Es una molestia espiritual no conocer autor ninguno respetable que haya dicho una frase inmortal acerca del baño, porque los epígrafes dan fuerza y autoridad a los discursos como la cita oportuna de un artículo legal suele dar la libertad a los presos, si sus defensores la hacen con tino y los jurados los creen.

Salvador Novo, “Motivos del baño”

In “Motivos del baño,” an essay first published in Mexico City in 1924, a nineteen-year-old Salvador Novo dwells on the pleasures of bathing in the river or sea, discusses the urban experience of the public bath, and wittily teases his readers with the comforts of a bathtub of their own. He writes on
an admittedly frivolous subject yet claims to desire the serious consideration that an epigraph from a literary figure might solicit. This tongue-in-cheek lament reveals a willful mismatch of registers, a witty play with cultural hierarchies that would quickly become a hallmark of Novo’s writing.

With an epigraph, Novo could establish cultural allies and anchor his ideas within a broader debate. His interest, at first, seems purely decorative: “Pienso en lo bien que se verían estos mis motivos del baño, si los ornamentalra la cúpula de una frase de, digamos, Shakespeare” (VE I 41), confesses the irreverent Novo. But the aestheticism of this poet, essayist, and chronicler, who was known to have used his own writings as epigraphs for his newer texts, harbors ulterior motives. The recognition of a reference to Shakespeare indicates knowledge and status for a reading public educated enough to know this author’s name but perhaps not erudite enough to grasp the superficiality of the reference. No longer limited to elite literary circles, Mexico City’s growing print culture had made reading accessible to a middle-class public that was not fully versed in literature. Novo’s reflection on epigraphs points to the ease with which a writer, through a few well-placed quotations, could pass as an intellectual. It also permits Novo to link himself with high culture at the same time as he mocks cultural hierarchies.

Those who read “Motivos del baño” in the glossy weekly El ilustrado were in fact faced by a peculiar epigraph. Instead of a supposedly desirable quotation by Shakespeare, a sensual photograph of Barbara La Marr, glamorous North American movie star, chatting on the telephone as she languidly reclines into a bubble bath, adorns the top of the page. The editor’s blurb reads, “Barbara La Marr, la exquisita artista, ha inspirado, con esta fotografía, el presente artículo a Salvador Novo” (see fig. 1).

Rather than choosing a literary quotation, Novo associates himself with the image of a female film star. In the 1920s, La Marr was a symbol of the

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2. Salvador Novo’s reflection on the epigraph could be a response to his contemporary Julio Torri’s short essay “Del epígrafe.” Knowing Novo’s humor, it might not be coincidental that “El maestro,” the essay preceding “Del epígrafe” in Ensayos y poemas (1916) is introduced by an epigraph from Shakespeare’s King Lear.

3. Novo uses an epigraph from his short story “El joven” in his essay “Nuestra Ciudad mía” (VE I 107). He adds this same short story as an appendix to his book-length chronicle on Mexico City, Nueva grandeza mexicana, published in 1946. He thus designates himself as the core of his genealogy of influences.

4. This magazine was at first called El universal ilustrado, but in 1928 its title was shortened to El ilustrado. For consistency, I will only use the title El ilustrado in this essay.
El Ilustrado. Reprinted with permission.
cosmopolitan popular culture of cinema, newspapers, and magazines, cultural expressions less esteemed than literary sources but that were as familiar to a popular audience as Shakespeare was to literary critics. Novo knows his classics and can play the epigraph game, but he chooses to forego the authority of a literary quotation for a reference to a less-sanctified artistic form, cinema. Novo performs literary codes, not to conform to them but rather to transgress them.5

This brief close-up of Novo’s play with epigraphs is, in itself, an epigraph of sorts. It is an emblematic example guiding this study of how a young writer established his public presence in postrevolutionary Mexican culture through the genre of the chronicle.6 First known as an essayist and poet who was a part of an avant-garde later called Contemporáneos, Novo gradually turned toward a career in journalism, regularly contributing chronicles to various newspapers and magazines. Gradually, his public status became that of a cronista, a chronicler whose work brought to life the intricacies of Mexico’s new urban modernity, often accompanied by pointed references to the literary tradition of writing the city. Many of Novo’s chronicles reveal, as does “Motivos del baño,” a slippery relationship with defined cultural institutions. His practice of the chronicle, a genre that draws from both journalism and literature, constantly breaks with expected conventions by walking in and out of different cultural norms, be they social, national, or sexual. Nonetheless, Novo’s pointed literary references, such as his joking wish to

5. I here take from Judith Butler’s argument that a performative act takes place within a recognizable formula that “conceals or dissimates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (12). Novo demonstrates that he is acquainted with and can follow the unspoken codes of literary conventions, but he chooses to authorize himself by giving a mocking twist to their accepted use. In other words, he reveals what Butler calls “the dissimulated citationality of performativity” (13).

6. For the genre of the chronicle and its practice in Mexico, see Carlos Monsiváis’s introduction to A ustedes les consta: antología de la crónica en México, as well as his essay “De la santa doctrina al espíritu público.” Also see the more recent volume edited by Corona and Jørgensen, Contemporary Mexican Chronicle. Salvador Novo’s career as a chronicler spanned more than fifty years and thousands of articles. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, he had already established himself as a public figure associated with poetry, essays, journalism, and other forms of popular culture. Despite its contentious elements, Novo’s writing maintained a consistently conservative bent, and he never renounced his links with high culture. As an established journalist, he was closely linked to Mexico’s political and intellectual elite, and was named official chronicler of Mexico City in 1965 by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, a title previously given to figures such as Artemio de Valle Arizpe. Novo’s relationship to official circles was highly criticized in the late 1960s and early 1970s for his failure to speak out against the 1968 massacre of Tlatelolco. At this juncture, he supported the official version of events given by President Díaz Ordaz.
quote Shakespeare, grudgingly acknowledge his desire to be affiliated with a literary canon.

As a chronicler, Novo entices his readers by inviting them to see what often remains hidden: the “backstage” where public literary authority is constructed.7 In fact, Novo began writing at a time when Mexican culture and literary authority were matters of constant debate, with private disputes often aired as public polemics. Novo’s contribution to these cultural negotiations can best be illuminated by a heated argument that took place in 1929 between the young chronicler and Rubén M. Campos, a well-known novelist and critic. Through the lens of this specific exchange, I will argue that Novo’s turn to the chronicle as a means to establish his public persona stems primarily from his stance in the debates of the 1920s regarding the role of literature in the aftermath of the revolution. Novo was a central figure in these discussions, particularly the polemic around the “feminization” of national literature, as his flamboyant homosexuality made him a ready target of homophobic criticism. At the same time, Novo’s dedication to the chronicle pragmatically responds to the rising importance in Mexico City of commercial media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and cinema.8

In the summer of 1929, a scathing polemic between Salvador Novo and Rubén M. Campos circulated in El ilustrado, the same magazine that had published “Motivos del baño” five years before. Campos was an established composer, musician, novelist, and critic. As a leader of Mexican modernism, he had been a regular contributor to Revista moderna (1898–1911), along with Rafael López and Manuel José Othon, and had authored novels such as Claudio Onoroz and literary criticism such as El bar: la vida literaria de México en 1900. Around the time of his argument with Novo, he had recently published two ethnographic studies, El folklore y la música mexicana (1928) and El folklore literario de México (1929). The dispute began in Novo’s June 13, 1929 article, “Generación anecdótica,” in which the young Novo dismissed the respected Campos as part of a generation incapable of artistic creation. De-

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7. I concentrate in this essay on Novo’s reflections on the genre of the chronicle and his engagement with literary debates. Many well-argued studies deal with the relationship between Novo and urban space. Vicente Quirarte’s Elogio de la calle: biografía literaria de la ciudad de México overviews the relationship of contemporary writers with Mexico City. See also Juan Gelpí, “Walking in the Modern City”; and Mary K. Long, “Writing the City”; as well as Long’s dissertation, “Salvador Novo: Between the Avant-Garde and the Nation.”

8. For more on the role played by the media in Mexican avant-garde movements, see Rubén Gallo’s Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution.
spite Campos’s accomplishments, Novo mockingly describes him as a survivor of an obsolete golden age of modernism in which a misunderstood Baudelairian tradition, combined with too much drink, had replaced culture and intelligence (VE II 399).

Campos counterattacked on June 27 with “La ‘novísima’ espuma literaria,” where he reproaches Novo for his homosexuality, criticizes his approach to literature as effeminate and banal, and makes public his contributions to El Chafirete, a ludicrous magazine dedicated to chauffeurs in which Novo’s writings had included a sexualized parody of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s poetry, published under the pseudonym of Radiador. When Novo responded to Campos on July 4, he called the final installment of this often petty exchange “Carta atenagórica al ‘Ilustrado’ sobre quien no lo es.” With this gesture, Novo purposefully recalls his previous parody of Sor Juana in El Chafirete, appropriating the title of a letter she had written more than two hundred years ago. Sor Juana’s original was a display of erudition, a carefully constructed argument coming from an unexpected source and directed to a male ecclesiastical authority, the Portuguese priest Antonio de Vieira. The letter was published in 1690 by the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, along with a reproach of Sor Juana’s intellectual ambitions that he signed with the pseudonym Sor Filotea de la Cruz. Sor Juana would then fire back with the famous “Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz,” in which she defended the right of a woman to pursue literary endeavors. At the time of Novo’s debate with Campos, Sor Juana was making a comeback among literary critics. With his reference, Novo demonstrates his current literary knowledge while signaling a lack of remorse for his own satire of her poetry. He also surreptitiously suggests that his polemic with Campos carries the same cultural weight in Mexican culture as did Sor Juana’s with the bishop of Puebla.

In his own “Carta atenagórica,” Novo never refers to Sor Juana, limiting himself to borrowing her title as though it were an epigraph. More than the particularities of the nun’s letter, what matters here is the way Novo strategi-

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9. In “Estantería” and “El cesto y la mesa,” columns Novo wrote for El ilustrado and Revista de revistas in which he overviewed the revival of interest in Sor Juana, Novo commented on recent academic publications on Sor Juana’s writings, singling out his own mentor Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Emilio Abreu Gómez, who had completed an edition of “Primero sueño” and was working on the “Carta atenagórica” (VE II 213, 298).
cally links himself to a figure who needed to defend her right to write when critiqued by an established authority. Novo’s intertextual referencing of Sor Juana links him not only to her gesture of self-defense, but also to her durable presence in Mexican culture. This comes as a rebuke to Campos’s allegations, which had compared Novo’s writing to “banalidades que se lleva el viento” (VE II 401). Novo here speaks through a figure recognized as doubly subaltern, both Mexican (vis-à-vis the Spanish crown) and female (vis-à-vis male ecclesiastical authority). This chosen ally takes on particular significance when placed in the context of the debates on the “feminization” of Mexican literature sparked five years before by Julio Jiménez Rueda, who on December 21, 1924 had published in the daily El universal the article “El afeminamiento de la literatura mexicana.” Here he had lamented the absence in Mexico of truly “manly” literature, thus establishing the connection between virility and Mexican nationalism that Campos later drew from in his article against Novo.10

In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the literary legacy of modernism that had been emblematic of Porfirio Díaz’s era was put into question by the intellectuals of the Ateneo de México, led by José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. These figures were eager to leave behind the influence of positivism and the francophile bend of literary modernism popular at the turn of the twentieth century. They now concerned themselves with the cultural heritage of the revolution and with creating a literature that embodied revolutionary ideals to define a new national culture. Vasconcelos’s work, in particular the messianic La raza cósmica, strove toward a united Latin American political and cultural consciousness, developed through popular access to learned culture. As secretary of education, founder of the national university, and promoter of the nationalist muralist project that facilitated Diego Rivera’s paintings, Vasconcelos’s didactic militancy advanced culture and education as tools for national progress.

In the 1920s, the role played by literature in a society reeling from conflict was often defined in sexualized terms. Texts that expressed a nationalist concern with Mexico’s political reality, its social struggle, and the potential of revolutionary change were labeled as robust and virile. Works with notable

10. Julio Jiménez Rueda’s article has not been re-edited, but it is extensively quoted in Díaz Arciniega.
foreign influences and aesthetic concerns reminiscent of modernism were dismissed as weak and feminized.\(^{11}\) Obviously, this struggle to define Mexican literature was fundamentally misogynous: effeminacy and masculinity were always adjectives defining a literature that was unquestionably male. Masculinity was associated with certain works, such as Mariano Azuela’s novel of the revolution, *Los de abajo*, while effeminacy was linked to texts with cosmopolitan interests that did not focus on the social and political impact of the revolution.

Novo’s eclectic literary interests, added to his relatively open homosexuality, placed him clearly in the effeminate, cosmopolitan camp. His growing dedication to the genre of the chronicle was not an effort to give testimony of the social impact of a revolutionary struggle; instead, he strove to document the interests of a bourgeois upper-middle-class who lived in Mexico City and stayed away from the nation’s political upheavals. Novo’s choice represented a sort of literary “treason” for the intellectual mainstream, an affront both to Mexico by depicting urban lifestyles rather than a national reality and to manhood by ignoring the rigors of social struggle. Novo was known to be an avid reader of André Gide and Oscar Wilde. He was considered an expert in all things foreign, to the extent that he was once introduced by the editors of *El ilustrado* as “un escritor yanqui, con sólida cultura inglesa y francesa, que escribe en español” (May 8, 1924). Novo’s reliance on foreign sources, in fact, highlights another facet of his cultural “borrowing”: quite a few of his articles from the early 1920s were loose translations taken from the American and English press or were directly lifted from the Spanish encyclopedia *Espasa Calpe* of 1916 (Sheridan, *Contemporáneos ayer* 171, 215).

Jiménez Rueda’s article elicited a wealth of responses from other intellectuals, launching a debate that divided Mexico’s literary world. On one hand, it set apart the *Contemporáneos*, linked to effeminacy and cosmopolitanism (a group that included Novo along with Xavier Villaurutia, Jaime Torres Bodet, Carlos Pellicer, Jorge Cuesta, Gilberto Owen, Samuel Ramos, and José and Celestino Gorostiza) from their avant-garde rivals, the *Estridentistas*, whose second manifesto declared “ser estridentista es ser hombre, solo los

\(^{11}\) This concern with sexual orientation can be traced back to the famous “baile del 41,” when in November 1901 forty-one men were arrested in Mexico City for dancing in drag in a private home. This event was widely reported in the press and became a common reference to designate homosexuality. See Ben Sifuentes-Jauregui’s chapter, “Nation and the Scandal of Effeminacy: Rereading los 41,” in *Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature*. 
eunucos no están con nosotros.'’ On the other hand, Jiménez Rueda’s article highlighted the rift between the Contemporáneos and the cultural politics of Vasconcelos’s Ateneo de México, for the debate on virile and effeminate literature had also reached the country’s official cultural discourse. That which could not be clearly defined and categorized was “hesitant,” effeminate, superficial, and by extension a threat to national identity. The regulation of sexuality, expressed through overtly homophobic critiques to certain types of cultural production, was inseparable from the elaboration of an official national discourse. If revolutionary change had been the fruit of aggressive masculinity and subsequent Mexican literature did not take note of such accomplishments, then this discrepancy could only be explained by the uncertain sexuality of the new generation of Mexican writers. Thus a concern with the “gender” of Mexican literature slipped into a debate on the sexuality of its writers. Novo’s homosexuality, like his literary interests, kept him on the margins of official national discourse and at the center of the dispute between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

At the time of Novo’s polemic with Campos, the debate on the sexuality of Mexican literature had become more subdued, but it still influenced many articles dealing with national culture. Novo’s decision to speak through Sor Juana when defending his contribution to Mexican culture is thus all the more laden. By irreverently pairing the expected chastity of a nun with his own well-known homosexual promiscuity, Novo questions both an intellectual’s implicit obligation to produce a vigorous, manly literature and the fact that virility was considered inseparable from a Mexican national identity. This borrowing from Sor Juana also puts into question the possibility of defining a national culture in absolute terms, as postrevolutionary nationalist discourse pretended. Novo thus shuns the intellectual and cultural responsibility held high by official discourse by playfully bringing together two categories considered mutually exclusive in national culture: effeminacy and “Mexicanness.”

When Novo responds to Campos’s attacks under the cloak of Sor Juana’s “Carta atenagórica,” we are faced not only by a young literary figure speaking

12. For further reading, see Daniel Balderston’s “Poetry, Revolution, Homophobia” and Robert McKee Irwin’s Mexican Masculinities.
13. See Sheridan’s Los Contemporáneos ayer and México en 1932, as well as González Rodríguez’s “Usos amorosos del joven Novo,” for more on Novo’s tense relationship with official discourse during the political climate of the 1920s and 1930s.
through the voice of a canonized author, but also by a male speaking through a female voice, creating a hybridity that borrows from both genders, like the chronicle, eventually to become Novo’s trademark genre, takes from the spheres of literature and journalism, from both erudite and “non-serious” culture. By appropriating the title of Sor Juana’s letter, Novo does not try to reconcile the oppositions highlighted by his pose (masculine versus feminine, chaste versus promiscuous, national versus foreign, “real” literature versus commercial journalism). Rather, he chooses to speak from these differences, exercising a form of literary transvestism. A third space having the flexibility to question the validity of binary structures, transvestism is, as Marjorie Garber argues, a space for possibility and questioning that signals “the crisis of a category itself” (17). A transvestite does not try to pass as the “other” or become that which it imitates, but rather expresses his/her identity as its parody, making difference and artificiality visible.

Like Novo’s take on epigraphs, which renders visible the strategies at work behind them, his transvestism of Sor Juana is a means to destabilize the rigid definitions of sexuality, literature, and culture that were used in postrevolutionary Mexico to affirm paradigms of national identity. In this sense, Novo’s use of Sor Juana claims a more versatile concept of the nation, one that leaves room for novelty and sexual difference. This doesn’t, however, imply that Novo wishes to annul cultural hierarchies. He still strives to authorize himself, albeit by dismantling conventional procedures to signal a crisis in the category of literature through which he can, as a chronicler, enunciate.

That Campos brings up effeminacy yet again to critiqueNovo’s writing in “La ‘novisima’ espuma literaria” is hardly surprising. Campos describes him as “un joven maestro en el arte de la ironia, todo pulcritud y gentileza,” who often turns toward the exquisite: “moja la pluma de oro en tinta de rosas.” Novo is “un ruboroso efebo, aún con la leche en los labios,” whose writings would burn “la satinada página con fuego de Sódoma” (VE II 401). This description of Novo as a young dandy who has not reached puberty recalls reproaches often aimed at the Contemporáneos as a group who were too young to have felt the rigors of the revolution and therefore had never hardened into manhood. This description of Novo also echoes Jiménez Rueda, who had lamented, “Pero hoy . . . hasta el tipo de hombre que piensa ha degenerado. Ya no somos gallardos, altivos, toscos . . . es que ahora suele encontrarse el éxito, más que en los puntos de la pluma, en las complicadas artes del tocador” (qtd. in Díaz Arciniega 58).

Campos’s attack on Novo’s sexuality, however, quickly backfired, for the
chronicler replied through two seemingly contradictory strategies. On one hand, he conjures a female figure as his ally in his counterattack against Campos. On the other, he gives emphasis to the signs that make his masculinity visible by describing his body as manly and unfeminine: “Y me doy cuenta del deplorable gusto de [Rubén M. Campos] cuando, conociendo mis exteriores (un metro 85, 86 kilos de peso) nuestro Rubén doméstico me llama efebo” (VE II 401). Despite the attacks against his person, Novo fits in with the very model of manliness desired by Jiménez Rueda. He truly is tall and vigorous, and yet he chooses to step beyond the supposed “masculine” requirements of Mexican literature. An intellectual stance is not about being, Novo suggests, it is about performing. It is as superficial as conveniently name-dropping Shakespeare to pass as an intellectual, it is subject to change on a whim. Novo’s performative sexuality thus works to open a space in the Mexican literary canon for the chronicle, a genre whose complex discourse is receptive to novelty and improvisation.

By displaying his sexuality as an open secret, always obvious but never stated, Novo undermines the importance of “knowing.” Campos had backed up his references to Novo’s sexuality with his supposed knowledge of his “secret” homosexual identity. But instead of contradicting Campos or proving his allegations correct, Novo shows that no one is immune from ambivalence. Novo familiarly calls him “our domestic Rubén,” linking him to femininity, domesticity, and implicitly to Rubén Dario, a poetic figure from the previous century no longer in vogue for Novo’s contemporaries. At the same time, Novo builds a parallel between Campos and the bishop of Puebla, the respondent to Sor Juana’s “Carta Atenagórica” who had written under the feminine pseudonym of Sor Filotea. If Sor Juana’s interlocutor wrote under the disguise of a woman, Novo’s adversary cannot himself remain at a distance from sexual ambiguity. Even the staunch defenders of a pure and “virile” Mexican literature can’t help being contaminated by the frivolity of effeminacy.

Novo’s play with his own sexual definition goes hand in hand with his

14. For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the closet is a space that condenses problems associated with representation, making visible the role of the secret in the process of self-definition. The closet thus functions as a space of homo/heterosexual definition, framing many of the major structures of thought and knowledge in contemporary Western culture (71). Novo’s strength, to follow Sedgwick’s terminology, lies in that he neither comes out of the closet nor stays within it, choosing instead to sidestep a definition of his sexuality in absolute terms.
resistance to describe literature in absolute terms. When interviewed by El ilustrado in 1925 for an article called “¿Existe una literatura mexicana moderna?” Novo responded with purposeful ambiguity: “Sospecho, pues, fundamente, que existe una literatura mexicana moderna cuya buena reputación de muchacha fresca y viril han querido opacar las lenguas doloridas y apolilladas de los que discuten sin crear” (Jan. 22, 1925; VE I 30–31). Just as he had combined a description of his masculine body with his ventriloquism of Sor Juana, Novo here describes literature as a girl who is both feminine and strong. He chooses to present literature as a figure that can play with its orientation, appropriating to his advantage the slippage between author and text that had occurred during the debate on the feminization of literature. The complex sexuality associated with Novo’s public image, as well as his embrace of both literary and popular culture, paved the way for a polysemic approach to literature. This possibility plays out in the chronicle’s discursive transvestism, one that permits Novo to move in and out of different registers and authorize himself through various discourses. In this sense, Novo accumulates ways of thinking literarily instead of replacing one literary model with another.

Can the chronicle be this fresh and virile girl Novo equates to literature? The notions of transvestism, hybridity, and excess discussed above are helpful to broaden our reflection on this genre as a particular mode of cultural production. In many of Novo’s chronicles, excess surfaces in his emphasis on the frivolity of bourgeois life, in his willingness to move toward aesthetic concerns and away from a didactic notion of culture. Novo’s penchant for documenting the superfluous aspects of city life recalls the modernist chronicle’s impulse to “decorate” the city by aestheticizing its utilitarian aspects, and by proposing the chronicler as a guide to the city’s offerings of luxurious goods.15 Novo’s orientation toward a bourgeois chronicle of manners is certainly comparable to the articles written by modernists such as Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, who had adopted a mundane, affectedly frivolous tone. Novo nonetheless distances himself from this predecessor in that he does not share Gutiérrez Nájera’s nostalgic need to remember a city of pleasures that was disappearing. Novo’s emphasis on excess functions primarily as a means to

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15. See Julio Ramos’s chapter “Decorating the City” in Divergent Modernities.
write about a changing urban reality that was being ignored and forgotten in the present by official cultural circles.

The excess of cultural registers that permeates Novo’s writing in the 1920s would distinguish some of his most important works. In Nueva Grandeza Mexicana (1946), a book-length chronicle published almost twenty years after the polemic with Campos, Novo links himself both to a long literary tradition of writing about Mexico City and to vibrant aspects of contemporary modern culture, thus defending his relevance in urban popular culture without relinquishing his link to “high” literature. He includes this work within a genealogy of texts going back to colonial literature, notably to Bernardo de Balbuena’s epic poem, Grandeza mexicana, from which Novo takes his title, structure, and also his epigraph.16 Like his borrowing of Sor Juana’s “Carta Atenagórica,” this emulation of Balbuena plays with different cultural registers by bringing colonial texts into a modern context. Novo here evokes a tradition of chroniclers that spans back to colonial times, erasing a fundamental difference between a modern journalistic genre that was published through the commercial vehicle of the newspaper, and a genre which in colonial times responded to completely different political and aesthetic referents. Although he chooses to overlook the journalistic aspect of the chronicle in Nueva Grandeza Mexicana, Novo nonetheless combines the structure taken from Balbuena’s colonial text with constant references to modernity. More than a historian, the chronicler functions as a tour guide who walks a new visitor through Mexico City life. Novo interprets the cityscape as though it were a text open to many readings, a play on Balbuena’s “todo en este discurso está cifrado” that refers to the multitude of meanings to be discovered in Mexico City. But unlike the modernist chroniclers, who tended to draw the city into an authoritative textual register, Novo works by putting literary reading to the service of the modern city.

Just as Novo successfully borrowed from Sor Juana and Bernardo de Balbuena, he also managed to portray himself as a public figure comparable to Mexican film star Dolores del Río. When he mentions Coyoacán, a neighborhood south of Mexico City, he notes, “Apenas hay dos mexicanos de alguna

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16. Novo’s epigraph to Nueva grandeza mexicana reads as follows: “Caballos, calles, trato, cumplimiento, / regalos, ocasiones de contento, letras, virtudes, variedad de oficios, / origen y grandeza de edificios, / gobierno ilustre, religión, estado, / primavera inmortal y sus indicios, / todo en este discurso está cifrado” (VE I 165).
nota, entre ellos, Dolores del Río y Salvador Novo, dueños de grandes jardines por esa calle de Santa Rosalía’’ (VE I 225).\textsuperscript{17} The chronicler refers to himself in the third person, becoming a character in his own description of the city. He links himself once again to femininity and more particularly to the cinema, a cultural form that in the Mexico of the 1940s had reached its “Golden Age” precisely through stars such as Dolores del Río and María Félix. The chronicler here doubles not only as Balbuena, a colonial writer, but also as a movie star, becoming a public figure within the urban landscape he describes. This gesture recalls the intimacy with Barbara La Marr he had flaunted in “Motivos del baño,” when at the end of his essay he had designated himself as the privileged interlocutor of the sensual actress: “Ya por lo pronto, la chica de la ilustración sigue mis consejos y me da las gracias por teléfono” (VE I 42).

Novo’s association with these glamorous icons of popular culture draws attention to their profession: acting. He draws from a variety of sources, making artifice visible and layering an abundance of meanings and possible interpretations. The chronicler, like the transvestite, thus undermines the simplicity of a binary system, be it “high” literature versus urban popular culture, nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, or masculinity versus femininity. By superposing his writing with his public persona, Novo performs his own concept of literature by embodying both the “freshness” of urban popular culture and the “virility” of literary tradition.

Novo transforms the very critiques that dismiss him as superficial into trademarks of his cultural production: frivolity becomes his style. The concept of style in mass culture draws away from the expected depth and intentions of a cultural project. As Stuart Ewen argues, style “deals in surface impressions” (22), it “makes statements, yet has no convictions” (16). Susan Sontag refers to similar characteristics to define “camp” as a sensibility (rather than an idea), that “converts the serious into the frivolous” (277), and that emphasizes “texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content” (278). As Novo’s fascination for flamboyant stars such as Barbara La Marr and Dolores del Río indicates, the camp sensibility of this chronicler works to seduce readers and introduce performativity and artifice as cultural ideals.

\textsuperscript{17}. Salvador Novo and Dolores del Río were neighbors in Coyoacán. The street where Novo used to live was renamed after him in March 1968. Dolores del Río, María Félix, and Novo’s mother were present at the naming ceremony.
In the late nineteenth century, the notion of style had already been singled out as a characteristic of the genre of the modernist chronicle. Rubén Darío argued that style was specifically what distinguished the chronicle’s literary quality from simple journalism by maintaining alive literature’s aesthetic impulse (Rotker 40). With Darío, style rescues the chronicle from being fully contaminated from the pragmatics of the commercial sphere, but with Novo, style becomes precisely what marks the inclusion of the chronicle in the realm of mass culture. Novo’s embrace of the rhetoric of mass culture does not detract from the pragmatic elitism that led him to define his audience within upper-middle-class circles, for style also serves as a social marker, reinforcing class divisions by consolidating the unity of the social group that recognizes itself through its signs (Simmel 547).

If superficiality indicates what is commonplace, cliché, overexposed, Novo became its embodiment, working from pejorative elements to stage his omnipresent public persona in his texts. Novo transformed the scrutiny of his sexuality into an asset by playing up his link to the effeminate and highlighting the performativity of his public image. He was frequently photographed and caricatured in poses emphasizing his dandyism—hair, plucked eyebrows, delicate hands (see fig. 2). Such images are also related to Novo’s participation in the commercial aspect of writing. He was often presented as an avant-garde artist and as a young intellectual precisely because these terms were in vogue—they sold. Novo thus responds to a change in the political and social space allotted to public figures. He becomes an intellectual in order to attract attention from a reading public, rather than attracting readers by virtue of being an intellectual. His move toward a “light” culture is political precisely because it is so forcefully apolitical in postrevolutionary Mexico. Our chronicler takes culture outside of the institutional sphere of government, outside of a nationalist project, and into the sphere of commerce. He becomes a public figure, not because he is associated with spheres such as the government or education, but because he is continually made visible through his exposure in newspapers and magazines. The very ephemeral nature of Novo’s texts works to guarantee his continuous presence and visibility as a public figure. They permit him to renovate his image and his style, day after day, chronicle after chronicle.

Novo’s choice to draw from both frivolity and intellect to create his public persona cannot be disassociated from the nature of the publication in which his polemic with Campos, as well as some of his most famous chronicles, first appeared. With the reference to “el ilustrado” in the title of his response
against Campos, Novo describes as erudite a magazine whose name ostensi-
ibly referred to the illustrations that adorned it rather than to its elevated
contents. This tongue-in-cheek reference to erudition describes Campos as
someone who precisely is not erudite, presenting him as less knowledgeable
than a publication that in the past had prided itself on being “una revista
para peluquerías,” a magazine to be read at barbershops. Novo also mocks
the concept of the man of letters (“hombre ilustrado”), fundamental to the
leading intellectuals of the time, dubbed cultural caudillos of the Mexican
revolution by historian Enrique Krauze (16).

It would be too quick, however, to dismiss El ilustrado as merely a frivo-
rous magazine without taking into account the complex condition of publi-
cations in Mexico City after the revolution. Especially under the direction
of Carlos Noriega Hope, who in the 1920s gave more visibility to young
contemporary writers, El ilustrado was one of the few venues for them to

publish. Defining itself as both literary and frivolous, this magazine followed the format of North American publications and was directed to a middle- or upper-class readership. It gave space to articles on food, fashion, cinema, as well as to anthropological, historical, and literary essays. It was one of the first publications in Mexico to translate texts from the European avant-garde, and its pages brought together many contemporary Mexican thinkers associated with radically different intellectual currents and literary publications. Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo*, hailed as the prime novel of the Mexican revolution, was published here in serial form, along with articles by the close friend of Novo, Xavier Villaurutia, the *Estridentista* Arqueles Vela, Artemio de Valle Arizpe, and Federico Gamboa, among others.

Novo’s erudite, illustrated pun goes back to the criticism he had extended to Campos in his article “Generación anecdótica,” where he had described him as a collector of cultural images devoid of creativity. Campos is, for Novo, a compiler of sterile information, a transcriber of folklore that he polishes didactically for the greater public: “Integra su misión en la tierra de remendar, como lo haría con ‘zapatos deformados por el uso de gentes incultas que no sienten ni piensan . . .’ versos y prosas, que copia al mismo tiempo y transcribe para un público largo” (*VE II* 398). While Campos intends to protect popular art from the ravages of daily use, struggling to erase the evidence of public consumption to guarantee that art remain in its intact, original form, Novo’s concept of art is instead defined by the very possibility of practical use and circulation. To the figure of the intellectual as collector and guardian of obsolete culture, exemplified by Campos, Novo counterposes that of the chronicler who informs the public in a playful and provocative manner, commenting on cultural novelties through an ephemeral medium, the press, which is also a commodity to be read and exchanged. He is a distributor of the new, a guide for urban dwellers and cultural consumers. For Novo, knowledge and culture must be put to use in order to be vibrant and ever changing. In a previous article, “Radioconferencia sobre el radio,” Novo had affirmed “El arte de hoy se gasta con el uso porque tiene aplicaciones prácticas y ello produce la ventaja de su renovación constante, la abolición de los museos y de las investigaciones arqueológicas” (*VE I* 39).

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18. *Revista de Revistas*, a rival of the *Universal ilustrado*, was a weekly published by *Excélsior*, which to a lesser degree also gave space to young writers. It was not, however, as culturally rich as *El ilustrado* under Noriega Hopé’s direction.
This conceptualization of art as a medium that cannot “afford” to be autonomous, for it depends on its reception to remain relevant, paves the way for the importance of the chronicle. As a form of expression characterized by its rapid turnover, the chronicle becomes both an example of accessible art and a medium through which readers can be informed of other artistic productions.¹⁹

Novo’s audience consists of those citizens who can afford entertainment. They can go to the cinema, and purchase newspapers and magazines. In the particular case of Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, a country still reeling from the conflict of the Revolution, the accessibility of popular culture through magazines, periodicals, radio, and cinema was certainly restricted to upper-middle-class city-dwellers. In fact, it is estimated that by the late 1920s, in a nation of 14,000,000 the newspaper-reading public reached only 700,000.²⁰ Novo’s elitism is thus pragmatic: he responds to the reality of Mexico City’s existing readers, stepping away from an activist notion of art as a vehicle for social change. If art thrives through its consumption, targeting an existing audience guarantees its constant renewal. Art and culture are here defined by their exchange value: they become that which can be consumed by the middle class.

Novo turns to El ilustrado’s frequent self-description as “una revista para peluquerías” to define his readers: “si esta revista se encuentra en las peluquerías, seguirá encontrándose allí muchas semanas, porque toda la gente civilizada se corta el pelo y se ase el calzado” (VE II 113).²¹ Novo here completely erases the rest of the nation as potential readers, while addressing himself to a public of city-dwellers who participate in the bourgeois rituals

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¹⁹. Novo defines art primarily through the public’s experience, echoing many critiques made by the European vanguards against the existence of art as an institution in bourgeois society. See Peter Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde. Also see Hannah Arendt’s lectures on Kant, especially “10th session,” where she describes the originality of the artist in terms of his ability to be understood by an audience (58–65).


²¹. At the time, a peluquería was generally associated with men and would loosely be translated as “barbershop.” Since the early 1920s, however, women began to cut their hair as a result of the influence of American “flapper” fashion, and the gender specificity of the term peluquería started to fade. This change points to women as a new type of cultural consumer. The debates on the “feminization” of Mexican literature can thus also be read as an anxious response to a commercial reality that targeted women as readers and cultural consumers.
of cleanliness and who would be interested in articles such as “Motivos del baño.” Novo has made many problematic statements about racial and social divisions in Mexico, usually opting simply to erase an unlikely rural or indigenous audience from a community of readers and citizens. For further comment, see Long’s analysis of Novo’s approach to folklore in her “Nota introductoria” to VE II.

23. See The Practice of Everyday Life.

24. See Andreas Huyssen’s chapter, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in After the Great Divide, where he traces the association between women and mass culture, as opposed to men and “authentic” culture: “Time and time again documents from the late 19th century ascribe pejorative feminine characteristics to mass culture—and by mass culture here I mean serialized feuilleton novels, popular and family magazines, the stuff of lending libraries, fictional bestsellers and the like—not, however, working class culture or residual forms of older popular or folk cultures” (49).

25. In a chronicle published in his column, “Consultorio a cargo del niño Fidencio,” Novo jokingly describes Mexico City as a modern paradise where Eve is a bourgeois housewife who stays...
If popular literature is seen as a feminine figure aiming to seduce a potential reader, transforming him (and her) from wandering citizen to accomplice in the sexualized market of popular culture, what does that make the producer of popular texts? Novo, in his typically biting humor, once compared his journalistic work to prostitution:

No se le puede exigir [a una bella muchacha] que alterne el sacramento de la maternidad con el ritual cotidiano de la prostitución. Si vive de ésta, por mucho que no lo haya voluntariamente elegido, lo más que se puede exigir es que sea placentero el efímero contacto con todos los que esa bella muchacha cumple a diario en la cama de los periódicos. (Vida en México 19)26

Novo describes himself as a figure divided between maternity (literature) and the daily ritual of prostitution (journalism). This choice ties him to the sensual and the ephemeral, toward a type of writing that will touch many readers only to be quickly forgotten. At the same time, it recalls the literary tradition of the chronicle, for figures such as Darío and Martí had already suggested a parallel between journalism and prostitution (Ramos 139). Novo claims to choose sexuality for its own sake, over a “sanctified” sexuality incorporated within a productive structure linked to heterosexuality, family, and nation. By offering himself to his readers, the chronicler becomes not only the prostitute, but also the pimp who caters to the sexual/textual desires of an urban population. Novo’s public persona thus takes to an unprecedented extreme the lack of “aura” that Walter Benjamin associates with the printing press.27 In this case, the lack of “aura” is not simply a side effect of the broad circulation enabled by journalism, it is the very element that defines Novo as a chronicler and public figure. The ephemeral pleasure of jour-

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26. Novo’s comment on prostitution has become one of his most recognizable statements. In the prologue to his only anthology of crónicas, Historia de lo inmediato, Renato Leduc paraphrases Novo to explain his hesitance to group his journalistic texts in an anthology with literary pretensions (8).

27. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin uses the term aura to describe the authenticity of a work of art: “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). This concept gives the work of art “the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be” (222). But mechanical reproduction has the effect of reducing this distance. The original can “meet the beholder halfway” and be reactivated through the process of reception (220).
nalism is his means of including literature within the constant ebb and flow of the modern city. Far from moralizing the choice of writing for a massive audience, Novo plays with the prejudices involved, defending the pleasure of being read.

Novo’s conceptualization of the role of literature, and more specifically the chronicle, draws from an intimate complicity between the intellectual and the public sphere. In the early twentieth century, most thought on Mexican culture had tended to reflect the rigid boundary between a didactic intellectual and a public eager to be incorporated into a new national modernity. The intellectual subject, such as Vasconcelos, or later Octavio Paz, defined himself as pure intellect (disembodied thought), while the masses described came into being through their corporeality. Critics such as Juan Gelpí contend that with the chronicles of Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, and José Joaquín Blanco in the 1970s, the masses became the focal point of the texts produced by Mexican intellectuals who now spoke from within the city’s public spaces (“Paseo por la crónica” 83). This shift is unquestionable, but I hope to have shown here that Novo’s embrace of the flow of popular publications in the 1920s marked a crucial first step in redefining the role of the chronicle in Mexico’s public sphere. Although he did not develop the political potential of his destabilizing cultural tactics, and despite the great political gap that separated a conservative Novo from the chroniclers of the 1970s, he did pave the way for this next generation. With Salvador Novo, the chronicler became a streetwalker: his texts and his image wandered the streets as part of a commercial dynamic, flirtatiously seeking to be picked up by a curious reader.

Works Cited


Mahieux: the chronicler as streetwalker