

# “Miracle-Working Satin” Overcoming Class Through Material Culture in Nineteenth-Century Mexico City



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The role that European material culture played in nineteenth-century Mexico was multifaceted and complex. One could presume that the internal social, cultural, and economic effects of imported commodities appeared among only the wealthier classes. Several scholars, including Arnold J. Bauer, Benjamin Orlove, E. Bradford Burns, and Rebecca Earle, have approached this assumption with skepticism and deserve recognition for their willingness to take on this challenging historical quandary.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Rebecca Earle argues that new material imports from Europe brought a rigidifying of society in Mexico City after the transition from colonialism to independence. Examining the relationship between clothing and identity in Mexico City, she points to growing condemnation and scorn for people—especially those with an indigenous or mixed-race background—who attempted to homogenize their dress with that of people of European ancestry to gain social mobility after independence, when the upper classes increasingly utilized imported materials.<sup>2</sup>

Earle cites examples from travel writers and *costumbrista* paintings that suggest that upper-class Europeans in Mexico City became infuriated with indigenous attempts to improve their position on the social ladder by appropriating imported commodities. She concludes that independence brought two effects based on material culture: a “vast sartorial gulf that separated the rich from the poor, and the failure of most attempts at dressing expensively” as a gesture of social mobility.<sup>3</sup> Despite Earle’s willingness to address a complicated historical issue, her argument is symptomatic of a methodological problem in the scholarship on material culture. Her analysis implies that less social mobility existed in Mexico City after independence because

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America’s Material Culture* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001); E Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1980); Benjamin Orlove, ed, *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Earle, “‘Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!’ Race, Clothing and Identity in the Americas (17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries),” *History Workshop Journal* 52 (2001), 187-189.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-179, 181, 186.

travelers described it, and because foreign painters depicted it. By employing rhetorical evidence from outsiders, as well as artists' renditions, Earle offers no evidence on the lived experience—the “social reality”—of the people *living in* Mexico City, especially those of the plebian class who did not write or publish accounts. Thus, one can see that Earle's approach does not make a persuasive case for the sociocultural impact that imported material commodities might have had in Mexico City after independence.

The solution to this problem lies in a methodological revision. The complexity of Mexican society during the mid- to late-nineteenth century requires a closer scrutiny of the *internal* social experience than Earle provides. Scholars must transcend the limitations of the records of outsiders to explore documents that locals created on the ground. This paper utilizes several different types of sources, all created in Mexico City and most appearing in mainstream newspapers, to explore the role that imported commodities played in shaping a new social experience after independence. These sources suggest that material culture held *internal* transformative power in Mexico City, especially by the late nineteenth century, perpetuating unprecedented social mobility across the social strata. Three reasons support this claim.

First, by the end of the 1800s, the presence of imported goods in Mexican society expanded dramatically. Statistical data from the period suggest that the marketplace in Mexico City was flooded with more and more European and North American commodities, from manufactured goods to fabric for clothing and other uses. The rate of growth of importation of several key commodities far surpassed the rate of population growth. Second, this new availability of goods meant more than just enhanced purchasing power for the wealthy; instead, the growing importation reached virtually *all* sectors of the population. Newspaper sources from Mexico City include ostentatious advertisements for products from jewelry to perfume, touting

both their desirability and their accessibility to anybody who sought to join the consumer class. The newspaper sources show that the market for these goods was expanding dramatically, and the notion of “luxury” was undergoing a process of egalitarianization. Goods from abroad no longer existed solely in the realm of the elite, but instead were accessible to the broader society; the commodities were *affordable*. The fixation on materiality created the potential for people to bridge the gaps between the two major social classes: the *gente decente*, or “decent people,” and the *plebe*.<sup>4</sup> Residents of Mexico City defined and portrayed themselves in relation to imported European material culture. Biographical sketches of diverse Mexican “types,” in a collection entitled Los mexicanos pintandos por sí mismos, suggest that the expanding markets and affordability of foreign goods allowed people throughout Mexico City to wear clothing made from European cloth, regardless of their role in the modernizing society.

Third, these imported commodities allowed people to transcend the distinctions between the *plebe* and the *gente decente*, sometimes with outrageous consequences. Evidence from José Tomás de Cuéllar’s novella “*Baile y cochino*” suggests that in Mexico City, the appearance of affluence—verisimilitude—triumphed over perceived class distinctions. In fact, both social classes recognized the new flexibility of the *plebe* based on material commodities. They understood that the European goods, especially dress, blurred and obscured the boundaries of class.

Together, these three reasons support the central claim of this paper, that the increasing presence of imported material commodities in Mexico City over the course of the nineteenth century transformed society in practice and ideology by offering social mobility on an unprecedented scale. This paper builds on the work of Rebecca Earle through its methodological

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<sup>4</sup> Francie R. Chassen-López, From Liberal to Revolutionary Oaxaca: The View from the South, Mexico 1867-1911 (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 280.

revision, looking at documentary evidence produced in Mexico, for Mexicans, and with the possible exception of the advertisements, *by* Mexicans, rather than outsiders. Although one might presume that the unprecedented flow of these goods into the country affected only the *gente decente*, the sources presented herein suggest a very different lived experience. This paper argues that imported material commodities transformed the post-independence scene in Mexico City because people enjoyed unprecedented access to European cultural goods across the social strata, because this new sociocultural environment allowed the city's residents to define themselves in terms of imported materiality, and because this new emphasis offered unprecedented social mobility by distorting and blurring the class structure.

### **Unprecedented Growth in Importation**

After the dissolution of colonial power in the 1810s-1820s, Latin American markets became saturated with products from major manufacturing powers in Europe. By the 1860s, Latin Americans increasingly engaged in the lucrative trade of exporting raw materials while importing manufactured goods, including tools, hardware, shoes, and even culinary innovations.<sup>5</sup> Mexico is an important case. Beginning in 1821, with the end of the Spanish commercial monopoly over the territory, Mexico pursued new trading relationships with several European countries at a moment of significant commercial expansion, especially as Britain and France sought to restructure the political geography of world commerce in order to overtake and eventually supplant the crumbling Spanish and Portuguese colonial machines.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> E. Bradford Burns explains the cultural ramifications of the export-oriented economy: "The politicians approved foreign exploitation of the natural resources with the hope that some residue of the wealth created would enrich them and facilitate the transformation of at least the capital cities into citadels of European culture." Burns, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ciro Cardoso, comp., *México en el siglo XIX (1821-1910): Historia económica y de la estructura social* (México, D.F.: Editorial Nueva Imagen, S.A., 1980), 209-210. Giovanni Arrighi explores the process by which France and Britain developed a new mercantilism that drove the global power struggle through the nineteenth century. Arrighi argues that Britain in particular was able to turn its geopolitical handicap—its location and small land mass—into a

These new relationships allowed for unprecedented levels of importation of goods into Mexico, primarily from Britain, France, and Germany, as well as the United States. The countries exporting the goods competed with considerable intensity for access to the lucrative Mexican market.<sup>7</sup> The imported items comprised finished or manufactured goods that included foodstuffs, wine, leather, furniture, and mirrors, as well as some raw materials, including spices, cacao, coffee, and tea.<sup>8</sup> Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that during the course of the nineteenth century, the value of imported food items increased by 183% and the value of imported paper and books increased by 676%.<sup>9</sup>

However, by far the most important foreign goods arriving in Mexico after independence were textiles, of many different forms and constructions, representing almost fifty percent of the total value of imports during 1821-1880. Cotton and linen were the primary fabrics in these textiles, but silk, wool, and combinations of these fabrics appeared as well. The extraordinary prevalence of textile importation into Mexico after independence resulted from several factors, including increased productivity of textile manufacturing in Europe, lower prices—greater accessibility, and new efficient and economical technologies of transportation that moved bulky textiles across the Atlantic Ocean and distributed them across the Mexican state with astounding

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remarkable competitive advantage for world commercial supremacy. Indeed, Britain developed as a global hegemonic power out of a new period of systemic chaos specifically by turning economic “conquest” into a revenue-generating business. Arrighi terms this process the rise of “free-trade imperialism.” Giovanni Arrighi, “The Three Hegemonies of Historical Capitalism,” The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times (London; New York: Verso, 1994), 47-58.

<sup>7</sup> Estadísticas Históricas de México, Tomo II, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (México, D.F.: Dirección General de Estadística, 1985), 647; Walther L. Bernecker, “Between European and American Dominance: Mexican Foreign Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” Itinerario 21, no. 3 (1998), 120-122. Some disagreement exists among scholars about the centrality of the U.S. presence in Mexican external trade in the nineteenth century. In particular, Walther Bernecker seeks to “correct” the commonly held perception that the competition for trade with Mexico existed primarily among the European powers. He suggests that the United States participated in the struggle for the Mexican market as much as did Britain, France, and Germany. Bernecker, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Kapp, “Les Relations Économiques Extérieures Du Mexique (1821-1911) D'Après Les Sources Françaises,” Ville Et Commerce: Deux Essais D'Histoire Hispano-Américaine (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1974), 59-61; Estadísticas Históricas de México, 647-648.

<sup>9</sup> Inés Herrera Canales, El comercio exterior de México, 1821-1875 (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, 1977), 26.

rapidity.<sup>10</sup> Figures 3 and 4 show that the values of overall textile and overall fabric importation in Mexico increased by 167% and 155%, respectively, during 1828-1872. Within these broad categories, the values of specific types of textiles show even more remarkable increases. According to Figures 5 and 6, the value of woolen textile importation grew by 637%, while that of mixed-fabric importation increased by an astonishing 4012%, during 1828-1874.<sup>11</sup>

These data suggest that unprecedented volumes of European merchandise arrived at Veracruz and other port cities for transportation inland to Mexico City and other major urban centers of distribution. The notions of circulation and dispersal pose an interesting question: distribution to whom? During Mexico's colonial period, only the wealthiest castes could participate on a voluntary basis in the European marketplace to acquire imported goods. After independence, the colonial restrictions dissolved, yet Mexican society remained heavily stratified. Furthermore, as Figure 7 shows, the total population of Mexico grew from around 6.4 million in 1831 to 9.2 million by 1873, an increase of only 44% in the decades following independence. Thus, the population growth far from mirrored the triple-digit and even quadruple-digit growth percentages in the values of imported commodities. The evidence in this section could lead one to reach one of two conclusions: first, that the market became saturated and glutted if the small wealthy proportion of Mexican society continued to purchase European goods at the same rate throughout the century; or second: that wealthy Mexicans suddenly expanded their purchasing on a large scale, absorbing many more imported commodities and sending payment back to Europe to begin the cycle of capital accumulation anew. But by looking beyond these quantitative records, one can discern a very different picture of the lived

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<sup>10</sup> *Estadísticas Históricas de México*, 647-648; Cardoso, 213. Cardoso provides a detailed description of the enhancements to transportation mechanisms and infrastructure on pages 198-209; 218-224.

<sup>11</sup> Herrera Canales, 26, 30, 34. Part of the explanation for the extraordinary growth in mixed-fabric textile importation might include the invention and development of new weaves and combinations during the same time period.

experience in Mexico City.

### **Expanding Markets for Imported Commodities**

Reaching the aforementioned deductions is not surprising through an examination of the statistical data available on Mexican importation and population from the nineteenth century. However, a nuanced historical analysis allows one to acknowledge another critical factor at work: *social* transformation accompanied the dynamic market economy in Mexico during the nineteenth century. Not only was the import market in Mexico City growing, it was developing and expanding in its sociocultural composition. Imported goods, such as top hats and woolen suits, took on significance as cultural insignias, even if they were not practical in tropical climates. This process coincided with the dissolution of the colonial race-based caste system into a more nebulous dichotomy between the *gente decente* and the *plebe*. Wealthy individuals of European descent, fearful of losing their status, became increasingly concerned with appearance and behavior. They sought to replicate the colonial-era laws by prescribing “appropriate” material items that one should associate with the *gente decente*. Enchiladas and tamales, for example, were “food of the lower orders.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the proliferation of increasing volumes of imported goods encouraged entire sectors of the population to demonstrate their ideological support for liberal economic development. By acquiring and adopting the latest clothing fashions from Paris and London, Mexico City residents could showcase their enthusiasm to reject the past and look toward a modern future in Mexico.<sup>13</sup> The plethora of Parisian fabrics and other paraphernalia that began

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<sup>12</sup> Bauer, 132-133, 137-140; Pilcher, 46; Burns, 10. Francie Chassen-López explores culinary culture in Oaxaca, noting that elites sought to “emulate French haute cuisine,” often by putting on lavish feasts complete with French foods and wine, with no traditional Oaxacan delicacies, such as *tlayudas* or *quesillo*, in sight. In fact, the menus for these feasts often appeared in local newspapers. Chassen-López, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Bauer, 146, 150.



to arrive in record quantities in Mexico City and other areas gave people the opportunity to demonstrate not only the *presence*, but also the *abundance*, of European culture in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, one must move beyond quantitative data in order to understand how imported commodities came to transform the day-to-day lived experience in Mexico City. An analysis of newspaper advertisements of these goods reveals how local shopkeepers introduced their wares into the sprawling urban center. The advertisements appearing in several newspapers published in Mexico City during the post-independence period share several approaches in their presentations of foreign goods. Along the lines of Benjamin Orlove's notion of the "allure of the foreign," the advertisements celebrate the luxuriousness and desirability of certain goods because of their association with European culture, centered in Paris. They also portray these goods as innovative, the latest in cutting-edge fashion or technology. But in the nineteenth century, these advertisements incorporate a new angle: affordability. They emphasize the accessibility of European material—and cultural—imports to a broad sector of the populations by placing heavy emphasis on bargain prices.

The notion of an expanded market for imported goods implies that vendors could portray commodities from abroad as a modern, progressive, and *attainable* reality for Mexico City's consumers. The advertisements present the imported goods and experiences not as expensive items out of the reach of the lower classes, but instead as economical ways of demonstrating one's allegiance to the nineteenth-century material world.<sup>15</sup> French perfumes, North American

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Orlove, ed, The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 13-14; Bauer, 152-153.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan McCann discusses this tendency in his analysis of advertisements in popular culture in Brazil during the 1930s-1950s, that representations of imported goods often emphasized a middle-class audience: "[advertisements] promised a product of elite quality, but always with the caveat—either expressed or implied—that for the first time such luxury was available to all." Bryan McCann, Hello, Hello Brazil: Popular Music in the Making of Modern Brazil (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2004), 224.

sewing machines, and British frock coats<sup>16</sup> were not only symbols of European culture and exemplars of the proudest manufacturing innovations across the Atlantic, they also were an affordable reality for all but the most destitute members of society. The evidence suggests that the ways in which retailers introduced the growing consumer classes in Mexico City to goods from abroad contributed to the transformative power of those items by bridging perceived socioeconomic gaps in the population, emphasizing that imported commodities lay within the purview of anybody who had a few pesos to spare.

An examination of nineteenth-century newspapers from Mexico City reveals an evolution in the emphasis that advertisers place on material imports that correlates with the increasing prevalence of those goods as the century progressed. A number of early post-independence newspapers, including the Noticioso general and El mosquito mexicano, from 1817—four years before independence—to 1834, place virtually no emphasis on advertising material commodities. Instead, the newspapers discuss political events in the outside world, especially in France, Britain, and the United States.<sup>17</sup> In some cases, the editors published decrees and national legislation for popular distribution, particularly after independence, as the new government struggled to consolidate and legitimize its authority.<sup>18</sup> For example, in the “*Parte Mercantil*” of the Noticioso general, sections on commerce limit the scope of their reporting to listings of current prices of various agricultural and manufactured products imported into Mexico.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A frock coat is a knee-length coat, usually black and made of elegant fabric, that one could wear open or closed. For a image, see Margarete Braun-Ronsdorf, Mirror of Fashion: A History of European Costume 1789-1929 (New York; Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company; London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 75.

<sup>17</sup> Noticioso general, 15 October 1817, 1; *Ibid.*, 22 October 1817, 1; *Ibid.*, 27 October 1817, 1-2; et al.

<sup>18</sup> El mosquito mexicano, 21 March 1834, 1-2; *Ibid.*, 4 April 1834, 1-2; et al.

<sup>19</sup> These descriptions are similar to stock listings in contemporary periodicals. Noticioso general, 15 October 1817, 1-2; *Ibid.*, 17 October 1817, 1-2, 4; *Ibid.*, 20 October 1817, 1-4; *Ibid.*, 22 October 1817, 3-4; *Ibid.*, 27 October 1817, 1; *Ibid.*, 17 November 1817, 3; *Ibid.*, 3 December 1817, 3; et al. Benedict Anderson argues that many of the early newspapers to emerge in the Americas “began essentially as appendages of the market” and often provided information on shipping, political appointments, marriages of the wealthy, and other similar topics. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1983), 62.

Newspapers from later in the nineteenth century place new emphasis on imported commodities, displaying them in prominent locations and even using pictorial advertisements. At this stage, the affordability of luxurious European goods emerges most clearly. The earliest examples appear in La opinión nacional, beginning in the late 1860s. In one advertisement, the imported commodities include jewelry, presented under manufacturers' names such as "French, Losada, Gerard-Perreguaux, Robert-Roskell, Robert-Brandt." The headline of the advertisement celebrates the "only watch and jewelry store that always has an immense collection of articles of good taste and cheapness . . . watches of perfect size, guaranteed, starting at 8 pesos."<sup>20</sup> This description combines notions of a wide selection of foreign brands, and perceived social "good taste" from owning a watch, with affordability.

An examination of newspapers from the end of the nineteenth century, during the outward-facing, progress-and-modernity-minded dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, reveals even more explicit introductions of European material culture into Mexico City as being within reach for the mainstream population. El noticioso, a newspaper from the 1880s, includes colorful and often witty depictions of goods from abroad, emphasizing the availability and affordability of those goods.<sup>21</sup> Many of the advertisements are for pharmacies, such as an "Antique French Drugstore . . . the only deposit of [therapeutic] acids and chemical products . . . at factory prices." These establishments sold "aromatic oils" and other "cures" for various sicknesses and bodily ailments,

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<sup>20</sup> "La única relojería y joyería que siempre tiene un inmenso surtido de artículos de gusto y de una verdadera baratura . . . Relojes de perfects andadura, garantizados, desde \$8. Relojes de French, Losada, Gerard-Perreguaux, Robert-Roskell, Robert-Brant." La opinión nacional, 1 September 1868; *Ibid.*, 2 September 1868; *Ibid.*, 3 September 1868; et al. All translations are by the author of this paper unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>21</sup> El noticioso also was one of the earliest bilingual newspapers in Mexico. It considered itself a specifically "mercantile" paper, as it proclaimed in the header at the top of every edition: "El noticioso is the only mercantile paper published in English and Spanish in the Republic of Mexico." El noticioso, 13 March 1881, 1; et al. Benedict Anderson explains that by the early twentieth century, a bilingual intelligentsia "had access . . . to models of nation, nation-ness, and nationalism derived from the turbulent, chaotic experiences of more than a century of American and European history. These models, in turn, helped to give shape to a thousand inchoate dreams. In varying combinations, the lessons of creole, vernacular and official nationalism were copied, adapted, and improved upon." Anderson, 128.

as the same advertisement suggests: “the only deposit of tropical elixirs and pills against fever . . . superior quality, moderate prices!”<sup>22</sup>

In some cases, the advertisements appear with large images, even on the front page, that combine visual elements of desirability with descriptions of affordability. For example, one advertisement for a sewing machine appears with the brand name “Americana:” “The new ‘Americana’ sewing machines, Latin American collection . . . sales on credit and in installments, great advantages!”<sup>23</sup> This advertisement, with its image of a sewing machine on an ornate stand, would catch the eye of anyone who viewed the front page of the newspaper on a street corner, and the emphasis on its availability through credit mechanisms likely would have appealed to those struggling to enter the consumer class. Furthermore, the association of the words “Americana” and “Latin American Collection,” in English, with the image of the sewing machine could have enhanced its perceived desirability because it establishes a connection to the United States as the exemplar of modernity and technological development. In other words, anybody could own a piece of North American “progress” by purchasing this item.

Finally, among diverse types of European goods, including alcoholic beverages and pharmaceuticals, imported clothing from France and Britain received attention in newspapers such as El noticioso. One advertisement in particular highlights the accessibility to the general population of foreign clothing—regardless of origin—in addition to its luxury and intrigue: “THE EXPLOSION . . . Great sale of finished clothing! . . . Foreign cashmere, common sizes . . . [also] of linen cloth for summer!” The advertisement includes a list of clothing items and price ranges, such as pants for two to four pesos, vests for one to five pesos, jackets for four to six

<sup>22</sup> “Antigua Drogería Francesa . . . Único depósito del Elíxir Tropical y las Píldoras contra las callenturas . . . clases superiores, precios modicos.” *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> “La Nueva Americana, Máquinas para coser . . . Latin American Collection . . . Ventas a plazo y en abonos, grandes ventajas.” *Ibid.*, 11 April 1881, 1; *Ibid.*, 27 June 1881, 1; et al.

pesos, frock coats for eleven to twenty-four pesos, overcoats for eight to twenty-two pesos, and shirts for seventy-five cents to two pesos.<sup>24</sup> With such a wide price range, it would not be surprising if even struggling Mexico City residents could afford a shirt or a vest.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, this advertisement suggests that manufacturers might have presented imported clothing items with price listings in order to offer a catalogue of sorts to consumers. Far from listing simply “elegant apparel from Europe” alongside a holistic image of a fashionably attired dame or gentleman, the advertisement deconstructs the materiality into its individual elements.<sup>26</sup> As a result, a certain transparency exists in the luxury and desirability associated with the commodities. Individuals viewing the notice who could not afford an entire European “costume” need not feel discouraged because they could see the prices of the specific articles of clothing and select an item or two that might fit their budget and still allow them to flaunt an artificial affluence, a sociocultural dedication to Europhilic cosmopolitanism.

In addition to tangible commodities, the newspapers advertise the importation of *cultural* commodities as accessible as well. For example, La opinión nacional celebrates the incursion into Mexico of literary accomplishments: “We have just received from Paris a magnificent novel that we soon will begin to insert into this newspaper—Gonzáles, Neve and company.” Imported theatrical drama received advertisements as well: “THE THEATRE! We will publish a weekly installment from the Dramatic Encyclopaedia that brings to light the best theatrical comedies of

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<sup>24</sup> “LA EXPLOSIÓN, Gran Barata, de Ropa Hecha . . . Ropa Hecha casimir extranjero . . . de lienzo y de verano.” *Ibid.*, 11 April 1881, 4. A correlation seems to exist between the price of specific types of garments and the amount of imported fabric and labor that one could hypothesize were involved in their creation.

<sup>25</sup> This conjecture might have to suffice in the short term. Stephen Haber explains that studies on average wages in Mexico during the mid-to-late nineteenth century are nonexistent, and the data sources are not very helpful because of the lack of a systematic approach in their collection. Furthermore, Mexico did not have a legal minimum wage prior to the 1930s. Haber suggests that the farthest one can go is to use certain indicators to point to “low and unequally distributed incomes.” Stephen H. Haber, “Assessing the Obstacles to Industrialization: The Mexican Economy, 1830-1940,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, no. 1 (1992), 5, 17-18.

<sup>26</sup> For a comparison, see The Ladies’ Pocket Magazine: The Origin of Pantomime, published in 1834, for a more holistic style of advertising.

modern theatre for not a cent more.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, the newspaper advertises the “notes from the diary of a princess, Inés de Salm Salm” as a “most interesting book, translated from German, to be sold for FOUR REALES.”<sup>28</sup> The representations of these imported cultural “goods” clearly highlight the desirability and innovativeness of the entertainment and enlightenment that experiencing them can provide for a literate audience. However, more importantly, the advertisements emphasize that the experience of this imported culture was affordable. Thus, one can infer that the editors of these Mexican newspapers commoditized cultural imports to make them something tangible and appealing for their readership, and for mainstream Mexican society in general.

The evidence from nineteenth-century newspapers printed in Mexico City, especially when the government of Porfirio Díaz placed emphasis on modernization and replication of European cosmopolitan life in Mexico, suggests that the public encountered imported material commodities in advertisements with several primary designators attached. The advertisements depict foreign goods as luxurious and innovative, but also available and affordable. They no longer existed only for the wealthy, but rather for a broad sector of society. A strong example lies in the clothing advertisements that extrude the prices of individual imported garments into lists, offering a catalogue from which people who could not afford the entire European wardrobe at least could obtain a token item.

However, looking at advertisements offers little insight into how the new accessibility of imported commodities to the populace transformed the day-to-day practice of material culture in

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<sup>27</sup> “EL TEATRO. Se publica semanariamente una entrega de esta Enciclopedia dramática que da a luz las mejores comedias del teatro moderno por no un real cada una.” *La opinión nacional*, 2 February 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 3 February, 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 4 February 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 13 April 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 14 April 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 1 June 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 2 June 1869, 4; et al.

<sup>28</sup> “Apuntes del diario de la princesa Inés de Salm Salm. Se ha hecho una edición de este interesantísimo cuaderno, traducido del alemán, y se venderá a CUATRO REALES el ejemplar...” *La opinión nacional*, 1 June 1869, 4; *Ibid.*, 2 June 1869, 4; et al.

Mexico City. Understanding the sociocultural ramifications of the idea that goods reached all classes of society requires a close scrutiny of the internal lived experience. Unlike Rebecca Earle’s approach that uses the attitudes of outsiders, this paper does not appeal to European travelers’ vision of Mexico City residents. Instead, it examines how Mexicans constructed themselves through a metaphorical and literal self-portraiture: a collection of sketches of Mexican “types,” originally published as a series of newspaper columns, entitled Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos. As the narrator explains in his animated “interview” with his first subject, the *aguador*, or water carrier, the collection emphasizes self-construction: “Please sit in that seat and tell me about your life . . . Think about the fact that today we Mexicans have taken on the task of depicting ourselves.”<sup>29</sup>

The genre of the collection is an autobiographical chronicle of life in Mexico City, told through the eyes of various Mexican interviewers and their subjects on the streets and in the shops. Mexicans would not be content to allow accounts of colonizers and outsiders to define them for a global audience, as the narrator tells the *aguador*: “You need to recognize that you, as a Mexican, now have the responsibility for informing the public about your customs, your habits, your vices, your qualities—everything that is particular to you . . . you have to tell the entire world.”<sup>30</sup> The transparency of this process within the written descriptions suggests a larger comment on Mexicans’ growing confidence to define and illustrate themselves *in print*—the medium of European formality—in order to supplant the written views of outsiders such as those that Rebecca Earle cites in her article. By emphasizing the daily lives and everyday affairs of

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<sup>29</sup> Siéntate en esa silla y cuéntame la vida que llevas . . . Calcula, hijo, que hoy los mexicanos hemos dado en pintarnos a nosotros mismos.” Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos: Tipos y costumbres nacionales, por varios autores (México, D.F.: Biblioteca Nacional y Estudios Neolitho, 1935, 1854), 2.

<sup>30</sup> “Lo que te atañe saber es que tú, como mexicano, tienes que dar al público tus costumbres, tus hábitos, tus vicios, tus cualidades, todo, en fin, lo que te es peculiar o propio, tienes que contárselo al mundo entero: hasta una estampa se ha hecho adonde estás pintiparado, tal como eres, para que todos te conozcan.” *Ibid.*, 2.

these “types,” the collection celebrates the “heroes,” the new protagonists, of Mexico’s future.

The collection includes thirty-five pictorial sketches of the “types” of Mexicans in contexts of their life and work, along with a written interview or “encounter” with each protagonist. The style of the writing is highly conversational and animated, often with first-person narration. Many categories of Mexican “types,” all focusing on the materiality of everyday life, appear in the sketches. They include the *plebe* in traditional, service roles, including the *aguador*, a waitress at a cantina, a domestic servant, an animal herder, a rancher, a hauler, a laundress, a baker, a coachman, a barber, an innkeeper, and various ambulatory vendors. The narrators introduce the reader to individuals of the *gente decente* as well, including a government notary, an attorney, and several *ministros*, mid-level government bureaucrats.

The significance of this collection for discussing the transformative power of imported commodities emerges when one examines the contexts in which the artists depict the various “types.” The sketches surround the protagonists from all walks of life in European material culture, often associated with their physical appearance and the paraphernalia of their work and lives. The *plebe* types appear in modest surroundings, yet their clothing and accoutrements are unmistakably European. Vendors such as the *mercero* (Figure 8) and the *cargador* (Figure 9) wear shirts and slacks of European style, made from European cloth, rather than loose indigenous weavings. The *mercero* also wears a form-fitting jacket of European style, and the *cargador* carries a plethora of imported wearable items for sale, including top hats, boots, and even an elegant sword. The *mercero* carries less distinguishable but similarly manufactured-looking commodities. The *aguador* (Figure 10) wears leather chaps over his light-colored European-style pants, and also wears helmet-like hat and dark leather shoes. The sketch presents a contrast between his physical appearance and the accoutrements of his occupation, the later of



which include a fairly traditional-looking ceramic jug and perhaps a large gourd strapped to his back.<sup>31</sup>

The sketches that depict Mexicans in the *gente decente* class show a proliferation of European material culture in a manner homologous to that of the depictions of the *plebe*. The *abogado*, an attorney (Figure 11), appears in a universe of imported items. His dress is elegant, from the black suit coat and tie to the vest and slacks. He sits at an ornately carved desk, in a chair of delicate construction, surrounded by his legal texts. The *ministro ejecutor*, a local government administrator (Figure 11), appears outside of his office in the requisite top hat, elegant dress shirt, and black long jacket, complete with handkerchief. However, his slacks appear identical to the ones that the *mercero* wears to sell his wares out on the street. Perhaps both pairs came from the same bolt of imported cloth, or even from the same tailor shop in Mexico City!<sup>32</sup>

Female “types” appear in the collection of sketches as well. The *china*, an affectionate term for the idealized, proud Mexican woman, appears in her traditional kitchen wearing a dress with elaborate European embroidery and patterning, as well as a cinching at the waste, in addition to her indigenous *rebozo*, or shawl (Figure 13).<sup>33</sup> The *coqueta*, another affectionate stereotype, in this case, for the idealized and sexualized dame of the *gente decente*, appears in her dressing room, surrounded by ornate mirrors and a vanity (Figure 14). Her dress seems to be made of silk or another elegant fabric, and she wears a European style of shoe, as well as a watch.<sup>34</sup> In the case of these two female types, the cross-class parallels between the sketches from the *gente decente* and the *plebe* are unmistakable. From their similarly defiant, proud

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 253-266, 279-280, 1-6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 141-148, 287-290, 253-266.

<sup>33</sup> Despite the proliferation of European cloth and clothing styles, the ubiquitous *rebozo* remained an essential material accoutrement of Mexican female identity, and it remains as such to this day.

<sup>34</sup> Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos. 135-140.

postures and facial expressions, to the fullness of the skirts, to the cinches at the waists, both women embrace and radiate imported materiality in their idealized “type.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, European commodities seem to bring these two female archetypes together, though they come from opposite ends of the social spectrum.

Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos suggests that the new availability of imported goods in Mexico City did not allow the wealthy simply to acquire more items. Instead, the extraordinary growth of importation permeated through society, reaching everyone from street vendors to government administrators. The sketches illustrate that people from both the *gente decente* and the *plebe* incorporated European clothing and other accoutrements into how they portrayed themselves. In other words, Mexican identity was linked to European commodities, regardless of one’s class status.

Despite their usefulness for gaining a sense of how new levels of importation broadened markets for foreign goods, the sketches of self-construction have methodological limitations. In order to complete the analytical exercise regarding the internal transformative power of European material culture in nineteenth-century Mexico City, one must explore how goods from abroad allowed upward mobility for members of the *plebe*. The sketches depict often-idealized archetypes, not people. As a result, they do not offer evidence to facilitate a discussion of social mobility. Thus, it is time to turn to a new type of source, created in Mexico City, from which one can extract evidence of the *discourse* of material culture and gain insight into the power of imported commodities to lift people out of the *plebe*.

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<sup>35</sup> While questions of gender and gender analysis are not the focus of this paper, they omnipresent within the discursive realm of Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos. Jocelyn Olcott discusses feminine archetypes that emerged in postrevolutionary Mexico, including the *soldadera* (camp follower), *soldada* (female soldier), *la madre* (mother, symbolically similar to La Malinche, conquistador Hernán Cortés’s mistress and translator, a symbol of Mexican femininity). Jocelyn Olcott, Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico, Next Wave: New Directions in Women’s Studies Series (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 17.

### The Power of Commodities for Social Mobility: The Novel as Source

Understanding how the new availability of imported goods from Europe transformed nineteenth-century Mexico City requires an analysis of qualitative data on the social experience in the metropolis. While Rebecca Earle chooses travelers' accounts and *costumbrista* paintings to analyze the effects of material culture on society, this paper concentrates on sources that existed within the realm of Mexican life. A work of literary fiction, written at the time, can provide a sense of the sociocultural experience that one could not obtain by examining external records and documents.<sup>36</sup> This section offers an analysis of a novella, “*Baile y cochino*,” translated as “Having a Ball,” by José Tomás de Cuéllar, to assess the effect that the permeation of goods from abroad might have had on everyday life in Mexico City in the decades following independence through the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Using this source type for understanding the lived experience requires a disclaimer because its audience, by definition, was the small but growing *literate* sector of the population. Nevertheless, Cuéllar makes clear that despite his position as a snooty member of the *gente decente*, he sought to convey his social and cultural commentary on Mexican society to as broad a sector of the populace as possible. In his own words, “*Baile y cochino*” exemplifies the genre of “local human comedy, uniquely Mexican.” At the same time, Cuéllar takes a moralizing

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<sup>36</sup> One cannot overestimate the power that seemingly “fictive” texts can have to enlighten scholars who seek a sense of social reality in a particular context. Natalie Zemon Davis argues that while ignoring creative and seemingly “fictive” aspects of texts and utilizing a “scientific” process of inquiry might allow one to understand historical *details*, to do so would be to miss the point, because the details themselves do not constitute a cohesive historical whole. In order to appreciate the full value of sources such as novels, one must focus on the fictional aspects of the documents—the process of shaping, forming, molding, and crafting a narrative. According to Davis, the way in which a historical actor *creates* a document such as a novel—the tone, rhetorical devices, and format—matters as much, if not more than, the concrete reality of the narrative. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> A rough literal translation of the title “*Baile y cochino*” is “the dance of the pigs,” or “dancing and piggishness.” José Tomás de Cuéllar, *The Magic Lantern: Having a Ball and Christmas Eve*, trans. Margaret Carson, ed. Margo Glantz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

pedagogical stance in order to warn his readers of the dangers inherent to the coming of modernity, specifically the importation and penetration of foreign consumer products. He depicts the flow of European material culture as an invasion that could pose a real threat to the “feminine sphere” and subvert progress and modernization by making Mexicans dependent upon “products from Balzac’s country.”<sup>38</sup>

Cuéllar’s moralizing bent comes across in his representation of material imports in Mexico City as a force of perversion. His scorn for the members of the *plebe*, specifically, the new facility with which they incorporated European commodities into their personas, suggests that he perceived Mexico’s expanding markets as a real sociocultural threat. If society had remained “typecast” as the idealized sketches in Los mexicanos depict, then no threat would have existed because despite certain analogous items of materiality, the “types” would have remained firmly ensconced in their places as either “decent people” or plebeians. By contrast, in his novel, Cuéllar presents a vision of the day-to-day lived experience in Mexico City that suggests that people *were* using imported material culture to engage in social mobility.

Cuéllar published “*Baile y cochino*” as part of a series entitled La linterna mágica, or The Magic Lantern, comprising twenty-four small volumes. “*Baile y cochino*” first appeared as a serial in a Mexican newspaper and later was published as a volume in 1886 in Mexico City.<sup>39</sup> The plot of the novella seems deceptively simple in comparison to the wealth of underlying data. The story centers on a *gente decente* family that decides to host a party. The novelty of constructing a “high society” event in Mexico City during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz offers the major dilemma within the story—establishing who the family considers its social equals, or at least elevated enough in social standing, to invite to the ball. In the representative world of

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<sup>38</sup> A reference to the perceived Bohemian vulgarity of French culture.

<sup>39</sup> Eventually, the Magic Lantern collection was reprinted in Spain.

Cuéllar's text, the expanding availability of imported commodities across the social strata was changing Mexican society—tragically, in his view—based on material possessions rather than perceived status or upbringing. According to Margo Glantz, the resulting party, “where people of all social classes and racial types mix together in complete promiscuity,” suggests a brave new world in Mexico, one in which a party provides “a pretext to gather the whole of Mexican society under the same roof.”<sup>40</sup>

Central to the new vision of Mexico is the notion that imported dress offered social mobility to those whose ethnic background or perceived class or race might have inhibited their ability to cavort with the aristocracy. The party in “*Baile y cochino*” serves as a social microcosm for all of Mexico City, a melting pot of sorts in which “an appearance determined by dress eliminates class distinctions, and those who belong to classes thought to have no mobility are able to ascend. ‘To be’ and ‘to appear’ once again define reality; thanks to the artifice of cosmetics and shamelessness of fashion, a woman appears to be ‘the other.’”<sup>41</sup> Within the notion of promiscuity lies the satire driving Cuéllar's word of warning: the result of this blurring of social classes will be social confusion and disorder—exactly what happens at the party.

These concepts materialize in the novella most clearly in the dramatic tension surrounding a pair of twins, the Machuca sisters, that receives an invitation to the ball despite the perceived indigenous background of the girls. Much of the dialogue among the members of the aristocratic family in the days and hours preceding the ball involves an almost-perverse fascination with these girls who were known to be poor, wandered the streets “barefooted,” yet received an invitation because they could keep up “the appearance of elegance” thanks to the new accessibility of European imported clothing to virtually all sectors of society. Cuéllar's

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<sup>40</sup> Cuéllar, xxx.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

description of these sisters provides the clearest sense of the power of imported European materialism in Mexico City. He suggests that people came to determine class and race by appearance, something concealable and fluid. The Machuca sisters serve as caricatures of the new lived experience in which class had become a transient, flexible marker of identity.<sup>42</sup>

The nature of this fascination with the twins—and their desirability for the likes of the party hosts—centers on the idea that people were conscious of the transformative power of clothing, in particular, that the sisters could switch from “Indian” to “Caucasian” by simply donning gloves and dresses, the appearance of affluence: “They appeared to belong to the Caucasian race, as long as they wore gloves, but when they took them off, the hands of La Malinche<sup>43</sup> appeared on the marble bust of Ninon de Lencios.” Cuéllar implies that “miracle-working satin,” a commodity for sale, could transform the sisters in ways that defied their linguistic limitations, for “whenever they opened their mouths, the imperfect thread became visible.” He also places emphasis on the differences between the public—street—and the private—home—arenas in Mexico City, adding intrigue and even magic to the dramatic tension surrounding these ethnically-ambiguous twins: “they appeared to be beautiful at night, or in the street, but in the morning or at home, the Machuca sisters were nothing more than dark-skinned girls who had been slightly washed.”<sup>44</sup>

By including the Machuca sisters as prominent subjects in “*Baile y cochino*,” Cuéllar seems to deny the legitimacy and authenticity of the transformative power of their strategy of class concealment. At the same time, his use of the Machuca sisters testifies to the efficacy, *as a*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>43</sup> La Malinche, or Doña Marina, was an indigenous companion and interpreter for conquistador Hernán Cortés as he made his way from Veracruz to the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlán.

<sup>44</sup> Cuéllar, 29. This evidence suggests that undertones of race comprise an essential part of this type of discursive analysis of material culture. This paper does not utilize race as an analytical framework, but the prevalence of race indicates that future studies could employ it.

*deceit*, of adopting European clothing for mobility purposes. Thus, Cuéllar's discourse suggests that the sociocultural power of goods was highly contested and polemical among social commentators who perceived that the "miracles" of satin and other European fabrics created the potential for members of the *plebe* to deceive society, and do so effectively.

The novel shows that women of indigenous and mixed-race ancestry were not the only beneficiaries of the new power of imported clothing.<sup>45</sup> When Saldaña, a butler for the family hosting the party, envisions owning a frock coat for the first time, his reaction suggests that the "appearance of affluence" offered perceived mobility, and sometimes real mobility, for the urban *plebe*: "It's splendid! . . . I'll look like a king. I'll create a sensation!" Indeed, Saldaña tempers his exuberance only momentarily to acknowledge that he was allowing himself to place social mobility over the needs of his family: "I just remembered! My poor Lupe! The mother of my children! With all the excitement over the ball, she hasn't received her daily allowance for three days!" Cuéllar establishes certain similarities between the characters of Saldaña and the Machuca twins in terms of the "inside" and "outside" appearances as well. In his "indoor" or private life, Saldaña is of the servile class, where he eats "turkey with mole sauce, enchiladas, tortillas and beans, and pulque to go with it all," though he fantasizes about the comparatively elegant "outdoor" or public lifestyle because the nature of his employment gives him the opportunity to adopt the façade of affluence, even to the detriment of his family's needs.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Cuéllar seems especially critical of the ways in which Mexican ladies felt driven to emulate what they perceived as European elegance. One could hypothesize that gendered threads might exist in the background of the lens through which he viewed society, painting women as more susceptible and vulnerable to manipulation by advertisements and popular perceptions about elegance.

<sup>46</sup> Cuéllar, 39-41. Bryan McCann explains that this tendency reflects the overall attitudes of the growing middle class: "the advertisers of mass-market commodities were primarily attempting to reach the growing middle class. As Brian Owensby has shown, members of that class spent a far greater percentage of their income on the commodities of the expanding mass market than did the poor and the wealthy. They were willing to go into debt to do so, partly in order to bolster their social status through conspicuous consumption." McCann, 224. Later in the text, Cuéllar points to the growing importance of pawnshops for Europhilic Mexico City residents such as Saldaña who saw the need to make "sacrifices" in basic household staples, such as food, in order to pour their resources into appearing as cosmopolitan and elegant as possible. For a discussion of the sociocultural role that pawnshops played

Cuéllar does not limit his discussion of the transformative power of European dress to the *plebe*. He seeks to illustrate that the fascination and preoccupation with imported dress was at the forefront of consciousness for the *gente decente* as well. In the novella, while the family hosting the party does not seek mobility in the same way as the Machuca sisters and Saldaña pursue it, its members nevertheless idolize European fashion. Cuéllar offers highly satirical descriptions of the ways in which this process materialized in everyday life: “Fashion has dictates that proper girls obey like galley slaves. Paris has taken charge of correcting her figure, of enlarging, whittling, and streamlining it in order to distance her more and more from our first mother in Paradise.” He introduces the characters of Isaura and Natalia, both fashionable young ladies whose preoccupation with Parisian fashion trends precipitates a scene that illustrates the ludicrous extents to which high-class women went to conform to their perception of European high culture: “With the sharp eye of the young lady of fashion, these girls had noticed that today’s woman should display a protruding curve in the region of the coccyx, neither more nor less than the size of an abscess, an unusual fibroid, or the hump of a dromedary.”<sup>47</sup> The description provides clear indication of the moralistic undertones in Cuéllar’s narrative. The women’s obsession with perceptions of Parisian fashion constitutes an affront to nature and to intrinsic human beauty.

The most ostentatious example concerns the ball gown of the hostess of the party, Doña Bartola. In one scene, Cuéllar emphasizes, in his scornful, condescending tone, that the preoccupation with making a “dazzling” spectacle of oneself in reality suggests that Mexican

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in nineteenth-century material culture in Mexico City, see Marie Francois, “Cloth and Silver: Pawning and Material Life in Mexico City at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century,” *The Americas* 60, no. 3 (2004). By contrast, Cuéllar depicts Saldaña’s “mujer,” the mother of his children, as a highly pragmatic figure who sees through the artifice of “affluence” and views with skepticism Saldaña’s enthusiasm for attempting transformation to a higher class through material dress. Cuéllar, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Cuéllar, 34-35.



elites did not know how to dress in *legitimate* European elegance, and instead developed their own fantastical imitations of it. For example, he describes Doña Bartola's dress as a panalopy of coloration that seems more an artist's mistake than a majestic elegance: "The dress was made of satin and had an indefinable color, somewhere between mocha and cranberry and verging on rust . . . It contained enough yellow to make it seem neither red nor brown; and it wavered hesitantly toward leaf green." Furthermore, the Jackson Pollock-style ornamentation of the dress adds to the hilarity of the scene: "enameled beads of a thousand different colors which, in combination, formed a veritable riot of indescribable lights . . . these beads would create a great sensation." The resulting ten-pound dress "radiated every imaginable color; it lit up like a chandelier and sparkled with the rarest tints and the most incredible hues."<sup>48</sup> The satirical depiction of this overblown gown as representative of new trends in mock elegance—ludicrous and utterly un-Mexican—implies Cuéllar's moralizing critique on the problematic direction of Mexican society as a result of the influence of European culture.

The evidence from Cuéllar's "*Baile y cochino*" suggests that imported commodities, particularly clothing, transformed perceptions of class in Mexico City during the nineteenth century. The process by which the proliferation of European items reached members of the *plebe* and gave them the opportunity for social mobility—in this case, the ability to attend the party—lies at the heart of Cuéllar's word of warning. He utilizes the outrageous circumstances surrounding the ball as dramatized "proof" that society was unraveling around imported materiality, a complete degeneration of the idealized Mexican "types" into a milieu of frivolity, disorder, unruliness, and debauchery. His depiction of this evolving cultural world suggests that the *plebe* had infiltrated the *gente decente* to an irreversible extent. The ability of the Machuca

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 78.

sisters to alter their personae by simply putting on gloves, and the fascination among the upper-class family about this process, indicates that in Mexico City society, the transformative power of imported European fashions of dress was significant enough to obscure and complicate the boundary between the *plebe* and the *gente decente*. Saldaña's exuberance as he contemplates owning a frock coat, regardless of the expense, suggests that he considers joining the *gente decente* a tenable reality, within reach even for a butler. In Porfirian society, a token material item, of clothing in this case, could offer social mobility, if for limited periods of time in the "outdoor" public world of display. Finally, Cuéllar's description of Doña Bartola's ostentatious dress suggests that imported commodities solidified and exacerbated elites' desires to replicate European high culture, often to an outrageous extent.

It is important to return to the question of genre, to acknowledge that the discursive universe of Cuéllar's storytelling is a fantastical creation that includes substantial embellishment and exaggeration for dramatic appeal and to address the author's frequently reiterated purpose of satirizing the ludicrous, materialist Porfirian society and imposing his moralization over it. At the same time, the novella has evidentiary value for this paper because, in comparison to the types of sources that Rebecca Earle uses, Cuéllar's text exists in much closer proximity to the world that it describes. "*Baile y cochino*" is a social satire written in Mexico City; its original audience was the same group of literate Mexicans who it satirizes. Thus, both the dialogue and the overall circumstances of the plot must contain a certain level of fidelity to the lived experience in order for readers at the time to take the novella seriously. The fact that Cuéllar's text went from a serial in a newspaper to publication in a volume, and later to an English translation, suggests that its audience in Mexico City thought that it made a legitimate and insightful social commentary. The fact that the novella exists in close association with the lived

experience—certainly closer than Earle’s sources—validates using this source for analyzing the mobility that imported commodities introduced into the Mexican metropolis. Cuéllar’s scornful chronicle, by definition, shows that mobility through material culture was something real for Mexico City residents by the late nineteenth century.

## **Conclusion**

The mechanisms of change in the decades following independence in Mexico were multifaceted and complex, and demanded a commitment from all sectors of society to adapt to the new systems of republican government. The market economy made possible the introduction of European commodities at unprecedented levels. This paper posits that imported goods transformed and shaped quotidian life in nineteenth-century Mexico City in unprecedented ways. European material culture lay at the heart of a new sociocultural paradigm of modernity, progress, and civilization, rather than backwardness and barbarism. Residents of Mexico City incorporated imported items into their lived experience and their ideological vision for their country.

Understanding how these foreign goods affected life in post-independence Mexico City is a challenging endeavor, replete with contradictions and inconsistencies that should be apparent by now. But it also is a worthwhile endeavor. This paper continues in the tradition of Rebecca Earle’s willingness to enter into a scholarly dialogue on the sociocultural role of material culture in Mexico City after independence, but utilizes a new methodology that emphasizes sources created in Mexico City at the time, most for distribution to a broad popular, if literate, audience. As such, the sources in this paper reflect a more accurate sense of the lived experience on the ground, and range in form from quantitative data to testimonial literature.

The documentary records suggest that imported commodities from Europe transformed the sociocultural experience for the residents of Mexico City. Statistical sources indicate that the value of imports, especially of textiles, far exceeded that of population growth. The new abundance of goods did not continue to exist only in the realm of the wealthy, but instead permeated all sectors of society. Newspaper advertisements of these commodities portray them as affordable, complementing the existing designators of luxury and innovativeness with a new sense of accessibility to a broad sector of the populace. The pictorial self-representation of Mexican archetypes in the Los mexicanos collection suggests that, indeed, people from all walks of life, in both the *gente decente* and the *plebe*, incorporated European clothing and accoutrements into their identity and self-construction. Finally, the evidence from José Tomás de Cuéllar's novella "*Baile y cochino*" suggests that people consciously engaged the transformative power of imported commodities to obtain social mobility. Dresses, gloves, and frock coats allow characters to transcend the boundaries of the *gente decente* and the *plebe*. The example of the Machuca twins is particularly revealing in terms of the power of goods to drive social mobility by blurring existing class distinctions within people's sensibilities.

These findings have several implications. In particular, this paper invites future studies on material culture in Mexico City to steer clear of sources of foreign origin, including those displaying outsiders' attitudes such as the ones that Rebecca Earle employs. Instead, using data, testimony, and discourse created *in* the area of study, and even *for* the subject population, can reveal aspects about sociocultural circumstances, especially involving social mobility, that outsiders might have missed because they were not ensconced in the day-to-day lived experience of the place. The tension and contestation surrounding the imported commodities, in particular, the notion of a "threat" to the established social classes that Cuéllar discusses, serves as a key

example of the nuances that one can gain only from a close scrutiny of internal sources.

While one could contend that the popular discourse of material culture does not address the importance of the commodities themselves, the evidence presented herein suggests that the objects and materials, not just rhetoric surrounding them, became integrated into society in Mexico City to such an extent that not even Cuéllar and his contemporaries who constructed the sketches in Los mexicanos could come to grips with the full complexity. For that matter, neither can scholars today. But unanswered questions often define the best historical arguments because they offer new opportunities for future research.

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