Este documento es proporcionado al estudiante con fines educativos, para la crítica y la investigación respetando la reglamentación en materia de derechos de autor.

Este documento no tiene costo alguno, por lo que queda prohibida su reproducción total o parcial.

El uso indebido de este documento es responsabilidad del estudiante.
Sex in Revolution

Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico

Edited by

JOCelyn OLcOTT,

MARY KAY VAUGHAN,

AND GABRIELA CANO

Foreword by

CARLOS MONSIVÁIS

The War on "Las Pelonas"

Modern Women and Their Enemies, Mexico City, 1924

ANNE RUBENSTEIN

Se acabaron las pelonas
Se acabó la diversión
la que quiera ser pelona pagará contribución

In the summer of 1924, Mexico still trembled on the edge of revolutionary conflict, as it had for many years. The Sonoran elite had not yet consolidated their hold on the national government: the possibility of armed struggle for power remained open. Nor did the government yet control much of the country with any certainty. But in Mexico City—at least if the magazines and newspapers of the day can be trusted—a truly important battle was being fought that summer: the debate over the length of women's hair had escalated to the point where men brawled in the streets and violently attacked women.

This was a global conflict, or nearly so. A fashion for short, blunt haircuts ("bobs") had followed the international spread of silent cinema. Given its connections to the movies, getting such a haircut represented a commitment to "the modern" and a break with "tradition" anywhere a woman tried it—though which of the multiple and complicated meanings of those terms were intended depended on whose hair was cut. In the English-speaking world, women who made such gestures of affiliation with all that was up-to-date were known as New Women, or flappers, a
The Vogue for Athletic Women

In the spring and summer of 1924 masculinized self-presentations by Mexico City women met with a great deal of rhetorical resistance, even before the physical violence began. The vogue for short hair and athletic bodies for women caused a kind of border panic because it had come from outside Mexico and because it was spreading beyond the small group of elite women who had already adopted it. Opposition to the style was cast in terms of defending national or racial purity. The first signs of trouble appeared at the newsstands of Mexico City in April 1924, as magazines and newspapers suddenly took up the question of las pelonas, with dozens of articles describing them in either critical or joking terms. One of the most popular magazines in the country, Revista de Revistas, devoted an entire issue to them. As the debate intensified, the Mexico City press tended to depict las pelonas condescendingly, characterizing them as women attempting to follow imported trends. But other tensions lay beneath such nationalist objections to the pelona style: the debate was not only about the distinction between the national and the international but also about race and class divisions.

Indeed, a new and radically different idea of feminine beauty had taken hold in urban Mexico, as it had in Europe and the United States, and by 1924 relatively poor and dark-skinned young women had begun to experiment with it. While the modern image was reflected in fashion—flapper dresses, short hair, and new cosmetics, shoes, and underwear—the change was not limited to material goods that could be purchased at salons, boutiques, and department stores. It also encompassed a new ideal for women’s bodies and women’s ways of moving, what Ageeth Sluis has called “the Deco Body”: long, thin limbs and torsos, short hair, and vigorous (but graceful) physicality. Beginning sometime around 1920, a rage for female athleticism, or at least for images of female athleticism, shaped the pictures ordinary Mexicans encountered, if not the activities they pursued.

Relatively few Mexican women actually participated in athletic activities (except for dancing) in the 1920s, but images of women in vigorous motion were omnipresent and influential. True, masses of young people, male and female, had been mobilized in demonstrations of nationalist fervor through group gymnastics—in Mexico City hundreds of students and teachers engaged in such displays during at least five inaugural ceremonies for the new Estadio Nacional that took place in the spring and summer of 1924—and many more were learning folk dances, volleyball, and basketball through the missionary efforts of the new, revolutionary Ministry of Education. But imagery of women athletes tended to represent members of a rarified elite: the country-club set. The First Lady herself, who often appeared in flapper dresses and cloche hats, belonged to this category. Describing another (more or less) First Lady, Plutarco Elías Calles’s daughter Hortensia, who became his formal escort upon the death of her mother, Sara Sefchovich writes, “She was a dynamic youth, who exemplified the changing lifestyles of women who belonged to the comfortable classes: dressed in the fashions of the twenties, with loose clothes, liberated now from rigid corsets, adorned with long necklaces and with hair cut short... playing tennis dressed in white and driving her deluxe automobiles.”

Upper-class women from the United States who lived in Mexico at the time helped popularize such fashions; for example, in a well-publicized debutante ball for Mexico City’s “American colony,” seven of the nine young women pictured in newspaper coverage of the 1924 event had bobbed hair. Although there could not have been many such elite, athletic young women in Mexico City, they were pictured everywhere: architectural decorations and murals, silent films imported from Europe and the United States, newspaper and periodical advertisements, movies, cartoons, comic books, illustrations in textbooks and advice manuals, fashion magazines, matchbook covers, burlesque theater and other public spectacles, and both the women’s pages and the sports sections of newspapers.

Such pictures reflected changing ideals of femininity. “Fashion gave way to comfort,” according to Julia Tufión, and at last “women who were thin, agile, and athletic could consider themselves beautiful too.” But this was not at all a rebellion against fashion; rather, it was sweeping change in the clothing, accessories, and “look” that high society accepted as fashionable. The chic clothing of the 1920s, which minimized breasts and hips while it exaggerated the length of arms and legs, announced this new look for women. After almost a century of argument and agitation, the international dress-reform movement had triumphed: elite women abandoned corsets and heavy, ankle-length skirts in favor of clothing that enabled them to move easily, breathe deeply, and participate in active sports. Newspapers and other media celebrated female stars of the day—Isadora Duncan, for instance, who was much admired in Mexico's...
print media, or the president’s daughter described in the passage—precisely because of their physical ease and grace.\(^8\) Indeed, journalists frequently linked lightweight, flowing clothing and physical exercise; one magazine article, for example, exhorted female readers to “never make use of corsets, because gym classes and elastic-waist skirts are enough to give you a lovely body.”\(^9\)

All the changes in fashion added up to an idealization of lean, androgynous, youthful women in vigorous motion. In pursuit of this ideal, advice books and magazines for women published between 1920 and 1940—in North America, South America, and Europe; in Spanish, French, German, and English—almost always suggested daily exercise, ranging from sit-ups to hurling “Indian clubs.” (Often such advice sounded vaguely political: one such book proclaimed that “no other remedy remains—if we are not to fall into the morbidities of decadence—than to return to . . . Nature, above all in that which touches on hygiene and sport.”)\(^10\) The boyish look of the healthy, active New Woman, flapper, or pelona—lightweight, flowing clothing and physical exercise; one Mexico City woman was to remember some decades later: “I cut off my braids. My mother said okay. My parents agreed that it wasn’t anything harmful or dangerous, just a new fashion. Fashion is the least predictable thing in the world. My father didn’t get involved with [the question of] my braids. It was my mother who said: ‘Nobody wears braids anymore, why are you still wearing them?’”\(^15\)

But the plethora of images of athletic women in mass media and high art reflected a reality beyond shifting fashions in dress and hairstyle. Elite Mexican women were busily engaged in the sporting life in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of them played tennis, while some participated in other athletic activities.\(^16\) Some continued riding bicycles, as upper-class young women had been doing since the turn of the century.\(^17\) Photographs taken in the 1920s show well-to-do women engaged in golf, diving, swimming, various forms of equitation, and fencing. Some Mexican women even tried mountain climbing: in 1921, female adventurers made single-day ascents of Popocatépetl.\(^18\) And for women of all classes and practically all ages there was dancing.

Ordinary Mexican women, without access to elite pastimes, encountered the new vogue for female athleticism in other ways. They saw athletic women depicted in magazines, newspapers, and silent films, where they always seemed both desirable and up-to-date. (A male clerk summed up the meanings implicit in these descriptions when he responded to a Mexico City newspaper’s survey of opinions about the pelona style: “It is very clean, very hygienic, and very well suited for these modern times.”)\(^19\)

Ordinary women also encountered the new female athleticism through the state, especially through their recruitment into various programs and projects of the Ministry of Education. People drew connections among state-sponsored events—for instance the training of hundreds of young women as gym teachers in Mexico City’s new school especially dedicated to that purpose—and the wider trend toward “modern” mobilizations of women’s bodies in the arts and spectator sports, and the new fashions which some young city women were adopting. Thus, in 1924, criticism of fashionable young women could be, by extension, criticism of the political project with which they had associated themselves.

**Trying to Resign from *La Raza Cósmica*: Critiques of Las Pelonas**

In July 1924, a newspaper advertisement for a silent movie from the United States, presented in Mexico as *Mujeres modernas* (*Modern Women*), connected the image of international modernity with the idea of changing gender roles and relations when it described the global danger posed by New York society women: “Our era . . . of ascendant progress in civiliza-
tion, has brought with it the unbinding of women in every sense: physically, morally, socially, psychologically, and materially. Today the woman is not what she was . . . the weak being who, from the stone age until the beginnings of this century, has not had a voice nor a vote, nor a will of her own. Women grow more powerful every day . . . The vogue for bobbed hair, hygienic and aesthetic, has spread to every corner of the world."

Similarly, from 1923 to 1925, when Mexico City periodicals printed reviews of movies made in France, England, and the United States, they frequently described the leading actress—Theda Bara, Constance Talmadge, Clara Bow, or Laura La Plante—as a flapper, and the term was never intended as unmixed praise. And reviewers assumed that Mexican "señoritas would go to the cinema to witness the defense of or the attack on this new mode of feminine hairdo."

Thus, opposition to the vogue for flapper clothes, short hair, and athletic female bodies could be cast in terms of defending national or racial purity, which the cultural critic Salvador Novo did almost fifty years later. "The thick hair inherited from la Malinche," he wrote, was a special source of national pride, which in turn explained why "las pelonas called more attention to themselves [in Mexico] than they did in other nations, and were the objects of mockery." That is, a woman who cut her hair could be seen as trying to resign from la raza cósmica. Similarly, in 1924 a woman journalist worried, "Today we admire the strength, agility, and health of foreign races, obtained through exercise . . . [but] in Anglo-Saxon countries, an excess of sporting activity by women is creating a third sex, known as the neuter sex; this, in place of benefitting the race, will tend to destroy it. This will happen due to the abuse that the weaker sex has made of some sports in the crazy rage to masculinize itself." The criticism of new ways of moving and dressing as foreign was implicit in a slang term for one style of bobbed hair: women with especially short hair were called "rapados á la Boston." Defenders of the vogue for athletic women—perhaps undiplomatically—also emphasized its racialized aspects and the challenge it posed to Mexican nationalism. For instance, the artist Angel Zárraga (who was then living in Paris and painting a series of heroic portraits and murals of male and female athletes) told an interviewer from a Mexico City magazine that he made a picture of women playing soccer "to counteract . . . the impulse our race has toward morbidity. . . . That deliberate effort at perfecting ourselves, submitting the body to gymnastic practice, will serve us well in Mexico where dreamers are so abundant."

Racialized explanations for opposition to women's haircuts moved easily from national pride to uglier sentiments. Another magazine article published in 1924 offered this history of the trend for short hair: "In our times, women of every nation have cut off their braids . . . to follow a style set by the girls of a nation whose women lack tender sentiments and agitate for change. . . . Three years ago in New York City this [trend] started among the fashionable women of Wall Street, and especially those of the Jewish neighborhoods, arriving instantly among the actresses of vaudeville and some from the cinema too who appeared with their hair done à la 'Bob.' " Humorists, too, expressed anxiety over the possibility of this trend spreading into the nation and outside its appropriate social and racial location. The magazine La Dama Católica parodied an article supposedly taken from a French periodical called Pages Médicales et Parisiennes. La Dama Católica's version suggested that the healthiest "modern sports for women" would be "those ancient ones which one cannot fear overdoing": mopping, sweeping, and washing clothes. This joke relied on the assumption that the masculinization of Mexican women was caused by the prestige of foreign ideas about health, sport, and gender. Perhaps the end point of the process through which the media conflated pelona style, sport, and the exotic came in July 1924, when the weekly magazine Jueves de Excésor jokingly ascribed the vogue for short hair to women's yearning for more free time in which to play "the Asian game of Mah Jong": "No woman . . . wants to waste a minute in which she could be engrossed in the play of the 'dragons,' 'winds,' and other exotic figures."

Sometimes, however, jokes and complaints about las pelonas implied that they had made themselves sexually unavailable or unattractive to men. Several journalists, a poet, and the advertisement for Mujeres modernas all mentioned the German philosopher Schopenhauer's dictum that a real woman was long of hair and short of thoughts—with the implication that short-haired women were likely to lack feminine charm in other ways, as well. Self-declared opponents of the new style warned "ugly girls (and ugly old women)" not to be "tricked" by pretty pelonas into bobbing their own hair. In other words, only women whose value on the marriage market was high had enough social capital to risk some of it by bobbing their hair.

The androgynous pelona style threatened to erase the visual differences between the sexes, and Mexican media sometimes wrote as if the new style also threatened to erase the visual markers of racial difference. One news-

ANNE RUBENSTEIN

The War on Las Pelonas
paper cartoon, again from the summer of 1924, showed an aged woman whose body type and dress suggested that she was an Indian; throwing off her rebozo to reveal a short, blonde haircut, she explained that she had "made herself chic". The cartoon's humor (and anxiety) arose from the woman's incongruous age, social class, and (especially) race. Another cartoon from the same newspaper, published a week later, depicted two housepainters observing a female passerby leaving a beauty parlor: "Just like our old brushes," one observed, "so little hair and so much paint [makeup]!" The tension underlying this joke lay in how an upper-class woman had made herself the object of comment for working men—her new hairstyle brushed away the barriers between classes. Similarly, the Sunday supplement of the Mexico City newspaper Excélsior ran a photograph of three women getting their hair cut in a barber shop—a very male space—with a caption which referred to the "various criollitas [little white girls] waiting their turn," tempering the shock of androgyny in the image with language that stabilized the subjects’ race and class.

Defenders of las pelonas tended to accept this view. A woman who referred to herself as "pelona y todo" in an interview with a newspaper conceded that not all women had "the right to cut their hair"; those who were too ugly, too thin or too fat, too old, not healthy enough, or "one of those barrel-shaped girls so representative of our race" should keep their hair long. So the idea of raza, or race, was key to both sides of this argument: neither opponents nor defenders of las pelonas wanted women who appeared too Indian ("barrel-shaped") or too poor to adopt this new style. Both sides—at least, both sides among the group of people whose views on the topic appeared in Mexico City periodicals—were complicit in a bargain in which newly permeable boundaries between genders were traded off for increased rigidity in the barriers between races.

But a corrido, or folk ballad, of the day drew a very different picture of las pelonas. It mocked them as "sitting at their window / waiting for Pancho Villa / so that he would give them a sister"—in other words, they were his concubines. The ballad thus suggested that the pelonas resembled the beautiful young women whom everyone understood to have been Pancho Villa’s many wives: mestiza and from poor or working-class backgrounds, apparently sexually available, closely associated with the revolution, and both participants in and examples of feminine modernity. The tension between these two ways of thinking about las pelonas, either as white, elite young women participating in an international fashion trend or as poorer and darker-skinned young women participating in the revolution, helps explain some of the confusion and anger that led to physical violence against real-life pelonas in the summer of 1924.

The War against Las Pelonas

The arguments against las pelonas soon moved beyond rhetoric. Some of the real-life consequences of these words were relatively minor, as when immigration officials turned away a group of women tourists attempting to enter from Brownsville, Texas, because they were wearing "knickers." A consular official explained to journalists that "previously many women had entered in such attire and had conducted themselves not in a manner in accord with the dignity of decent Mexican families." But in Mexico City in the summer of 1924, things went further. Sixty years later, a woman who had been a young, short-haired student herself at the time remembered it as follows.

When short hair came into fashion, it even led to fights between [preparatory school students]... Those of us who had cut our hair produced a moral panic among the boys. They did not tolerate it. There were fights... because a girl who had been passing by the School of Medicine—in those days in the Plaza de Santo Domingo—was taken away by the boys to be punished. They hit her or maltreated her. And this infuriated [students from another school]. They felt bad, well, who knows what they felt? It was a historical episode, something very expressive of what a man wanted to find in a woman. I think that there were many very serious differences between us, but one of the most notable, the most objective, was hair, long hair.

Although her account does not agree in every detail with newspaper reports printed at the time, the speaker’s remarkably close recall of these events more than half a century later suggested how important and upsetting they were.

The rhetorical war in the newspapers and magazines of the day began in April but had escalated by late June to the point where most newspapers mentioned the topic every day. In mid-July the church weighed in on the question. The archbishop of Mexico City gave a long interview in which he threatened to take steps against “women who forget decency, natural modesty, and elementary decorum in attire” similar to those that had been taken by the archbishop of Milan, Italy, two weeks earlier: banning women with short hair from the local cathedral. (That the archbishop of Mexico City turned immediately from this subject to his complaints against the revolutionary state may indicate how closely connected las pelonas were to the revolutionary government, at least in the archbishop’s imagination, or it may simply suggest that both topics mattered to the cleric and the journalist who interviewed him.) A few days later the same newspaper reported on a “meeting of Catholic ladies” in

The War on Las Pelonas

The arguments against las pelonas soon moved beyond rhetoric. Some of the real-life consequences of these words were relatively minor, as when immigration officials turned away a group of women tourists attempting to enter from Brownsville, Texas, because they were wearing “knickers.” A consular official explained to journalists that “previously many women had entered in such attire and had conducted themselves not in a manner in accord with the dignity of decent Mexican families.” But in Mexico City in the summer of 1924, things went further. Sixty years later, a woman who had been a young, short-haired student herself at the time remembered it as follows.

When short hair came into fashion, it even led to fights between [preparatory school students]… Those of us who had cut our hair produced a moral panic among the boys. They did not tolerate it. There were fights… because a girl who had been passing by the School of Medicine—in those days in the Plaza de Santo Domingo—was taken away by the boys to be punished. They hit her or maltreated her. And this infuriated [students from another school]. They felt bad, well, who knows what they felt? It was a historical episode, something very expressive of what a man wanted to find in a woman. I think that there were many very serious differences between us, but one of the most notable, the most objective, was hair, long hair.

Although her account does not agree in every detail with newspaper reports printed at the time, the speaker’s remarkably close recall of these events more than half a century later suggested how important and upsetting they were.

The rhetorical war in the newspapers and magazines of the day began in April but had escalated by late June to the point where most newspapers mentioned the topic every day. In mid-July the church weighed in on the question. The archbishop of Mexico City gave a long interview in which he threatened to take steps against “women who forget decency, natural modesty, and elementary decorum in attire” similar to those that had been taken by the archbishop of Milan, Italy, two weeks earlier: banning women with short hair from the local cathedral. (That the archbishop of Mexico City turned immediately from this subject to his complaints against the revolutionary state may indicate how closely connected las pelonas were to the revolutionary government, at least in the archbishop’s imagination, or it may simply suggest that both topics mattered to the cleric and the journalist who interviewed him.) A few days later the same newspaper reported on a “meeting of Catholic ladies” in
Brussels which had denounced the new fashions for women, insisting that they were especially ill-suited for churchgoing. The congress of Catholic women declared, “In a Christian fashion one may deduce that there will be immorality where there is immodesty, and one may affirm that the churches are not cinemas or dance halls.” In reprinting this section of the declaration, the newspaper specialized the issue of las pelonas in two ways: first, it drew attention to the transnational dimensions of the new fashion and of opposition to it; second, it juxtaposed two types of urban space, the church and the theater, as stages for different types of public enactments of femininity. In Mexico City, other urban spaces—the public schools, the streets, government offices, and a train—soon offered a new kind of stage to this drama.

At the same time as the archbishop was airing his views, an afternoon tabloid printed a very long account of a meeting of anti-pelona activists. The story in El Universal Gráfico was so lurid that it lacked the slightest plausibility, as its second sentence made obvious by assuring readers that “this has nothing to do with a reporter’s fantasy, but is a real fact.” The account probably does not describe what really happened as much as it conveys what editors thought they could get away with; thus, it can point to what readers at the time—with expectations raised by the rhetorical war over female modernity in the newspapers, by popular songs, and by cinema—believed might be happening. The article details a meeting of “a strange grouping of students and workers” to plan “direct action” against “our modern ‘flappers’ which will begin this very day. Five young girls have been selected to suffer the exemplary punishment . . . of having their heads shaved in public.” The reporter claimed to have learned of this by eavesdropping on a “heated discussion” in a train from Mexico City to an unnamed small town. He followed the young men he had been listening to off the train, through the town, and to “an old farmhouse” where, “hidden behind a tree,” he observed more debate among a larger group of “men whose faces were obscured and bodies partly covered” by large, pointed hats and loose robes. As the leader explained to the reporter once he had been discovered, the members of this group were arguing about how best “to impose punishment on whatever woman does not repudiate this Yankee style.” In case readers missed the reference, the article helpfully reminded them of the recent “case of Señor Mercader . . . who had perished due to the activities of the famous gang, the Ku Klux Klan. At the time nobody placed any faith in our information and even now there are persons who believe the whole story was made up by the editors of this newspaper.” But, the article reiterated, violence really would be visited on pelonas who did not “abstain from going out on the street until their hair grew long again”—and the attacks would begin very soon, perhaps the next day.

Of course, this tale of the defense of female purity owes very little to facts about the Ku Klux Klan and its activities against Mexicans resident in the United States, and almost everything to the movie that established the myth of the Klan, D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation. If the anti-pelona men quoted in the article did exist, they and the reporter would have seen this film very recently: although produced in Hollywood in 1915, the silent film premiered in Mexico City 9 October 1923 and played in second- and third-run movie houses in the city for months afterward. There are some bizarre aspects to this analogy between the story detailed in the newspaper article and the plot of The Birth of a Nation. In the film, African American men threatened the virtue of white American women, who were defended by white American men; in the newspaper story, young Mexican women threatened their own virtue, and had to be protected from themselves by young Mexican men. But the plot of The Birth of a Nation must have seemed to fit a conservative vision of Mexico’s situation in the early 1920s. The movie tells of heroic male interventions in the aftermath of a civil war. These interventions are, according to the logic of the film’s plot, justified during a period in which political chaos (summed up in the movie’s stunning representation of President Lincoln’s assassination) and newly permeable boundaries between the races (figured in the movie as the threat of sex between white women and black men) menace the peaceful, patriarchal home. El Universal Gráfico may or may not have gotten its facts right about the particular meeting it described, or invented, in this article. Yet the article did reveal some important truths about the underlying tensions and conflicts that would soon result in physical violence against young women in Mexico City.

To express the growing sense that something bad was going to happen soon to las pelonas, even more respectable newspapers than El Universal Gráfico probably fabricated certain stories. By the middle of July 1924, Mexico City’s dailies certainly contained some unlikely reports. El Universal, for instance, wrote about a group of pelonas living in the upper-class neighborhood of Tacubaya who announced that they planned to form a “Pro-Pelonas Club” that would “be just like a union, with the goal of supporting this hygienic and modern style, which in no way offends against morality and proper behavior.” This report was, at least in part, a joke—the “Pro-Pelonas Club” never reappeared in the media—but, again, it responded to an intangible but widely felt sense of menace. And two weeks after El Universal printed this article, something did happen.

At 8:30 in the evening, Monday, 21 July 1924, a group of preparatory
school students grabbed a young woman with bobbed hair from the entryway to her school, the Escuela Nocturna Doctor Balmis. (As a student of this new vocational night school, she would most likely have been mestiza and working-class: a perfect representative of the kind of “quasiflapper” disdained even by the elite pelonas.) The preparatory school students took her to another location where they shaved her head, then released her—a crime small enough that at least one major daily paper, El Universal, did not bother to cover it. But the following evening the anti-pelona forces made their actions much more public. Around seven o’clock, at the brand-new campus of the Mexico City Medical School, a group of male students—both first-year medical students and students of the nearby National Preparatory School—gathers in front of the school gates, where they made loud, insulting comments to anyone with short hair in their vicinity and applauded passers-by with long hair. Young women studying at the medical school had to be escorted out of the building by older male classmates. The younger students who were part of this mob started throwing water as well as insults at any pelona they saw and making feints at them with scissors and razors. Finally they dragged two unlucky young women inside the medical school, forced them into the building’s new showers to be “washed,” and shaved their heads. This event was large and public enough to draw a crowd, which was eventually joined by the police and a Cruz Blanca ambulance in which the young women were borne away.

Various groups responded quickly, almost always in support of las pelonas or, at least, in opposition to violent attacks on young women. The first reactions came from some of those who were directly involved: the students and the newspapers. The male medical students who had defended their female peers visited newspaper offices, complaining about the scandalous behavior of their younger male colleagues. Female medical students and female students at the preparatory school wrote to the newspapers explaining that the majority of their male colleagues made them welcome, even though the schools had only recently begun admitting women. The “modernity” of the whole affair entranced commentators: a crime small enough that at least one major daily paper, El Universal, had been kept informed of the news by “more than fifty persons who used the telephone to contact us.” Yet the papers also editorialized against “an attack which dishonors the city,” as one headline put it, while they reported on the negative responses of other interested parties.

Some responses seemed opportunistic. Reinforcing the connection between silent film and the pelona identity, one chain of Mexico City cinemas took out an ad denouncing the attacks and promising that “las peloncitas” would be “very much at home and completely secure” in their theaters. The most important Mexico City theater went further: five days after the attacks began, el Teatro Iris announced two special shows, a matinee and an evening performance, to which only women would be admitted. The centerpiece of the show was a speech by the director of the theater, the famous diva Esperanza Iris, titled “The Right to Have Short Hair, Dedicated especially to Las Pelonas.” (El Teatro Iris thrifty repeated the entire program the following weekend for a mixed-gender audience, and Esperanza Iris was still lecturing her audiences on the subject when she toured Colombia in 1928.) Meanwhile, the municipal government, which already had a special police patrol assigned to movie houses and theaters in the city, stepped up surveillance of these locales “with the object of impeding any barbarian who would attempt such an indescribable crime.”

Political actors of several types also entered the argument. The industrial workers’ union, crom (Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana) had its representative tell reporters that the workers were opposed to attacks on las pelonas, adding, “Now we are certain that any worker is more correct in his behavior and better knows how to respect a lady than any student does.” The spokesman for the National Agrarian Commission sent a telegram to the governor of the Federal District (essentially, the unelected mayor of Mexico City) complaining that the female employees of the commission feared similar “outrages” and demanding that the government act to protect them. The Ministry of Education (SEP) announced that if it caught the students who had committed the assaults, they would be expelled.

At the same time, some students acted to assure the public and the state that they could police themselves. Male students from the School of Medicine formed a “Pro-Pelona Committee” in opposition to their classmates who had attacked the pelonas, while cadets from the Military College and the School of Aviation proclaimed their intention to join patrols that would guard pelonas at other schools, including the Medical School. This, in turn, led to confrontation between the male students of the different schools three days after the second attack. In an atmosphere of great excitement and tension, young men from the School of Aviation and Military College marched to the Medical School, where students from other schools had gathered in support of male students. Reporters had gathered to watch, along with a number of members of the army, who were in uniform and armed. (Newspaper reports are unclear about whether someone in authority had sent them there in an official capacity or whether they went simply out of curiosity or solidarity with the cadets.)
Shouted taunts between the two groups of students seemed to be on the verge of turning into physical confrontation when the soldiers began ordering the entire crowd to disperse. Finally, one soldier fired his gun into the air, nonetheless mildly wounding a student, and this convinced everyone else to leave.

The next day, another group of young men in Tampico attacked two short-haired women who had been sunbathing at Miramar beach, but the women managed to swim away while the boys were arrested and briefly jailed. Meanwhile, presumably under some pressure from the authorities, leaders of the two groups of Mexico City students met privately and agreed to a public reconciliation. Thus, the “question of honor” was resolved among the young men, without a word from the women over whom they had quarreled. 52 Indeed, at least temporarily, las pelonas disappeared from the story.

A Question of Honor

As magazines recounted the whole story in subsequent weeks and months, public disavowal of the attacks on las pelonas took on a more joking, relaxed tone. Journalists focused once again on who the short-haired women were and whether or not they were sexually attractive. Commentary on the young men who had attacked them shifted quickly to a register of amused comprehension. A typical magazine article combined mild scolding of the attackers—“Everyone has the right to follow universal fashions, however ridiculous they are, and nobody should mind if their neighbor puts on the most absurd things . . . That is, actually, one of the great triumphs of civilization”—with explicit approval of them: “One can understand this student gesture against some of the exaggerations into which we slip by imitating the styles of other places. There are short-haired types who ought to be banned from the city streets . . . who deserve to be locked up and fed nothing but bread and water until they allow their hair to return to the simple and plain style of their nation. These tonsured types . . . who have all the habits of present-day Yankees, now I do believe that they require direct action. Those [women] really should be bathed and given prosthetic braids.” 53 Who were these young men, that their public attacks on women could be so easily understood and forgiven? What about las pelonas inspired their violence?

The position of all the groups of students—las pelonas, their attackers, and their defenders—in relation to the post-revolutionary state was critical. To begin with, all were students. As a great deal of historical research has shown, education in all its aspects was formed by the post-revolutionary state’s efforts to build the nation and legitimize itself. Who was able to learn or teach what, and the locations and conditions in which they did so, were product and project of the state’s ideological and pragmatic interests. And the experience of education was profoundly gendered. 54 Although newly available educational opportunities benefited both young men and women in Mexico City, women had more to gain. For women other than those who belonged to the very highest strata of the elite, education was a gift of the beneficent new government, whether they were attending recently gender-integrated institutions such as the National Preparatory School, recently created vocational schools, or recently expanded and improved schools such as the Normal School. As they adopted the pelona style, ordinary young Mexico City women were claiming two different identities: they were embodying the glamorous look of local society women and international celebrities, but at the same time they were associating themselves with the revolution and its gendered educational projects.

Young men who were privileged and powerful enough to attended such important, longstanding institutions as the National Preparatory School and the Military College had little to gain and much to lose by these changes in the national system of higher education. Such young men might have felt called on to defend these institutions and their positions within the political life of the nation. (Among the student leaders who spoke for groups on the side of the pelonas were young members of the Ávila Camacho and the Costío Villegas families, which gives some indication of the schools’ important role in the formation of the nation’s military, political, and intellectual leadership.) Both those who attacked the pelonas and those who defended them used their status and the traditions of their institutions to shape and give meaning to their words and actions. Throwing water and violently shaving the heads of the unwilling were longstanding habits of students at most of the schools involved, usually practiced by older students against new students and understood as an act of initiation. When first-year students turned these practices against female students of other schools or went to the campuses of other preparatory schools in order to engage in these practices, they inverted their meanings in a refusal of school tradition. At the same time, the shaved heads, as well as being an ancient gesture of shaming and social ostracism, also implied “modern” hygienic practices, as in the treatment of prisoners or of people suffering from lice. In doing so, the young men who attacked las pelonas positioned themselves as the agents of (revolutionary) moder-
Embodying Revolution (Las Pelonas Strike Back)

The student attacks and the cultural climate which enabled them to happen pushed las pelonas to stop claiming to belong to a “global revolution” in fashion spread by international media. Instead, they protected themselves from physical danger, and improved their opportunities, by strengthening their cultural and political affiliations with the state. Rather than trying to resign from la raza cósmica, they came to embody the revolution.

To understand the terrain to which las pelonas moved, consider another series of events occupying the newspapers in the spring and summer of 1924: the inaugural celebrations of the National Stadium. These ceremonies—grander versions of the inaugural festivities with which the SEP celebrated the opening of public schools in the capital—began even before construction was entirely finished, so that (as newspaper ads explained) ticket sales could finance completion of the building. Such mass performances of “rhythmic gymnastics,” to use the English-language term, have nearly vanished from public memory, and they have received little attention from cultural historians or other scholars. But at that time they were important and popular alternatives to spending leisure time attending church or going to the movies—the other pastimes available on the Sunday afternoons during which such events were held.

The new stadium’s modernist architecture earned little admiration. “From the beginning, in 1924, it was the target of abundant joking due to its unpleasant looks,” Eduardo Flores Clair wrote, which added to the “general suspicion” that the edifice would find its most frequent use in “political ritual, that is, mass meetings, state-sponsored demonstrations, and political rallies.” This rumor proved true: by 1932, the head of the physical education department was forced to plead with SEP administrators for even occasional use of the stadium for track-and-field events, rather than for “festivales . . . del departamento del Gobierno.” But if the stadium lacked public approval, that only would have increased Secretary Vasconcelos’s interest in emphasizing its importance. Thus the Ministry of Education organized not one, but three grand patriotic festivals to inaugurate the National Stadium.

Most of the women involved in these spectacles—choreographers, organizers, dancers, athletes, and Red Cross nurses—conformed to the flapper mode. Some had not cut their hair, but tucked it away under caps or cloche hats. Although such was not Secretary Vasconcelos’s intention, these festivals and similar occasions became opportunities for women employed by the state to display themselves en masse as both pelonas and representatives of the revolution. Thus, newspaper coverage of these events tended to show women in gym clothes or pseudo-Greek togas, all cut more or less on the model of the flapper dress. Such events also demonstrated, probably inadvertently, the vast numbers of young women who had found a place for themselves within the SEP. The program for the third of the three inaugural events, for instance, included a mixed chorus of a thousand voices singing pieces by Beethoven, Delibes, and Wagner; an “Egyptian Dance” performed by female students from the school of physical education; and baton-twirling by a group of 200 female gym teachers.

Newspaper coverage pointed out that the crowd in the cheap seats responded enthusiastically to all “the different numbers on the program,” which the reporter claimed to be “a proof of the intellectual betterment of the people.” Spectacle organizers seem to have believed that large numbers of performers would, in themselves, attract audiences: one of the advertisements for the National Stadium inauguration was headlined “800 gymnasts/300 dancers/1,000-voice chorus.” Members of the audience shared the experience of being in a dense, somewhat disorderly
crowd while watching a highly organized (but almost as tightly packed) group of nearly the same size, and this seems to have been the most memorable—perhaps the most meaningful?—part of the experience. The SEP certainly took great care to have as many participants as possible in the parades, demonstrations, rallies and mass spectacles it organized, requiring teachers to attend, if not join in or organize, such group displays. The SEP used whatever means it had to reward participation. The Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública printed detailed accounts of “Festivales al aire libre” in most of its early issues. Teachers responsible for the organization of such small festivals or the choreography of portions of larger ones like the National Stadium inaugurations were excused from giving classes, sometimes for weeks. Teachers who led students in successful performances during patriotic festivals received fulsome letters of congratulations from their supervisors, which went into their permanent files. The SEP also punished teachers who failed to attend or participate in patriotic festivals (which often took place on national holidays when teachers might not otherwise have been working). School officials had to distribute written orders requiring attendance, take roll at the events themselves, and write memoranda to their own heads of section explaining any absences. Special inspectors visited gym classes regularly to make sure that teachers were preparing students properly for their roles in such events. In sum, a system of surveillance, reward, and punishment helped the SEP make these patriotic spectacles what they were.

All this might suggest that viewing or participating in these spectacles was a dreary business, engaged in only by those who had no choice. But other evidence shows that large numbers of people attended events such as the inauguration of the National Stadium eagerly and enjoyed what they saw. The first inauguration ceremony filled every seat in the stadium, according to newspaper accounts, at ticket prices ranging from two pesos for a seat on the shady side to fifty centavos for general admission—roughly the same price as a theater ticket and slightly more than a first-run movie theater seat. People waited in long lines to enter the stadium, with women holding parasols to ward off the sun and policemen standing by to enforce order. The two subsequent inaugural ceremonies were not quite as popular: photographs of the stadium show perhaps half the seats empty. Nevertheless, someone did steal or counterfeit a large bloc of tickets for the third inaugural ceremony, which suggested that the criminal assumed that the tickets could be sold easily enough to make the crime worth the trouble. These were popular events, and their popularity was their point: the people who collaborated in producing them hoped to create a new kind of spectacle and a new form of civic ritual, displacing both cinema and church.

Through events like these, athletic women claimed the New Woman as their own, and they made a healthy Mexican revolutionary out of her, even as other sectors of the revolutionary state insisted that the proper way for women to contribute to the revolution was as good mothers (Gabriela Mistral’s Lecturas para mujeres best illustrates this tendency). As the athletic, energetic, and short-haired New Woman retreated from her public affiliation with transnational media culture, she sought protection within the new revolutionary state by entering the new schools as a student, teacher, or administrator. During and after the days in which the new stadium was inaugurated, las pelonas found other ways to continue self-fashioning and self-presentation by working within the SEP. They elided the terms of art and physical education, much as they had combined sports with fashion in their self-presentations as pelonas. Thus the Ministry of Education made “physical culture” a part of its fine arts division during its 1921 organizational phase, while schools taught gymnastics, sports, games, and dance as a single subject from the beginning of primary school through the end of normal school. (Rhythmic gymnastics remained part of the public school curriculum, at least for little girls, through the 1960s.) School inspectors checked physical education teachers to see how well they taught dance, how much revolutionary zeal they displayed, and how well their students worked together in forming gymnastic tableaux; in rural schools, visiting inspectors were often greeted with special pageants, which included demonstrations of dance by “las señoritas profesoras” and their students, exhibitions of students’ skills in basketball or track and field, and declamations of patriotic sentiment written by well-trained pupils. Women teachers made rhythmic gymnastics and folk dance central to the patriotic mobilization that was supposed to take place within the new urban public schools. The SEP sent piano accompanists (almost all women) from school to school in Mexico City to help. Sports and the arts blended together—especially as practiced by women—and enlisted themselves in the project of building the new, revolutionary (female) Mexican citizen. This was partly a matter of the state marshaling all possible resources for its project, partly a question of genuine belief and enthusiasm on the part of participants, but also partly a reflection of ambitious women’s ability to make use of the state.

This does not mean that the Mexican flapper lived happily ever after. Short hair on women remained a troublesome image to many Mexicans, inspiring a lotería card that elided the pelona figure with the image of
death. More than twenty-five years later, *El Universal Gráfico* sent a reporter out to ask random passers-by what Mexico’s worst problems were, and one of them complained that “short hair on women... makes it possible to confuse them with men.” Women’s haircuts continued to inspire controversy until they were replaced in the public imagination by the question of men’s hair—specifically, long hair worn by male university students—-in the late 1960s. And the memory of the 1924 attacks on las pelonas lingered, at least in the minds of university women, longer still. High schools, colleges, and universities remained a site of gender conflict. As late as the 1980s, at least one women’s athletic team at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) called itself Las Pelonas in memory of the women who were attacked in 1924. And as newspaper articles and magazine stories from the summer of 1924 suggest, at the time and well into the future las pelonas remained easy to mock and to trivialize, if not to physically abuse. Yet it is also true that by taking advantage of the new opportunities the post-revolutionary state opened up for them, las pelonas made their way in the world at least partially on their own terms. A limited victory, but a real one.

Notes

Research for this article was funded through the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Thanks, too, to fellow panelists and audience members at the first Conference on Mexican Women’s and Gender History, and the 2003 Reunión de Historiadores Mexicanos, Estadounidenses y Canadienses for especially lively and helpful discussions of this topic. Although all the readers and editors of this volume aided greatly in clarifying the argument here, I am especially grateful to Gabriela Cano for her scholarly solidity and sense of humor; without her help, this article could not have been written at all. Translations throughout are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

1. “The pelonas are finished / The fun is done / She who wants to be a pelona / Will have to pay her dues.” Thanks to Carlos Monsiváis, who remembered this rhyme from his youth, and to Gabriela Cano, who passed on the citation.


6. For images of female athletes in commercial imagery, high art, and architecture see the exhibit catalogue *Art Déco* (1997, 25–30 and throughout). For athletic women in murals, see the frontispiece to “Decoración de la Sala de Conferencias en la antigua iglesia de San Pedro y San Pablo,” *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública* 1:2 (1922); also see Angel Zárraga’s murals for the Mexican embassy in Paris, as reproduced in *Angel Zárraga* 1990. For athletes on matchbox covers see *Mexicana* 1998.


12. Asael T. Hansen, “Miss Blackburn. Styles,” unpublished field notes on Mérida, folder 25, box 11, Robert Redfield Papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; Margaret Park Redfield, journal entry for 24 January 1928, folder 17, box 3, Margaret Park Redfield Papers, Special Collections, University of Chicago.

13. Frederick Starr, journal entry, 15 July 1928, notebook 56, box 21, Frederick Starr Papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

14. This refers to thousands of photographic negatives from this era, mostly taken at country clubs but some from other sporting events (AGN, Fototeca, Enrique Díaz collection, boxes 14–17 and elsewhere).


16. Evidence for this in the 1920–1930 period can be found in newspaper coverage of country-club tennis tournaments and other sporting events, particularly in the sports sections of *Excésior* and *El Universal*, as well as in photographs from the Díaz collection (AGN, Fototeca, Enrique Díaz collection, boxes 14–17 and elsewhere).


18. Frederick Starr, journal entry, 7 September 1921, notebook 53, box 21, Frederick Starr Papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. Starr’s informant, Carmen Tancerrado, joined an expedition led by the painter and muralist Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), which left the base camp at two in the morning, she complained, in order to make the sixteen-hour round trip. She appears to have had little respect for Dr. Atl: she told Starr that the artist’s book on Popocatepetl was “not scientific and exact.” William Beezley writes that mountaineering, including climbing Popo, was of no interest to Mexicans before the 1922 founding of the Explorers’ Club; the expeditions led by Dr. Atl appear to have been more a nationalist expression than a gesture toward adventure or fitness (1987, 40–41).


20. Advertisement for *Mujeres modernas* (*El Universal*, 9 July 1924, sec. 1, p. 5). The same advertisement appeared six more times in the subsequent ten days. What was this movie? The advertisement contained no imagery, merely this somewhat inflammatory text. It lists “Corinne Griffit,” surely a misspelling of Corinne...
Griffith (a huge star of the day), as the film's lead actress. But the usually reliable Internet Movie Data Base (http://us.imdb.com/) does not mention Griffith's participation in any such film, although she did star in a 1922 melodrama about high-society life titled *Divorce Coupons*—perhaps these advertisements refer to some version of that film?

21. See the reviews reprinted in Garrido 1997 (402-4, 410-12, 415, 418-20, 456).


26. Fras 1924, 22.

27. Serrano 1924, 9.

28. "Deportes femeninos modernos," *La Dama Católica*, 1 August 1924, p. 25. Thanks to Patience Schell for this citation.


38. The following account of these events is based on coverage in the Mexico City newspapers *El Universal*, *El Universal Gráfico*, and *Excésior* and the magazines *Jueves de Excésior* and *Revista de Revistas*, 1 April—15 August 1924, except where otherwise noted.


42. "¿Se trata de ejercer la acción directa contra las pelonas?" *El Universal Gráfico*, 16 July 1924, p. 8.

43. See Amador and Ayala Blanco 1999, 186.

44. "En tacubaya se formará un Club Pro-Pelonas," *El Universal*, 10 July 1924, sec. 1, p. 11. The phrase was "moralidad y buenas costumbres."

70. Blanca de Lizaur, personal communication, 2 August 1999.
71. Frederick Starr, journal entry, 19 August 1928, notebook 57, box 21, Frederick Starr Papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.
72. See, for instance, the life history of the dance teacher and athletic coach Alura Flores (Cano and Radkau 1989).
73. For the inspection forms of physical-education teachers and teaching schedules of piano accompanists see the personnel files in caja 9504 and caja 9114, ramo Bellas Artes, Subsecretaría de Educación Pública.