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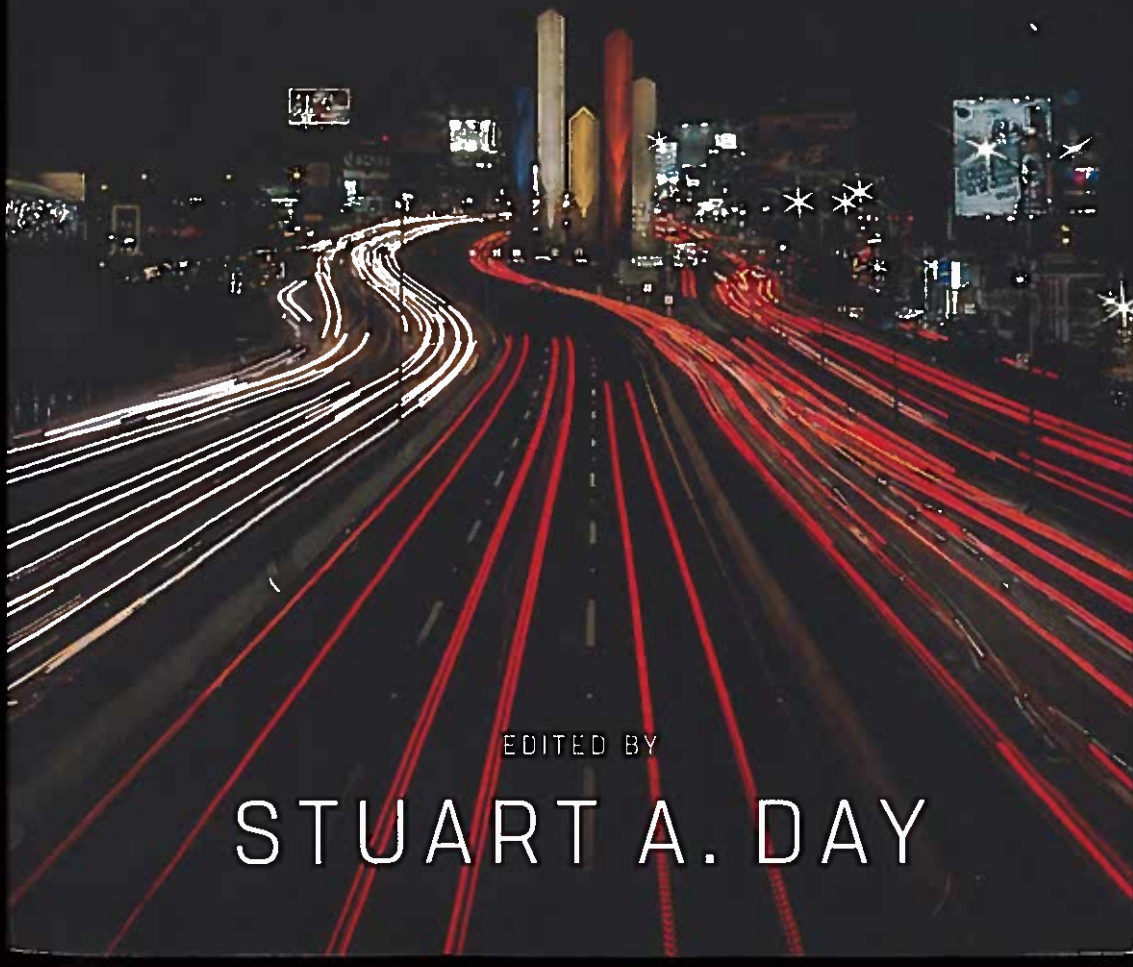

EDITED BY

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CLASSISM

Gente Decente and Civil Rights: From Suffrage to Divorce and Privileges in Between

EMILY HIND

PRIMARY MATERIALS

- *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother Too), directed by Alfonso Cuarón (film, 2001)
- *Las batallas en el desierto* (Battles in the Desert) by José Emilio Pacheco (novel, 1981)
- Letters and poems by Salvador Novo (1930–73)
- Photographs by Semo (1942–63)
- Life trajectories of María Conesa (b. 1892, d. 1978) and Virginia Fábregas (b. 1871, d. 1950)

THE NOTION OF *GENTE DECENTE* sheds light on the ongoing national failure to respect the civil rights guaranteed by law to all citizens of Mexico. In practice, the select groups that trample the civil rights of others correspond to the sectors that imagine themselves to be socially superior, the *gente decente* (decent people). The automatic deference awarded to persons of seeming "decent" status, conferred by such dubious virtues as a light skin tone, or a strong financial station, or an advantageous job and the attendant connotations of authoritative literacy skills, conditions a national debate over the abuses perpetuated by these supreme citizens. Twenty-first-century footage from Mexico City, available on YouTube, includes the video *Gentleman de Las Lomas* (Gentleman from Las Lomas), taken from a security camera in 2011, and *Las Ladies de Polanco* (The Ladies from Polanco), shot on a cell phone, also in 2011. These notorious videos, and others like them, show the despotic behavior of the *gente decente* in Mexico City as they verbally and physically abuse, respectively, a valet parking attendant and a police officer, with onlookers passively watching. The videos succinctly illustrate the despotism of the *gente decente* and can prove stressful for the viewer, thanks to the one-sided violence directed at the less economically privileged and darker-skinned workers. The colonial viewpoint that cast the indigenous peoples as inferior until they turned Catholic, and even then prohibited them from inner-circle status, grounds the contemporary workings of the *gente bien* (nice people) or the "GCU," which stands for *gente como uno* (people like oneself) (Loaeza 60). The very phrasing of these terms reveals the enduring claim not only to righteous moral standing but also to an elite collectivity. The collective identity of the *gente decente* attracts aspirants, and this resulting "we" invests the term with impressive political power.

Perhaps confusingly for outsiders, *gente decente* are not strictly defined by economic status. Julio Moreno observes that the category allowed democratically inclined mid-nineteenth-century citizens to imagine "that Mexicans could have 'class' and 'culture' without having money" (84). The opposite of *gente decente* were the "common" or "uneducated" people, which registers the cultural capital underlying this status (83). Steven Bunker's study of the Porfiriato, the dictatorship that lasted from 1876 to 1911, supports this elastic definition, and it reveals the connection between *gente decente* and the middle class, which was "as much a cultural as an economic category" (109). Bunker lists the "gente decente values" as "thrift, sobriety, hygiene, and punctuality" (109). Whether citizens professed those values in their aspiration to the middle class or as a reflection of already achieved middle-class status, the desire to belong to this group remains an overwhelming imaginative force. Jorge Castañeda reports the findings from a poll commissioned in 2011 that asked how Mexican respondents viewed themselves: "1% said 'rich,' 16% replied 'poor,' and an astonishing 82% stated that they belonged to the middle class" (60–61). Castañeda cautions that in the most optimistic of measurements, only 60 percent of Mexicans fit into the middle class in economic terms. The nebulous nature of *gente decente* means that citizens must surveil their own behavior to make sure they are following "decent" etiquette. The following analysis contemplates less discussed discriminatory prejudices based on qualities such as age, body fat, and disability.

Perhaps because of the imaginary nature of the *gente decente* in the first place, a surprising variety of qualities can threaten citizens' "decent" status and convert them into the uninfluential segment whose civil rights prove unenforceable in the corrupt legal system. Besides the YouTube videos, the analysis below suggests study of the film *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother Too, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, 2001), the novella *Las batallas en el desierto* (Battles in the Desert, 1981) by José Emilio Pacheco, select poems by Salvador Novo, images by the photographer Semo, and the life trajectories of the actresses María Conesa and Virginia Fábregas. All these texts and biographies share an anchoring reference in Mexico City, and yet they stretch beyond nationalism by recognizing the existence of other countries, especially the United States.

Both Polanco and Las Lomas, the neighborhoods named in the titles of the YouTube videos, mark sites of economic privilege in Mexico City. As the videos show, economically privileged Mexicans live elbow to elbow with the other social classes. Ignacio Sánchez Prado studies this interdependence in terms of *Y tu mamá también* when he observes that in the film, class segregation "is not so much a fact as an ideological perception" because "the working classes are always already there" (*Screening* 190). Cuarón's film gives repetitive earfuls of rough language and insistent eyefuls of full nudity, queer sex, and drug use, and thus may offend some audiences. These objections to the film paradoxically support the theme regarding the hypocritical sensibilities of the *gente decente*. The simple plot has Luisa Cortés, a cancer-stricken dental hygienist from Spain, abandon her adulterous husband and take a road trip to an undeveloped Mexican beach with two (also unfaithful) Mexico City youths, middling-class Julio Zapata and higher-class Tenoch Iturbide.[1] If the true upper class is best defined as the 1 percent, Tenoch's family may not necessarily rank at the very top and may fall into the category of upper middle class.[2] The film ends with Tenoch informing Julio that Luisa died a month after the trip. This chat over coffee will be the last time that Tenoch and Julio talk, because they are ashamed of the threesome they engaged in on the beach trip. The formulaic plot of the road movie finds critical energy in the film voice-over, which interrupts continuously and expands the contextual information.[3]

The voice-over takes advantage of the conclusion to set the boys' last meeting around the time of the historic PRI loss in 2000—the presidential election that led to a PAN presidency with Vicente Fox. The voice-over avoids an optimistic take on this democratic opening, which has helped the film to age well. Indeed, Mexican democracy took a turn for the worse in 2006, when PAN president

Felipe Calderón came to office and intensified a "drug war" that resulted in a six-figure death count in six years. *Y tu mamá también* silently foreshadows this civil rights disaster with the protagonists' freewheeling fondness for marijuana and other recreational drugs and with the contrasting images of the military presence on the side of the road to Oaxaca. Those forces conduct narcotics-related searches distinct from the effort to defuse the tension over the civil war in Chiapas that erupted in earnest in January 1995 and whose aftermath attracts Julio's earnest sister. The relatively ineffectual switch in power from the PRI to the PAN came to be known as the *alternancia*, and in 2012 the presidency peacefully "alternated" back to the PRI. The *alternancia* parallels the short-lived glimpse of "another way" in Julio and Tenoch's sexual tryst. Because the distanced, steady-toned voice-over seems neither optimistic nor an activist force of change, this technical device meshes nicely with a comment by the anthropologist Emily Wentzell, who writes in her study of contemporary Mexican masculinities, "In response to my questions about their own lives, the men often adopted the detached tone of a documentary voice-over and described the behaviors intrinsic to *el Mexicano* [*sic*] in the abstract" (36). Possibly, the Mexican male voice-over denotes a national rhetorical habit. It may be that Cuarón's audience felt more comfortable with alienating narrative interruptions, voiced by star actor Daniel Giménez Cacho, than might have otherwise been predicted. At any rate, the domestic popularity of national stereotypes helps to explain the survival of categories such as *gente decente*.

Rather than invent new terms, *Y tu mamá también* explores Mexican types. When Tenoch confides to his cousin Alejandro, nicknamed Jano, near the beginning of the film that he too would like to be a writer, Jano insults him by asking if he plans to write about *niños bien* (rich boys). Jano's derision regarding the possibilities for worthwhile artistic contribution by a privileged citizen predicts the academic reception of the film. For example, one critic reacted by proclaiming that "real life" happens mostly outside the protagonist's vehicle: "a lo largo del filme el director nos hace guiños para sugerir que lo interesante (o sea la verdadera vida) es lo que se halla fuera del coche" (throughout the film the director winks at us to suggest that what is interesting [that is, real life] is what is found outside the car) (Sánchez 231). This extraordinary statement indicates a hypocritical tendency toward dismissal of the "reality" of the *gente decente*, the category to which most people aspire. The insinuation surely leaves at least some critics, who are also middle class or aspire to the middle class, in an oddly self-canceling posture. Another academic analyzes, through similar

reverse snobbism, a scene set in a threadbare family restaurant: "When the camera abandons the three protagonists and enters the kitchen of the modest house, . . . this detour is not to present an exotic Mexico, but to tell the young protagonists and spectators that they are missing the reality of their country" (Oropesa 93). It isn't customary for restaurant patrons to poke their heads into the kitchen, and so the expectation that the protagonists adopt the same freedoms as the camera condemns the protagonists for politely playing their roles. In other words, if Luisa, Tenoch, and Julio did not observe the hypocritical rules of *gente decente*, they might not eat in the restaurant at all.

As the interaction between Jano and Tenoch shows, the characters themselves police the manners that enforce understandings of appropriate civility. A *niño bien* cannot write well, because he isn't and *can't be* in touch with anything worthwhile, according to Jano and the nonfictional film critics. In a self-defeating move, Tenoch supports these rules when he calls Julio a *naco* (low-class jerk or yokel) for spitting at him and onto the car window: "Pinche nacote" (Fucking big-ass yokel or poser), Tenoch sneers. Julio eventually tries to take revenge by calling Tenoch a *fresa* (literally, a strawberry; figuratively, a preppy), but the lack of sting in *fresa* as compared to *pinche nacote* simply reinforces the fact that Tenoch is more securely located among the *gente decente* and therefore enjoys a superior status. It is more difficult to turn the notion of an excessively entitled citizen (*fresa*) into an effective insult, in other words, and it is relatively straightforward to use an infringement on good taste (*naco*) to strip away dignity. Novelist Xavier Velasco identifies the term *naco* as Mexico's most relished and most feared (middle-class) insult:

> Ningún mexicano sentiríase plenamente contento con la vida si no contara con al menos un semejante en quien descargar el más contundente de los insultos nacionales, mismo que como tantas palabrotas contienen solamente cuatro letras: n-a-c-o. De ahí que cada mexicano viva y se desviva para conservar o conseguir un certificado de que *no es naco*. (65; italics in original)

> No Mexican shall feel fully satisfied with life if she or he does not count on at least one similar being on whom to unload the strongest of national insults, like so many other swear words containing only four letters: n-a-c-o. Hence, each Mexican shall live and expire in order to conserve or acquire a certificate that she or he *is not naco*.

Y tu mamá también never offers alternative or more insightful categories than *fresa*, *niño bien*, and *naco*, perhaps because of this difficulty of working beyond etiquette when trying to stage a believable cross-class friendship. The discrepant manners between Tenoch and Julio—with a disgusted Tenoch using his foot to raise the toilet seat in Julio's house and a shamed Julio lighting a match after using the bathroom at Tenoch's mansion—illustrates the precarious positioning of the middle, as the lower middle and the upper middle invoke distinct realms of fear. For example, to judge from the rules implicit in Cuarón's film, the lower middle and the fallen in class (the *venidos a menos*) can believably aspire to become writers, while the upper middle can aspire to police the lower middle's writing. Thus, the *niño bien* Tenoch brings up the negative reviews of the less wealthy Jano's book, but he ultimately decides to pursue an economics major, and the lower-middle-class dental hygienist Luisa never dares to speak up among Jano's more educated "intellectual" friends when they ask her opinion, not even to recite the technical names of teeth. A frank national conversation isn't really possible under these rules, because the person and the style used to issue a message seem to take precedence over what is actually said.

Although wealth alone does not determine the boundaries of the *gente decente*, considerable financial resources can make that status seem almost unassailable. A last comment on Tenoch's more secure positioning, thanks to his wealth, emerges in his eating habits. Compared to the less wealthy Julio and Luisa, Tenoch displays the most voracious appetite. His alcohol habits match those of Julio, and both drink rum and Cokes rather than Luisa and Jano's choice of wine at a wedding, but Tenoch exceeds the rest when it comes to common-denominator snack food. He occupies the back seat of the car in low style, eating Ruffles potato chips from the bag and a Gansito snack cake. As the repeated nude scenes show, Tenoch consumes this "junk" without becoming "fat." That is, Tenoch remains immune from the usual consequences of popular taste. In his analysis of *Y tu mamá también*, Oropesa also takes an interest in Tenoch's snack habits and reminds us that the housekeeper, Leodegaria, brings him a grilled-cheese sandwich, a *platillo volador* (literally, a "flying saucer"), a seemingly throwaway line that is difficult to hear in the movie because the microphone barely catches it (99). Fans of Mexican literature will know that this dish stars as the exotic after-school snack in Pacheco's *Las batallas en el desierto*.[4]

Pacheco's novella hints at the bad taste (more or less literally) inherent in this U.S.-inspired concoction of yellow cheese, white bread, and sweetly bland

condiments. The sandwich in "bad taste" in Pacheco's novella marks the bedazzled introduction of Carlitos, the protagonist, to the cook, Mariana (mother of Carlitos's schoolmate Jim), and his difference from his lower-class schoolmate Rosales, who presumably never eats such a thing. In fact, at times Rosales has trouble finding anything at all to eat. A plot summary of *Las batallas en el desierto* benefits from Hugo Verani's distinction between narrator Carlos and protagonist Carlitos. Adult Carlos remembers his boyhood crush on Mariana, which got him expelled from school, and thus Carlitos remained far from the unfolding events when, as rumor has it, Mariana fought with her politician boyfriend and committed suicide. The parallels between Cuarón's film and Pacheco's novella stretch beyond the assimilated *platillo volador*. Like the ending of *Y tu mamá también*, with Tenoch and Julio's strained final conversation, Carlitos and Rosales meet up—possibly for the last time—near the conclusion, when the boys no longer attend the same school. Rosales confesses that he has not eaten, and at Carlitos's disdainful invitation, the near-homeless youth wolfs down *tortas* (Mexican sandwiches) with such bad manners that his host watches in disgust. Because Pacheco's Rosales is much more impoverished than Cuarón's Julio, the classroom audience can see that the difference between a *niño bien* and a *naco* is defined by degree and not by a particular income bracket. If it weren't for his relatively adequate elementary-school education, Rosales might fall into the no-taste category of the flatly "poor," who cannot participate in the incompetent consumption at work in the display of *naco* bad taste. The disgust that Carlitos feels toward Rosales's bad table manners seems to reflect the idea that Rosales should know better, in other words. Narrator Carlos has previously clarified that as a boy he took a lesson in table etiquette at the Las Lomas residence of his former schoolmate Harry Atherton, where Carlitos functioned as the implicit *naco*.

If *Y tu mamá también* allows its protagonists to ignore roadside violations of civil rights, in *Las batallas en el desierto* the residents of an entire apartment building deny that the vanished Mariana and her son ever lived there.[5] Carlitos is unable to ascertain the ultimate fate of Mariana and Jim. The neighbors' silence seems understandable in view of the risks of falling out of *gente decente* status: willful obliviousness eliminates knowledge of the indecent that might threaten one's entitlement to the privileges of "decency." Because Mariana never suffers any disgrace in Carlitos's eyes, her depression-free suicide aligns with Luisa Cortés's symptom-free cancer. These women's glamorously hygienic disappearances leave the male narrators to control the story and elide the unsexy complications of disability. That is, Mariana and Luisa seem to figure as likeable *gente decente* because they aren't fully present as themselves, but rather operate as objects of desire focalized through the adult male narrators' "alienated" (but comforting) authority and the young male's star-struck but necessarily uncomprehending admiration. This gendered trope helps me to question Sánchez Prado's assessment of *Las batallas en el desierto* as a vote for democracy. Against the critics who view the novella as an exercise in nostalgia, Sánchez Prado believes that it traces the development of a social consciousness, which sets up possibilities for democracy: "Y es a partir de esta conciencia, me atrevo a sugerir, que emergerá la ideología que posibilitará la democracia" (And it is from this awareness, I venture to suggest, that the ideology will emerge that will facilitate democracy) ("Pacheco" 397). This democratic emergence seems less certain after a gender-sensitive reading. After all, the reader can never be sure where the adult narrator Carlos stands in his assessment of his own status as decent. The notion that he does not judge Mariana but only loves her probably ends up contributing to rather than combating the problem. That is, the self-constructed myth of nonparticipation that Carlos attributes to himself as a child regarding his high-minded impartiality on racial and sexual matters does not assure his decency. Contemporary scholars of bullying believe that the passive observer is as implicated as the bully.[6] The social triangles involved in bullying, among the bully, the bullied, and the bystander, suggest one way to connect the dots regarding violence in *Las batallas en el desierto*, *Y tu mamá también*, and online videos such as *Las Ladies de Polanco* and *Gentleman de Las Lomas*. Mexican literature and film hint that imperious "playground" and "dating" power dynamics may have something to do with the macropolitical scene, in other words.

It might seem a leap to travel from a film of 2001 to a novella from 1981 and then to Salvador Novo's poetry and writings from around the period 1930–50, but Mexico City allows smooth transitions because these artists and their texts, in one way or another, have intimate connections. For instance, Laura Emilia Pacheco clarifies in a picture-book biography of her father, José Emilio, that Salvador Novo used to drop by Pacheco's childhood home (18). The tightly bound social geography among the *gente decente* in Mexico City comes into play here. As mentioned, these interconnected households—though often merely middle-class enterprises—are usually staffed with domestic workers. In point of fact, Novo wrote about his housekeeper in a newspaper column. With a kind of noble amusement, he described Domitila's mistrust of his other low-ranking

employees, Gonzalo and Rafael. Suspicion, rather than cooperation, seems to reign in Novo's public portrait of his household:

> Domitila ha cumplido aquí ya casi cuarenta años. Mi madre la enseñó y educó a convertirse en la ama de llaves autoritaria, cumplida y experta que me heredó y que lleva la casa; se trae de un ala al jardinero, deja largas temporadas de hablarse con Gonzalo, no suelta los manojos de llaves que sólo ella sabe de qué son; mantiene su distancia con Rafael, insiste en rendirme cuentas detalladas de sus gastos—y aún se da tiempo para atender a un sobrino suyo que se trajo (con permiso de mi madre, por supuesto) a vivir aquí desde chico; estudiar y ahora trabajar en un Banco. Raras veces tropiezo con él. ("Cartas" 25 Apr. 1973)

> Domitila has spent almost forty years here. My mother taught and trained her to become the authoritarian mistress of the household, accomplished and expert, whom I have inherited, and who manages the house; she holds by one wing the gardener, withholds for long periods speech from Gonzalo, never lets loose the bunches of keys that only she knows the purpose of; she keeps her distance from Rafael, insists on listing detailed accounts of her expenses to me—and still finds the time to attend to her nephew, whom she brought (with my mother's permission, of course) to live here as a boy; he studied and now works at a Bank. I rarely bump into him.

The passage suggests that Domitila strives to protect her family's status as second-class citizens by creating a hierarchy that disdains a third-class rung. The absence of a democratic feeling in Novo's household captures his ambivalence toward uniformly applied civil rights. On the one hand, Novo pushed the boundaries of the definition of *gente decente* by flaunting a democratic taste in male lovers and by treating his household help with relative respect.[7] On the other hand, Novo's reputation suffers from his damning late-life alignment with the corrupt presidencies of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and Luis Echeverría and his haughty attitude toward select portions of Mexico City residents—it remains unclear if Novo thought much about the Mexicans living outside the capital. Viviane Mahieux defends the relevance of Novo's poses for the poet himself: "An intellectual stance is not about *being*, Novo suggests, it is about *performing*" (165). By fashioning a bureaucratic dandy role, Novo plays up multiples angles of decency and helps to embrace and reject, in alternating moves, the hypocrisies of that category.

Novo's autobiographical poems prove highly accessible, in various senses. A print anthology appears online and comprises poems that test the boundaries of "citizen privilege" (Monsiváis, "Material"). Novo's texts from the 1930s, such as "La historia" (History), "La escuela" (The School), and "El amigo ido" (The Absent Friend), contemplate Novo's uncomfortable positioning as a light-skinned elite child, a transplant to Mexico City as a result of the Revolution, at a time when other, less colonialist values attempted to take hold. "Escribir porque sí, por ver si acaso" (To Write Just Because, in Case) introduces the theme of fear of aging, as does the poem "Primera cana" (First Gray Hair), which explores the strategy of deciding to ignore the aging process. Poems about sexual maturity, such as "Nuevo amor" (New Love), provide a platform for the reader to think about Novo's daringly uncloseted orientation. The shift from Novo's lifetime to the twenty-first century has seen changes in civil rights for same-sex orientations. Even at the time of Julio and Tenoch's steamy sex scene in *Y tu mamá también*, same-sex couples still could not protect their relationships with a governmentally sanctioned union. Not until December 2009 did Mexico City see passage of same-sex civil union provisions. The "naturally" styled kiss between Julio and Tenoch in *Y tu mamá también* contrasts with precise instructions that Novo provides in a 1951 booklet he wrote for theater students, which concludes with a chapter titled "Hugs and Kisses" (*10 lecciones* 51–55). The tensions that reign between mid-twentieth-century Novo and twenty-first-century *Y tu mamá también*, between formality and informality, between the scripted and the spontaneous, point to stereotypical associations between youth and the "natural."[8]

Importantly, Pacheco's novella appears between Cuarón's film and Novo's performance and explores the tipping point of the rise of informality in Mexico, which was gaining ground even as Novo wrote his acting manual. While Pacheco's reader in the 1980s knows that Jim's informal ways with his mother will largely triumph over Carlos's grammatical sense of hierarchy in his family, Novo seems to operate on less "spontaneous" terrain, which may have contributed to the pressure that he felt to change and stay "young" as the manners began to shift and his age and weight evolved in the unfashionable direction. In that regard, the fat phobia that likely contributed to Novo's demise illuminates another aspect of the constellation of qualities that define *gente decente*. Novo's anxiety over his appearance reveals the democratic possibilities of glamour and the ways that appearance can either support or cancel status that is staked on performance and not just birthright. In the 1970s, Novo wrote persistently in

his newspaper column about his desire to lose weight. The decision to trust a miracle-promising clinic appears in Novo's column on May 10, 1972: "Y la aventada decisión de visitar, al día siguiente, esa Clínica que se anuncia tan conveniente, convincente: tantos kilos en tantos días, sin dieta, sin molestias, sin ejercicios ni sacrificios. Garantizados" (And the bold decision to visit, the next day, that Clinic that advertises itself as so convenient, convincing: so many kilos in so many days, without a diet, without troubles, without exercises or sacrifices. Guaranteed) ("Cartas" 10 May 1972). Novo seems to have misplaced his trust, and in January 1974 he died in the gastrointestinal hospital ward from complications due to his weight-loss regimen. The hours before his death included the humiliation of being caught on a television camera without his toupee, makeup, dentures, or more than a skimpy hospital gown (Barrera 253). This episode supplies a kind of warning regarding Novo's initially successful methods to defend his *gente decente* standing. Fine manners and cultivated appearances may at first appear to secure one's "decency," but if a citizen falls ill or ages ungracefully, the grounding for that claim weakens.

On this point of the unsustainable claim to democracy by way of glamour, it proves helpful to consider Semo, the photographer mentioned in Pacheco's novella, who supposedly photographed the fictional character Mariana and who actually did photograph Salvador Novo's face and hands (for images, see García Krinsky 10, 192). Russian-born Semo, or Simón Flechine, arrived in Mexico in the early 1940s and established a photography studio in Mexico City in 1942 (Trujillo 21–22). Early advertising introduced Semo to Mexico City as "El fotógrafo de las estrellas" (The Photographer to the Stars) whose name, in self-proclaimed publicity, served as a "garantía de originalidad y buen gusto" (guarantee of originality and good taste) (Morales Carrillo 62). Artists like Semo, in other words, may have helped to define the aesthetics of *gente decente* through a possibly democratizing effect of glamour in the relatively affordable medium of the photograph.

Semo also photographed the next subject of inquiry, María Conesa, but then, who *didn't* photograph her? Conesa, the dancer, singer, and actor, dominated the Mexican stage for four decades (Monsiváis, "María" 7). Her life story provides an excellent case study of the influence of glamour on civil rights, and although her performances went largely unrecorded, images of Conesa appear on the Internet as well as in gorgeously illustrated texts, like the one by Alejandro Rosas Robles, *200 Años del espectáculo: Ciudad de México* (200 Years of Spectacle:

Mexico City, 2010). Such materials show that Conesa and most of her cohorts carried more body weight than many star dancers do today. Like Novo, Conesa did not receive much official fanfare upon her death, and like Novo, she fretted publicly about her age and fitness. By contrast, Conesa's two-decades-older colleague Virginia Fábregas does not appear to have left a record of anxiety about her elderly fitness, and, perhaps not coincidentally, she is one of the five women (among more than one hundred men) buried in the Rotunda of Illustrious Persons in Mexico City. It may be relevant to note that Fábregas remained "decent" in the traditional way until the end; she never had plastic surgery, whereas Conesa—like Novo—attempted a medical solution to the problem of aging out of the public eye. Conesa's biographer, Enrique Alonso, writes angrily about the results of Conesa's late-life decision to undergo plastic surgery:

> Un día un asesino, con título de cirujano plástico, le aseguró que le devolvería el rostro de la Conesita de principios de siglo. María aceptó con la condición de que todo se hiciera en secreto, pero el asesino, una vez consumado el crimen, lo publicó en todos los diarios. Efectivamente, la deja sin una sola arruga, pero cambió por completo sus facciones; perdió parte de la expresión de su rostro. (161)
>
> One day a murderer, with the title of plastic surgeon, assured her that he would return to her the face of la Conesita from the beginning of the century. María accepted under the condition that everything be done in secret, but the murderer, once he consummated the crime, published it in all the newspapers. Indeed, he left her without a single wrinkle, but completely changed her features; she lost part of the expression of her face.

Alonso explains that the surgery supported Conesa's career because Mexicans flocked to the theater to see her new face (161). For contextualizing thought, see Alexander Edmonds's *Pretty Modern* (2010), a book on plastic surgery in Brazil. Today, Brazilian doctors argue that public funds should subsidize these cosmetic procedures for women who are not wealthy. Edmonds worries about the racist ideals behind facial surgery and the sexist principles of bodily alterations that surgically "lift" women's breasts, stomachs, and buttocks to erase the signs of childbearing; these ideals seem to argue "the 'ugliness' of the maternal body" (92). Long before this Brazilian debate, an aged Virginia Fábregas displayed a

heavily maternal figure onstage and in mid-twentieth-century films, and in one black-and-white publicity still she underwent a more temporary "correction": the elderly star gazes into the eyes of a younger male actor, who has strategically placed his hands so that he covers her neck up to the bottom of the sagging jawline in a gesture that seems an almost literal "face lift" (Fábregas and Reyes de la Maza 173).

Fábregas and Conesa prove a marvelously compatible pair for a biographical discussion. Fábregas is the earlier star and regarded as the more serious; Conesa, the more sexy and scandalous. Both risked losing decency through single motherhood and divorce, and they thus helped to pave the way for resetting the standard for the "decent." These women competed against each other even as they upheld common goals. Around 1907, according to the fictionalized biography by Fela Fábregas and Luis Reyes de la Maza, Virginia Fábregas recognized two threats to her theater business: the five movie theaters in Mexico City and María Conesa (77). Spanish-born Conesa ended up in Mexico to escape the child labor laws in Spain. Yet her star act in the Americas traded from the beginning on the equivocal sex appeal of her "barely legal" age. Long before turning eighteen, she earned roaring popularity as "La Gatita Blanca" (The White Kitty Cat). Monsiváis clues us in to the appeal of the song "La gatita blanca," whose double-entendre lyrics gave Conesa her lifelong nickname: the dancer's youthful innocence onstage allowed her to push the limits of decency and thus provoked delicious scandal each time she sang it ("María" 13, 15). After the kitty-cat act and before the Revolution, Conesa took a brief hiatus for unwed motherhood and then quietly married the birth father, an upper-class Mexican. Against the desires of her wealthy husband, Conesa returned to the stage in 1909, earning the almost fantastic sum of 3,000 pesos a month. A "decent" woman would not appear in stage, but this wealth—reinforced through her lavish taste in clothes—allowed Conesa to present herself as an exception. In 1910, Conesa observed the country's centennial celebrations by sewing the national eagle on her skirt—a defiance of patriotic rules that Porfirio Díaz opted to applaud. By the time of the Revolution, Conesa made use of a quick wit and a sharp knife to enter into the audience of soldiers and military brass. With merry impunity, she cut off, for instance, gentlemen's ties, a button from General Pancho Villa's clothing, and one handlebar of General Juan Andreu Almazán's prodigious moustache (Poniatowska 39). Despite her intimate knowledge of political leaders, however, Conesa did not exercise the right to vote. Women were

not allowed to vote in a Mexican presidential election until 1957, and the Mexican Constitution still does not allow foreigners to participate in national politics. Nevertheless, Conesa became known as a politically inspired figure, "La Tiple de la Revolución" (The Vaudeville Dancer of the Revolution).[9] According to the composer Agustín Lara, every soldier on any side spent his first day in Mexico City visiting the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the morning and, in the evening, the theater to see María Conesa (Monsiváis, "María" 16).

Terminating her marriage proved relatively simple for Conesa. She acceded to her husband's request for a divorce around 1923 (Alonso 101).[10] Fábregas also seems to have acquired a divorce in a relatively straightforward fashion. Fábregas became pregnant by a wealthy man without being married, but unlike Conesa and her legitimizing wedding, Fábregas ultimately married someone else, because the birth father was already someone's husband. The wedding photo, from 1902, shows only one woman—Fábregas herself—among some forty-eight men in suits, which hints at the hypocrisy of the decent women who would not pose with Fábregas for the cameras (Fábregas and Reyes de la Maza 58–59). Fábregas's reputation became a matter of public defense as her husband succumbed to alcoholism. An article from September 1911, in the newspaper *El Heraldo*, covers the painful divorce under the salacious title "La vida íntima de Virginia Fábregas" (The Private Life of Virginia Fábregas) and specifies the details behind the divorce and the couple's financial ruin (Fábregas and Reyes de la Maza 107). Fábregas never recovered her once immense fortune. In sympathy and gratitude, in 1932 the Mexican government awarded the theater star a pension, although to make ends meet Fábregas continued to work until her death in 1950. Just before she died, Rosario Sansores mused in *Novedades* about Fábregas's financial fall:

> Ahora Virginia es una anciana. Toda su arrogancia, toda su hermosura ha ido desapareciendo. Virginia Fábregas no es rica, como artista al fin no guardó nada para el mañana, no pensó que su belleza tenía, como el sol, su ocaso; no meditó en la vejez terrible, la creía demasiado lejos y no la sintió llegar. Nunca dejó de trabajar, en los umbrales de la ancianidad, animosa y valiente, quería continuar luchando. Su alma, su bella alma de artista, soltará las terrenas ligaduras y se elevará a la altura donde sólo hay paz, quietud y luz. (Fábregas and Reyes de la Maza 194)
>
> Now Virginia is an old woman. All her arrogance, all her loveliness has been fading. Virginia Fábregas is not rich, as an artist to the end she never saved anything

> for tomorrow, she never thought that her beauty had, like the sun, its dusk; she never meditated on terrible old age, she believed it too far away and didn't feel it coming. She never stopped working, on the threshold of elderliness, she wanted to continue fighting, spirited and brave. Her soul, her beautiful artist's soul, will release the earthly bonds and will elevate to the heights where there is only peace, quiet, and light.

The moral lesson that observers extract from figures who dare to broaden the definition of *gente decente* through democratically anchored glamour shows the risks of linking the effective exercise of civil rights to perceived "decent" status.

A last case of divorce seems relevant because it contrasts with the legal successes of Conesa and Fábregas. Although in 1926, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, a wealthy Mexico City native, a writer and patron of the arts, won her request for a divorce, a reversal was upheld by a Mexican court decision of 1930; Rivas Mercado was forced to remain married to her U.S.-citizen husband (Varley 145). The legal scholar Ann Varley relates the tragic denouement: "A year after losing her appeal to the Supreme Court, Antonieta Rivas Mercado killed herself in Paris. The struggle with her husband, leading her to forge his signature on her passport and smuggle their son out of Mexico, 'certainly contributed to her suicide'" (citing Jean Franco, 113). A photo of Fábregas's passport, presumably for a trip taken in 1949, indicates her civil status as "widowed" instead of "divorced," and like all passports of the time, it leaves two blank lines for separate signatures; Fábregas signed as the "holder" of the card, and she left the lower line for the "wife" blank (Fábregas and Reyes de la Maza 192). The nineteenth-century laws of Mexico saw great amendment in the twentieth century, and as Kif Augustine-Adams reminds us, before those changes a woman's very nationality and not just her passport depended on her husband. In the nineteenth-century case of the sisters Felícitas and Enriqueta Tavares, born and raised in Mexico, marriage to Spanish citizens meant they lost their Mexican status (and their right to buy ships), according to the final decision by the Mexican Supreme Court in 1881 (65). In other words, the laws of the nineteenth century made it possible for Mexican women to become foreigners in their country of birth by dint of marriage (66). Obviously, the laws have cultivated new protections for more generally applied civil rights, and yet, as the twenty-first-century videos of the ladies of Polanco and the gentleman of Las Lomas vividly demonstrate, the full gamut of these guarantees remains out of reach for some citizens.[11]

NOTES

1. Despite analysis of these historically resonant last names in articles such as that of Acevedo-Muñoz, Sánchez Prado argues that the references act nonsensically and thus "establish a pact of distance with the viewer: there is no way one can find a situation real [*sic*] with people named like that" (*Screening* 192).
2. Oropesa's explanation of the social resonances of every setting shows how the screenplay typecasts characters by neighborhood (97–99).
3. Sánchez Prado studies the distancing effects of the narrative voice, whose use causes the sound to be muted in a given scene in order to comment on it (*Screening* 185).
4. Food and authenticity appear in Weis's review of white bread in Mexico and Novo's and Pacheco's handling of the topic.
5. Epple denounces this apparently willful lack of collective memory among Pacheco's secondary characters (41).
6. See Coloroso's analysis of the triangular patterns of playground bullying, where she argues that desensitization affects "both the bully and the bystanders" and enables them "to commit more severe acts of violence and aggression against the bullied kid" (7).
7. See Irwin's work on Novo, which summarizes his contributions to a journal aimed at taxi and bus drivers, *El chafirete*, meant as a tool to help him seduce "the most solidly built of the drivers themselves" (126).
8. Historian Cas Wouters studies Europe and the United States to argue that informalization came about in the mid-twentieth century as young people successfully spread "more outright, spontaneous, straightforward, and direct" customs, interpreted as "the (more) 'natural'" (185).
9. See Kristy Rawson for an explanation of the various categories of *tiples* (88).
10. Stephanie Jo Smith explores the complexity of divorce in the context of the Yucatán following the national liberalization of Mexico's divorce law in 1914 and the similar legal changes in the Yucatán the following year (116).
11. For further reading, aside from the texts in the Works Cited, see the following volumes. For fat studies, see Richard Klein, *Eat Fat* (Pantheon Books, 1996); and Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds., *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York University Press, 2009). For age studies, see Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2004). For a shift in manners, see Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century*

Emotional Style (New York University Press, 1994). For glamour, see Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (Zed, 2010). For more images of Conesa, Fábregas, and other early Mexican stars, see Humberto Musacchio, ed., *México: 200 Años de periodismo cultural*, vol. 1 (Conaculta, 2012).

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