectability and comportment.¹²

Embracing its radical methodological potential, I use bisexual erasure as an analytical tool in two ways. First, as a recuperative project to historicize the desire to know – via rumour and speculation – Zapata’s unknowable sexual desires. Rather than applying a category of sexual identity to Zapata, I instead seek to interrogate the erasure of any possibility for considering bisexual desire in debates about him. Second, I use bisexual erasure to highlight how recognising a plurality of sexual pleasures in historical figures like Zapata can resist the globalized mandates and colonial dictates of sexual identification and decency (which often fall into the traps of hypermasculinity and homonationalism).¹³ In doing so, I consider queer racial difference in the construction of bisexuality as indecipherable and suspicious, advocating for a more expansive understanding of censorship as more than the decision to remove an obscene or erotic image from the public sphere, but also an act of historical erasure of diverse sexual desires in favour of a homo/hetero binary.

Revolutionary Rumours

¹¹ Juana María Rodríguez, ‘Queer Politics, Bisexual Erasure,’ *lambda nordica* 21.1-2 (2016): 169-170.

¹² Deborah Vargas, ‘Ruminations on “Lo Sucio” as a Latino Queer Analytic,’ *American Quarterly* 66.3 (2014): 715-726.

¹³ Clare Hemmings, “What’s in a Name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 11.1-2 (2007): 18.

To suggest the possibility of bisexual erasure, we must first confirm what Rodríguez calls the ‘statistical validation’ of bisexual desire.¹⁴ According to Robyn Ochs, bisexuality signifies ‘the potential to be attracted romantically and/or sexually to others of varying genitalia, and/or varying genders, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree.’¹⁵ Though most histories have enshrined compulsory heterosexuality by prioritizing Zapata’s military accomplishments over his private life, a handful of works reference the possibility of Zapata’s same-sex desires.¹⁶ Turning to the historical record that these works reference, we find moments of bisexual potential. First, Zapata’s numerous children provide a sort of statistical affirmation of the likelihood of his attraction to women, whereas two major rumours hint at Zapata’s possible male-male sexual desires. Though we can acknowledge that rumours hold potential truths, we must also recognise that there is little to no archival material to support them. More important for this analysis, however, is the persistence of such hearsay despite the lack of historical evidence and continued attempts to capture Zapata’s sexuality in the existing nomenclature of straight, gay, or queer, but never bisexual.

Born in 1879 to a small landholding family in Anenecuilco, a city in the south-central state of Morelos, Zapata slowly become a renowned figure

¹⁴ Rodríguez, ‘Queer Politics,’ 170.

¹⁵ Robyn Ochs, ‘Bisexual: A Few Quotes from Robyn Ochs,’ *Robyn Ochs*, <https://robynochs.com/bisexual/>

¹⁶ Brunk, *Posthumous*, 189; and Florencia Mallon, ‘Local Intellectuals, Regional Mythologies, and the Mexican State, 1850–1994: The Many Faces of Zapatismo,’ *Polygraph* 10 (1998): 39–78. While Ryan M. Jones’s work noted a potential bisexuality, he pivoted quickly to convert Zapata into a symbol of queer radicalism. Rather, it is more often popular news outlets and blogs from Mexico that note Zapata’s potential bisexuality. See for example: <https://ulisex.com/emiliano-zapata-tan-hombre-se-acostaba-otros-hombres/> <https://www.reporteindigo.com/piensa/la-presunta-bisexualidad-de-zapata-donde-nacio-el-rumor/> <https://culturacolectiva.com/history/emiliano-zapata-sexual-myth> <https://themazatlanpost.com/2019/12/12/was-emiliano-zapata-bisexual-and-lover-of-porfirio-diaz-son-in-law/> <http://homocronicas.blogspot.com/2013/10/ignacio-de-la-torre-emiliano-zapata-y.html>

in local politics when he began engaging in landholding and campesino disputes. In 1897, he was swept up in a protest at a local hacienda and was conscripted into the army. After a six-month stint, he worked as a horse caretaker and eventually returned to his home state. At thirty-one, he married Josefa Espejo, the daughter of a livestock dealer from nearby Villa de Ayala. Zapata had a son and daughter with Espejo, but both died during childhood. He would, however, go on to father over ten more children out of wedlock with roughly nine other women.

In contrast to his documented relationships with women, Zapata's sexual encounters with men lay almost entirely in the realm of speculation. The first rumour involves the period he worked as a horse caretaker under the employment of Ignacio de la Torre y Mier, son-in-law of the dictator Porfirio Díaz. De la Torre was an aristocratic landholder from a prominent Mexico City sugar manufacturing family who became son-in-law to the president when he married Díaz's daughter, Amada. In 1906, de la Torre hired Zapata and resided with him for a year on his hacienda in Cuernavaca. It is speculated that during that time, de la Torre and Zapata had some type of amorous relationship. In terms of proof, there is an alleged diary entry by Amada Díaz claiming she spied on the two and discovered them in a compromising position.¹⁷

Zapata's relationship to Ignacio de la Torre is more notorious due to the latter's association with the Porfirian era scandal of the Dance of the Forty-One. The Dance of the Forty-One was a 1901 incident in which forty-one men were arrested for attending an all-male drag ball in Mexico City.¹⁸ Allegedly, there were originally forty-two men arrested, including de

¹⁷ It is notable that these are second-hand revelations made by the writer Ricardo Orozco who alleged he read the excerpts from Díaz's diary in which she supposedly recorded the relationship between her husband and Zapata. Ricardo Orozco, *El album de Amada Díaz* (México: Planeta, 2003).

¹⁸ For more on the Forty-One, see Robert McKee Irwin, 'The Famous 41: The Scandalous Birth of Modern Mexican Homosexuality,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 3

la Torre. However, his family connections and relationship to the president assured that his participation in the ball was erased from the record. Still, rumours of de la Torre's involvement in the ball persisted and have been immortalized in various iterations of the Dance in films, novels, and telenovelas. Though Zapata left de la Torre's employment after about six months, their entanglement persisted. When Zapatista forces entered Mexico City in December of 1914, Zapata allegedly released Ignacio de la Torre from prison and held him hostage at Cuernavaca. Amid the turbulence of administrations in 1917, de la Torre managed to escape to New York, where he died in April of 1918 from surgical complications.

The second rumour involves Zapata's relationship with his personal secretary, Manuel Palafox, and potentially other soldiers during his time as leader of the Liberation Army of the South. This story has been kept alive by popular works such as the 2006 novel *Zapata* by Pedro Ángel Palou, which hints at Zapata's homosexual relationships with soldiers based on the alleged testimony of Palafox.¹⁹ In October of 1911, Zapata recruited Palafox to support him as an advisor and secretary. An educated man from the state of Puebla, Palafox had stints as an engineering student, a salesman, and a worker on a hacienda. As an advisor, he became indispensable as Zapatismo grew to become an influential force in national politics, which required individuals skilled in political writing and diplomacy. However, there was mistrust and hatred towards Palafox among the Zapatistas.²⁰ After gaining considerable power, Palafox's fall from grace began in 1917 after a series of diplomatic debacles. According to the historian John Womack, Palafox's ouster was cemented in late 1918 when his alleged homosexuality came to

(2000): 353-376 and Robert Franco, 'Todos/as Somos 41: The Dance of the Forty-One from Homosexual Reappropriation to Transgender Representation in Mexico,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 66-95.

¹⁹ Pedro Ángel Palou, *Zapata* (México: Editorial Planeta, 2009).

²⁰ Samuel Brunk, "Zapata and the City Boys: in Search of a Piece of the Revolution," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 73, no. 1 (1993): 42-43.

light. 'It seems that in doubt of his sex he behaved indiscreetly and became an object of contempt at headquarters. Zapata almost had him shot,' writes Womack.²¹ Palafox was subsequently reassigned to Puebla and faded into obscurity after the Revolution.

Erasure of Desire

The possibility of a diversity of sexual pleasures in the historical record of Zapata subverts the binary camp of categories of gay or straight. As Clare Hemmings notes, binary identity categories fail to capture diverse forms of sexual contact and privilege an epistemology rooted in Western sexual identity.²² Yet, nowhere in reports on the Fine Arts Palace clash was the historical possibility of bisexuality even suggested. In the absence of a clear category of sexual identity, it would seem the concept of queer would be the apt term to understand Zapata's sexual desires. For the past three decades, queer has become the primary signifier for sexual desires that subvert identity categories, disrupt the links between gender and sexuality, and challenge heteronormativity. Queer's liberatory promise of destabilizing modern binary oppositions of homosexual and heterosexual has also extended into analyses of Latin America and elsewhere in the global South, where its broad interpretation has encompassed a wide range of sexual practices. In Mexico, Zapata has been asserted as a symbol of queer power and revolution, and *La Revolución* has since become a paragon of queer art, all of which points to the term's appeal for making sense of transnational sexual meaning.²³

²¹ John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 306. Brunk, however, insists that this aspect of Palafox, if true, only played a minor role in his disgrace.

²² Hemmings, 'Name,' 17.

²³ Ibid., 19.

The transnational use of queer, however, often fails to capture the specificity of sexual acts. Queer has thus become its own form of universalism that subsumes global South sexualities under a universalist rubric of antinormativity.²⁴ The expansive use of ‘queer’ to broadly signal all forms of non-normative sexual acts and desires censors bisexuality. For one, by taming and encompassing bisexuality under an umbrella of sexual diversity, queerness masks bisexuality’s emphasis on physical sex acts and pleasures.²⁵ Furthermore, in the case of Zapata, the use of the term queer erases his attachments to women while confining the plurality of his sexual desires to transnational nomenclature. For example, as the Fine Arts Palace scandal wound its way through social networks such as Twitter and Instagram, supporters of Cháirez began posting their own interpretations of the painting. In images, descriptions, and hashtags, many of these works use the terms gay or queer, and they connected Zapata to an international struggle for LGBTQ+ rights [Figures 4-8]. As a result, women – particularly the indigenous, mestiza, and campesina women that are central to Zapata’s legacy – were absent. Furthermore, as Zapata entered a strictly homosocial space, his desires were translated for a globalized liberal audience, resulting in a fluid transition of terminology between ‘gay’ and ‘queer.’ Such language prioritizes identity over sexual positions or preferences and ensures that gay men and lesbians remain, in the words of Hemmings, ‘the *de facto* subjects

²⁴ Ibid., 20; For more see: Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira, ‘Reflecting on Decolonial Queer,’ *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25, no. 3 (2019): 403-429; Diego Falconí Trávez, Santiago Castellanos, and María Amelia Viteri, eds. *Resentir lo queer en América Latina: diálogos desde/con el Sur* (Barcelona: Egales Editorial, 2014); Diego Falconí Trávez, ‘De lo queer/cuir/cuy (r) en América Latina. Accidentes y malos entendidos en la narrativa de Ena Lucía Portela,’ *Mitologías hoy* 10 (2014): 95-113; Joseph Pierce, ‘El cuerpo, la colonialidad y la crítica queer,’ *Conversaciones del Cono Sur* 4:2 (2019): 3-5; Fenando A. Blanco, Mario Pecheny, and Joseph M. Pierce, *Políticas del amor: Derechos sexuales y escrituras disidentes en el Cono Sur* (Santiago, Chile: Cuarto Propio, 2018); Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan, eds. *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

²⁵ Rodríguez, ‘Queer Politics,’ 169.

of queer studies.’²⁶ The assigning of gay or queer to Zapata thus reflects a generalized suspicion of bisexual desire – that its alleged apoliticism renders it useless in sexual rights movements that either seek to integrate sexual minorities into normative structures of monogamy and decency, or which disavow assimilation altogether (because of the fear that

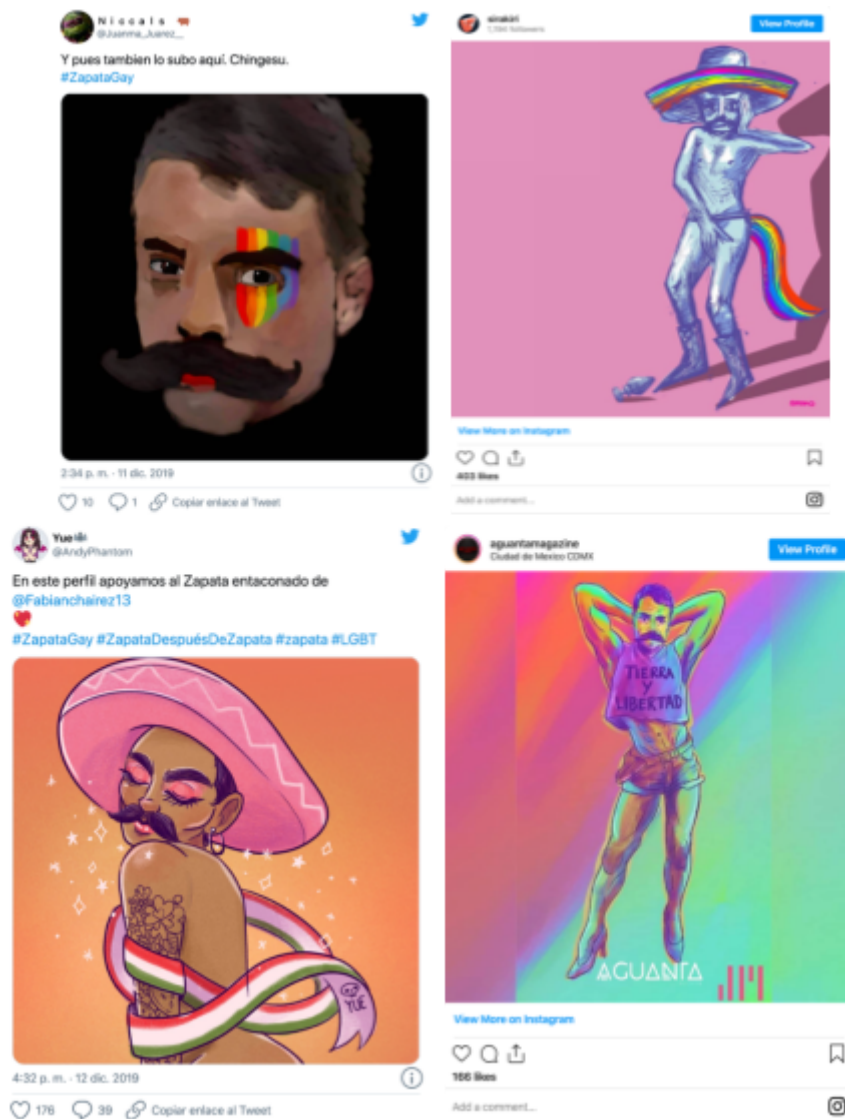


Figure 4-8. “Gay” Zapatas. Images courtesy of Instagram and Twitter

²⁶ Hemmings, ‘Name,’ 14.

bisexuals will assimilate into heterosexual monogamous partnerships).²⁷ Such characterizations of distrust, furthermore, are most often applied to racialized subjects of the global South who are often seen as stuck in a stage of underdevelopment.²⁸

Yet Zapata and global South bisexuals also represent the seductive allure of the dark-skinned subject. For example, many images portrayed Zapata with a sculpted physique, and sought to maintain his traditional features as part of his sexual appeal: the sombrero, mustache, and muscular frame that indicate a desirable rural masculinity. In this way, the debate around Zapata is related to those around the figure of the *chacal* [jackal] or *mayate* [beetle] – a darker-skinned, lower-class male subject who can be coaxed to participate in same-sex sexual acts through bribery with drugs, money, or housing. The writer and critic, Carlos Monsiváis, described this subject as an essential, yet inaccessible, character of Mexico City urban culture.

The *chacal* is the young proletarian of indigenous or mestizo appearance, historically described as The Bronze Race. The *chacal* is proletarian sensuality, the body that comes from the gym of life, from hard work...The *chacal* does not look so as not to give away his gaze, but he lets himself be watched to increase his self-esteem. The fitted T-shirts, the tight and conveniently torn jeans, the baseball caps, the refinement of the hostile or indifferent gaze that is nonetheless inviting, by no means prostitution, but by some means inaccessible.²⁹

The *chacal*/*mayate* is portrayed as taking the active penetrative role in sexual encounters and combines the ‘rough trade’ of proletarian masculinity with native eroticism. As such, he represents the transgressive potential of

²⁷ Rodríguez, ‘Queer Politics,’ 174.

²⁸ Hemmings, ‘Name,’ 14.

²⁹ Carlos Monsiváis, ‘La noche popular: paseos, riesgos, júbilos, necesidades orgánicas, tensiones, especies antiguas y recientes, descargas anímicas en forma de coreografías,’ *Debate Feminista* 18 (1998): 55-73.

mixing social classes and sexual orientations. Nevertheless, he is a subject on the margins of sexual rights movements – one who often also elicits ideas of suspicion and illegibility due to his bisexual expression.³⁰ Still, the debate over *La Revolución* differs from the chacal/mayate in many ways, particularly his sexual positioning in the painting which evokes an anticipation of penetration. For it is one thing to acknowledge a masculine Zapata who may have taken the active role in sexual relations with men, but quite another to recognize a bisexual Zapata who may have desired to be penetrated.

Brown and Out

The artwork on social media was bifurcated by indigenous/proletarian sexual eroticism and the globalized politics of the closet. While some of the artwork queered Zapata with feminine clothing and gestures, others emphasized a sculpted physique. Still, most were united in seeking to give Zapata the sexual identity he was allegedly unable to explore in his lifetime, depicting him as out of the closet with symbols such as the rainbow flag.

Advocates of Zapata's hypermasculine image, from the Mexican state to the protestors who stormed the Palace of Fine, upheld the mythos of his heterosexual legacy and mestizo masculinity embodied in all manner of cultural productions. As the acclaimed musician and supporter of the rioters, Armando Manzanero, stated: 'It is the most disgraceful and unjust things one could do to one of our heroes. Instead of heels, he should have

³⁰ Carlos Monsiváis, "Nightlife," in *The Mexico City Reader*, edited by Ruben Gallo, 180-181; For more on the figure of the chacal, see Pablo Antonio Caraballo Correa, "Los Limites de la 'Hermandad': modernidad e identidad *gay* en México," *La Teoría* 70 (December 2020): 70-99; Sergio Galaz-García, "La era del 'chacal': modernismo y homoerotismo en la Ciudad de México," <https://www.arquine.com/la-era-del-chacal-modernismo-y-homoerotismo-en-la-ciudad-de-mexico/>

been painted with huge balls [huevos bien grandes].³¹ Women's participation in the affair also reasserted Zapata's relationship to campesinas and reiterated his importance for rural women to assert their voices in struggles for land and labour. In doing so, these groups have disassociated revolutionary militancy from the effeminacy and same-sex desire embodied by *La Revolución* and the LGBTQ+ activists of the country's capital.

In addition to the language of gay or queer, contradictory elements of race and gender also circulated on social media in support of *La Revolución*. Although some works sought to emphasize Zapata's mestizo background, others erased his regional identity and brown skin, depicted him instead with European features [Figures 5-9]. While these artistic works sought to reappropriate Zapata against violent machismo, their resulting efforts elided the intersections of race, gender, and class that are crucial to Zapata's erotic legacy. The erasure of Zapata's racial background is further linked his bisexuality. Images of a whiter, muscular jock version of Zapata sought to connect him to transnational discourses and symbols of sexual liberation such as the rainbow flag. The brown bisexual of Mexico, when entering the platforms in which these social media sites operate, becomes a legible subject only through associations with gay, queer, and whiteness.

Since museums are often the spaces where libidinal politics play out, it was the Palace of Fine Arts where the demand for censorship originated.³² The campesinos who protested *La Revolución* understood Zapata's mestizaje and masculinity as equally crucial to their demands of state support in rural

³¹ Agencia Reforma, 'Ofende a Manzanero pintura de Zapata,' *Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/entretenimiento/articulo/2019-12-12/ofende-a-manzanero-pintura-de-zapata>

³² Jennifer Tybrczy, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

and underserved regions of central and southern Mexico, suturing gender presentation with nationalism. As Jorge Zapata further stated:

What we have come to expose is their stupid act of showing an image of our General in the Fine Arts museum. An unknown painter who wants fame has depicted our general as gay. As a family, as a people, as true Zapatistas, we are not going to allow that. We are going to sue both the painter and the person in charge of Fine Arts for exposing the figure of our general in this way...I have nothing against gay people, I have many gay friends... and I don't know why the Palace of Fine Arts, a place so important to everyone, exhibited the figure of our general in this way and so we will not allow it.³³



³³ Elsa Nú
Emiliano
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Figures 9-13. Images courtesy of Instagram and Twitter

Marco Antonio Ortiz Salas, leader of the coalition Organizaciones Democráticas, Urbanas y Campesinas (CODUC), also added that the painting reflected a general attitude of disdain towards campesinos and indigenous communities.³⁴

For the protestors, *La Revolución* harboured divisive feelings between capital and countryside. By painting a feminized Zapata who appears ready for penetration, Cháirez's work elicited a longstanding anxiety of masculinity most famously encapsulated by Octavio Paz in the term *chingar* [to sexually break or rip open]. To be *chingado* means that the 'passive' person is open to exploitation by the 'active' *chingón* or the *macho*. As Paz writes, 'the male; he rips open the *chingada*, the female, who is pure passivity, defenceless against the exterior world...To the Mexican, there are only two possibilities in life: either he inflicts the actions implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others.'³⁵ The violent backlash to *La Revolución* was a rejection of a persistent portrayal of indigenous peoples and campesinos as passive. By placing Zapata in the role of the *chingado* instead of the active penetrator, *La Revolución* embodied colonial anxieties in which the passive indigenous Mexican continued to be exploited by external colonizers. The painting thus tapped into a national psyche tied to the racial politics of nationalism, in which indigenous and campesino communities refuse the passive stigma.

In the media, the campesinos were read as stereotypically ignorant and homophobic. 'For nationalists, a queer-friendly Zapata is inconceivable,'

³⁴ Isidro Murga, 'El colectivo LGBT de México defiende el "Zapata gay" de Cháirez,' 14 December 2019, <https://es.euronews.com/2019/12/14/el-colectivo-lgbt-de-mexico-defiende-el-zapata-gay-d-e-chairez>

³⁵ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 77-78.

wrote Ryan Jones of the scandal, ‘Zapata cannot sin! — and the feminine version degrades him. Perhaps they fear that such a portrayal reveals how even machos feel queer desires, a revelation undermining static forms of masculinity and revolutionary ideology.’³⁶ Characterizations of ignorance helped to propel the scandal and gave value to the artistic work, for the image of a backwards global South is also an economic one. ‘The notion of Western conviction that developing nations are less advanced, less tolerant and less concerned with individual rights,’ writes Hemmings, ‘such that gay and lesbian tolerance can stand as a dubious symbol of Western democratic freedom.’³⁷ The censorship around the painting contributed to its extreme value inflation on the international art market as buyers responded positively to the transnational narrative of Mexican homophobia. Taxto Benet, the businessman and journalist who purchased *La Revolución*, claimed it was a ‘fundamental’ addition to his collection of censored art, a collection that includes works by Joan Tàpies, Ai Weiwei, David Cerny, Marta Minujín and Robert Mapplethorpe.³⁸ He also noted how the piece ‘provoked repulsion among campesinos, who have Zapata as an idol,’ which seemingly added to its appeal.³⁹

The protestors at the Palace of Fine Arts demanded that Zapata’s sexual morality be restored to the status of hypermasculinity and heterosexuality. Spokesmen like Jorge Zapata sutured nationalism to heterosexuality and posited homosexuality as a foreign influence that was irreconcilable with the revolutionary general. The camp of Cháirez supporters, meanwhile, focused on a queer or gay image of Zapata. Doing

³⁶ Jones, ‘Viva’.

³⁷ Hemmings, ‘Name’, 16.

³⁸ ‘Empresario español compra el polémico cuadro de Zapata desnudo y con tacones,’ *Pulso*, 15 January 2020, <https://pulsoslp.com.mx/cultura/empresario-espanol-compra-el-polemico-cuadro-de-zapata-desnudo-y-con-tacones/1053387>

³⁹ Ibid.

so aligned him with a globalized sexual modernity, but his notably darker skin, mestizo roots, and geographic origins were lost in translation, reviving a historical misunderstanding of collapsing whiteness with gender transgression.⁴⁰ The debate over Zapata's heterosexuality or homosexuality, therefore, is not exclusively a disagreement over the details of his sexual past. It is also a revival of a rural/urban divide that seeks to either strengthen the ties between heterosexuality and nationalism or give Mexico an international icon of sexual liberation. The result is a homophobic, queered, gay, or even white Zapata, but never a brown bisexual one.

Obscenities

As a final exercise in bisexual erasure, I want to imagine what productive conversations could emerge if we read *La Revolución* as piece of bisexual art. Embodying the femininity and sexual carnality of bisexuality, the painting incites anxieties and questions that are often downplayed in historical reimaginations of nationalist figures. Due to its association with excessive sexual appetite, bisexuality signals the desire for penetration, dominance, and submission in ways that reflect expressive gender roles.⁴¹ This is especially true among femme and brown bisexuals who are often characterized as insatiable and unrestrained, thus constructing bisexuality 'through raced, classed, and gendered associations regarding normative sexual behaviour.'⁴² Acknowledging bisexuality therefore demands the recognition of sexual acts and pleasures – anal, vaginal, and oral sex, among others – as constitutive of desire, deterring a normative link between desire and a stable system of gender and identity.⁴³ For these reasons, bisexuality offers a method of thinking, theorizing, and writing about the diverse sexual

⁴⁰ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

⁴¹ Rodríguez, 'Queer Politics,' 169.

⁴² Ibid., 171.

⁴³ Ibid., 176.

lives of the historical figures we encounter in the archive with full consideration to libidinal carnality: the desire for sex acts with a variety of genitalia and bodily pleasures that fluctuate in degree and duration.

Emphasizing bisexuality's ability to subvert normative regimes of sexual desire embraces *lo sucio*. For Deborah Vargas, 'the analytic of *lo sucio* operates in conversation with three racialized discourses of difference, with attention to queer genders and sexualities: first, lewd, obscene, offensive hypersexual undisciplined bodies; second, darkened, suspect citizens perpetually untrustworthy, impure, and nonloyal to the state; and third, diseased "cultures of poverty" subjects overdetermined to fail to arrive to normative womanhood and manhood.'⁴⁴

Lo sucio emphasizes how minoritized and poor subjects are often the ones policed for the same sexual disconformity that white Western subjects laud as modern and progressive. In this queer racialized difference, global South bisexuals are deviant, disloyal, indecipherable, and suspicious.

Despite its seemingly negative connotations, *lo sucio* highlights a useful indecipherability of sexual plurality at the heart of the Zapata affair. While this often results in erasure, sexual pluralities and their attendant obscenities of effeminacy and disloyalty are necessary to challenge the suturing of nationalism with sexual decency. The painter Fabian Cháirez, for example, represents a generation of artists and painters undermining stereotypical masculinity through the depiction of the eroticism of feminine bodies. In fact, *La Revolución* was not Cháirez's first foray into controversial imagery. His paintings include indigenous nudes, *lucha libre* wrestlers in embrace, gay priests, and lesbian nuns. However, it was the first to depict a nationally beloved figure. According to Cháirez, the painting was

⁴⁴ Deborah Vargas, 'Ruminations on "Lo Sucio" as a Latino Queer Analytic,' *American Quarterly* 66.3 (2014): 715-716.

meant to undermine traditional depictions of Zapata that glorified hypermasculinity among Mexican men.⁴⁵

In *La Revolución*, the effeminate and racialized aspects of bisexuality are associated with the act of anal penetration. Zapata retains his distinctive features – sombrero, moustache, and pistols – but they have been rearranged to emphasize femininity and his excitement to be penetrated. Doing so undermines nationalist depictions of heterosexuality and masculinity as premised on the rejection of the passive. Since bisexuality, as Rodríguez notes, ‘destabilizes not only exclusive sexual orientation categories, but also exclusive and distinct classification of binary gender,’ the feminized bisexual Zapata of *La Revolución* enables new historical imaginings.⁴⁶ Rather than being the imagined villain of national histories, Paz’s figure of the *pasivo* is the protagonist of Mexico’s revolutionary period.⁴⁷

The erasure of bisexuality and passive penetration is also linked to the censorship of the illicit desire for bodily fluids, particularly semen. As evidenced by videos uploaded to social media, the campesinos who protested the painting used slurs and vulgarities against activists, including those associated with HIV. Antonio Bertran, one of the counter-protestors, recounted the ways in which they were called ‘sidosas’ – a derogatory term for a person living with HIV/AIDS.⁴⁸ Soon after the affair, the Mexico City

⁴⁵ Justin Lessner, ‘New York’s Museum of Modern Art just bought the nude painting of Mexican icon Zapata and not everyone’s happy about it,’ *Mitú*, 10 December 2019, <https://wearemitu.com/culture/update-this-painting-of-mexican-icon-zapata-is-going-viral-in-mexico-and-not-everyone-is-happy-about-it/> and

“‘La Revolución’, la pintura de Zapata feminizado que causa polémica,’ *Milenio*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.milenio.com/cultura/arte/zapata-feminizado-revolucion-pintura-genera-polemica>

⁴⁶ Rodríguez, ‘Queer Politics,’ 171.

⁴⁷ For more on rethinking the figure of the *pasivo*, see Xiomara Verence Cervantes-Gómez, ‘Paz’s *Pasivo*: Thinking Mexicanness from the Bottom,’ *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 29.3 (2020): 333-347.

⁴⁸ Nacho Lozano, 10 December 2019, 5:04PM, <https://twitter.com/nacholozano/status/1204522293956927490?s=20>

adult film production company *Mecos Films*, known for its emphasis on bareback sex and ejaculation (*mecos* is slang for semen), began production on a full-length pornographic film on Zapata.⁴⁹ Instead of semen disappearing in the procreative act or being censored due to the stigma of HIV/AIDS, pornography enables us to further visualize Zapata's allegedly obscene erotic desires for penetration and bodily fluids. Emphasis on *lo sucio* – 'dirty' sex acts and bodily fluids – thus represents bisexuality's ability to conjure the remnants of sex acts that must also be acknowledged in the erotic legacies of historical figures.

The radicalism of *La Revolución* lies in its ability to simultaneously emphasize Zapata's revolutionary background, dark skin, and diverse sexual desires. Depicting Zapata's femininity and eroticism – and thus acknowledging a bisexual desire to penetrator and penetrated – is the obscenity that elicits censure, for it undermines the active/passive distinction central to heterosexist nationalism. Foregrounding bisexuality thus makes Zapata *disloyal* to state-led and *machista* appropriation while retaining his campesino background. Recognising a brown, bisexual Zapata who fought for land rights and enjoyed a plurality of sexual pleasures also reconciles the politics of pleasure with colonial struggles over material resources, two goals that are often pitted in a zero-sum game.⁵⁰ In this way, he remains a malleable symbol of liberation, one that can be used by a variety of struggles from feminist to campesino movements.

Conclusion

Resisting the bisexual erasure of Zapata undermines the insistence of compulsory heterosexuality and decency politics. Acknowledging bisexuality offers the potential for understanding unsatisfied desire – the

⁴⁹ Caitlin Donohue, 'The Pin-Up Revolutionary,' *Open Space*, 29 April 2020, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2020/04/the-pin-up-revolutionary/>

⁵⁰ Hemmings, 'Name,' 16.

rejection of complacency and dissatisfaction – as constitutive of revolutionary movements. It also holds space for Zapata's potential desires for penetration, sexual dominance, and submission, while also signalling his ongoing revolutionary commitments to combatting sexism and engendering broad political alliances. As Rodríguez notes, 'insisting on the significance of bisexual identity and experience...affirms a queer commitment to feminist, anti-racist political demands for greater sexual autonomy and self-determination in the presence of increasing state regulation and discipline.'⁵¹

Foregrounding bisexuality elicits a more nuanced examination of historical personalities. It offers a more accurate gauging of the statistical probability of diverse sexual acts than a homo/hetero binary can provide, serving as a more apt term to identify a variety of relationships. As we continue to queer the archive, embracing a bisexual reading practice can be fruitful for our analyses. Bisexuality can, for example, account for moments of apparent asexuality or the absence of sexual desire, particularly during armed struggle. Instead of writing of the forfeiting pleasure during these times, might we be better off thinking about the circumstances of struggle: with whom is one in hiding or stuck fighting alongside? Perhaps there is limited availability of partners in an underground hideout, or perhaps whomever is available is not your cup of tea. Thus, rather than defer to an ambiguous moral asceticism that inadvertently celebrates the 'sacrifice' of sexual pleasure during periods of clandestinity, bisexuality asks us to consider how desire fluctuates due to space, bodies, and availability.

⁵¹ Rodríguez, 'Queer Politics,' 178.