Preface

My earliest encounters with the mythical being known as the Mexican macho took place in the living room of my childhood home in an isolated Coahuila mining town named after another mythic model of manliness: Hercules. On one of the two television channels available in the late 1980s, I witnessed the Herculean trials and triumphs of Pepe el Toro, incarnated by Pedro Infante, in the classic trilogy of melodramas directed by Ismael Rodríguez, films that were by then almost four decades old. With the nearest cinema located several hours away by mostly unpaved roads, my introduction to Mexico's filmmaking tradition came from the relatively regular television broadcasts of landmark productions from the *cine de oro* archive. The first film of Rodríguez's three-part saga, *Nosotros los pobres* (We, the Poor) (1947), introduces the male protagonist, Pepe el Toro, as a humble carpenter who enjoys a relatively settled life in a close-knit urban community until it is abruptly overturned by a series of hardships and misfortunes. Despite having little money, Pepe goes happily and vigorously about his working day, spends quality time with his daughter, Chachita (Evita Muñoz), reveres his incapacitated mother (María Gentil Arcos), hangs out with his *cuates* (buddies), and woos his beloved Celia (Blanca Estela Pavón). Pepe has many personal flaws but these only serve to accentuate his virtues. He is ferociously stubborn but fundamentally kindhearted, quick-tempered but compassionate. Ultimately, his positive qualities far outweigh his defects. He is brave, handsome, physically strong, charming, playful, expressive, and always ready with a song. Replete with sudden tragic turns and forced resolutions, the trilogy's overarching narrative strains the suspension of disbelief even by the standards of Golden Age melodrama, hence much of the enduring appeal rests with Infante's iconic embodiment of Pepe el Toro. Enjoying these movies as a

young girl in the 1980s necessarily implied overlooking many elements of the plot and dialogue that now stand out as abhorrent, including the naturalization of male privilege and outright misogyny. Although it was perhaps impossible not to perceive that the female characters occupied denigratingly subordinate positions relative to Pepe el Toro, some part of me was nonetheless captivated by the pathos of Infante's performance and blinded by the positive ideals he represented. Yet, even as I allowed myself to be partially entranced by his cinematic spectacle, I could not help but notice that neither my own father, who worked as an office-bound human resources manager, nor the fathers of any other children I knew came close to approximating any facet of Infante's quintessential Mexican manliness. The men of Hercules had about as much in common with national cinema's mythic macho as they did with the heroic son of Jove.

The discrepancies between the Mexican characters portrayed in classic films and my own contemporary social experiences were rather plain to see. In Hercules, as well as in other communities I had known, it was easy to observe that people's daily lives were not organized around strong communal bonds as they were onscreen. Public displays of emotion were very rare, and absolutely no one was predisposed to spontaneous neighborhood sing-alongs. In the demeanors of men at work and at home, I saw no resemblance whatsoever to Pedro Infante's defining qualities, such as his passionate intensity, charming optimism, and aggressive assertiveness. In my childish effort to make sense of the differences between the performances in classic cinema I was growing to adore and the everyday reality I inhabited, it occurred to me that the Mexican character must have changed dramatically along with society as a whole in the decades since my favorite films had been made. When I asked my mother if my grandparents' lives had been closer to those of the characters in the movies, she swiftly disillusioned me, explaining that nothing like cinema's version of Mexico's past had ever actually existed. Sparing me most of the detail about the adversities that marked our family's past—of which I learned more as an adult—she told me enough to curtail my nascent romanticism about the period of Mexican history that gave rise to the "Golden Age" of film. She showed me the few existing family photos taken in Chihuahua in the 1940s and '50s, giving me a glimpse into the past experiences I was curious about. Although relatively little could be gleaned from these images, I could see well enough that, even as a young man photographed in his newish mechanic's coveralls emblazoned with the Goodyear Tire logo, my maternal grandfather appeared nothing like a personification of

classic cinema's cheerful and passionate working-class Mexican macho. To me, he looked somber and serious. My mother also spoke to me of my grandfather on my father's side, whom I would meet on only a few occasions while he was alive. As a Nahuatl-speaking campesino in rural Veracruz obliged to cultivate land he did not own, his lived experience could hardly have coincided with the model of Mexican manhood celebrated in Rodríguez's urban melodramas—not to mention the offensive stereotypes offered up by so many *indigenista* films of the same era. After these conversations with my mother, the appeal of spending part of a Saturday afternoon watching Pedro Infante suffer, sing, and swagger on television was never quite as strong.

Some memory of these early lessons in media criticism stayed with me as I began to study Mexican cinema and masculinity in graduate school. Engaging with scholarship that described and analyzed Mexican nationalist filmmaking as the definitive ideological instrument of the postrevolutionary era gave me an understanding of the vexed relationship between the "real" Mexico and the nation dreamed up in film studios financed by the state as part of a didactic cultural agenda. My readings disclosed the paternalism and patriarchal impetus behind the pedagogical construction of a national film culture that sought to "Mexicanize the Mexicans," in the words of famed director Emilio "el Indio" Fernández.[1] Yet, I was dissatisfied with certain recurring assumptions in accounts of how this strategy was supposedly realized. The explanations often amounted to iterations of the same basic argument positing homogenous popular identification with the fictional characters and narratives depicted onscreen. Of course, there had to be some consequences to a mass audience's temporary attachment to an ideologically driven cinematic point of view, but it seemed to me that what many chroniclers and critics were proposing presumed the public's passive and natural submission to an imposed set of cultural codes and parameters. From this perspective, Mexican audiences did not go to the cinema to have a responsive encounter with interesting stories set in a dreamlike, semimimetic world, presented in a novel medium, and spoken in a language that was, for some, their own. Rather, they went to receive lessons in national identity, which they readily accepted and internalized despite glaring contradictions between their own lives and the fabricated myths displayed on the movie screen. In this way, according to some prominent thinkers, ordinary men apparently learned that the value of being an Infante-style macho was equivalent to that of being a modern Mexican.[2]

To my mind, this account did not hold up against the fragments of family history my mother had gathered to lift the enchantment that *cine de oro* had briefly placed over me as a child. Did my maternal grandfather have the opportunity or inclination to watch films while working to support his eleven children? Did he recognize aspects of himself reflected in Infante's portrayal of a sentimental auto mechanic in *Necesito dinero* (I Need Money) (1952, dir. Miguel Zacarías)? Did he see this performance as an aspirational model of masculinity to emulate? And were national cinema's lessons at all relevant to my paternal grandfather? Did film have any significant cultural resonance in his church-oriented rural community? Would he have adopted a new understanding of his masculine indigeneity had he watched Infante perform in *Tizoc* (1956, dir. Ismael Rodríguez)? Although I never had the chance to ask my grandfathers these questions, reflecting on them oriented my investigations toward gaps and fissures in Mexican cinema's combined projects of mythmaking, nation-building, modernization, and machismo.

As I continued to research film's formative role in naturalizing the unity between Mexican men and the mythology of the macho, I was glad to discover the work of scholars who shared some of my doubts about the totalizing completeness of popular identification with *mexicanidad*. In Susan Dever's *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas* (2003), Andrea Noble's *Mexican National Cinema* (2005), and Dolores Tierney's *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins* (2007), I found complex critical reassessments of the national film archive that highlighted its unsettled meanings and problematized existing accounts of its role as an influential cultural mediator between the patriarchal state and the masses. I also relished Sergio de la Mora's *Cinemachismo* (2006), which brought to light the paradoxes of Infante's performances of iconic machismo in Golden Age cinema. His analysis of masculinity as a system of power in Mexico provided significant inspiration for the ideas in this book. The alternative textual interpretations of classic films offered by de la Mora show that normative, ideologically constructed categories of gender identity and sexuality articulated in Mexican cinema acquired significant cultural authority yet nevertheless remained in a constant state of flux, always shifting in tense relation with disavowed otherness. The very possibility of representing the virile heterosexual macho ideal embodied by Infante, argues de la Mora, depends on its coarticulation with homoeroticism and male effeminacy. Unveiling the queerness that both regulates and enables cinema's invention of machismo constitutes de la Mora's major critical

intervention. His work reveals eclipsed dimensions of the gendered and sexualized logic of male identification, creating openings for complex encounters with nonnormative desires and subjectivities in national film.

Thinking relationally about masculinity at its intersections with categories of male sexual otherness fractures the monolithic façade of Mexican machismo. Cinema's invention of the iconic macho necessitated not only promulgation of the stereotyped figures of the submissive woman and her untamed counterpart but also of the unmanly male. De la Mora examined the overshadowed but nonetheless necessary presence of homosexuality in classic cinema's portrayals of dominant heterosexual masculinity, but there are many other cracks in the illusory monolith of Mexican machismo, and peering deeper into these fissures reveals still more hidden facets of its oppressive power. The cultural logic that organized the projection of idealized male identities onto the movie screens of the Golden Age was not only directed by homophobic and misogynist precepts but was also closely aligned with racial capitalism. The correlation of these dimensions of machismo has been obscured by the emphasis given to effusive, celebratory representations of protagonists coded as "mestizos" from lower-class origins. In addition to studying cinematic gender formation, scholars like de la Mora, Dever, Noble, and Tierney have provided insightful critiques of problematic codifications of class and race by identifying contradictions stemming from the romanticized view of poverty, the distorted meanings of *mestizaje*, the whiteness of the film stars, the denigrating aesthetics of *indigenismo*, and so forth, but there has yet to be a full study of how these and other related dilemmas impinge on the popular appeal of the symbolic supremacy accorded to the macho.[3] This book does not consist of such a study, but it does propose that critical dialogues with Golden Age cinema's originary configurations of machismo contribute to a genealogical mapping of the dominant representational matrix that continues to assign malformed gender identities to racialized, lower-class Mexican men.

As a starting point for such dialogues, I suggest that the positive myth of the proud, dominant, melodious, hot-blooded macho celebrated in so many Golden Age films was composed in contradistinction to an adjacent cultural construct with an opposing set of features: a defective perversion of a proper Mexican macho, one not successfully formed as a man, or, more precisely, permanently and intrinsically malformed. This figure has many correlates in Mexican cultural discourse, particularly in the social psychology of Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, intellectuals who sought to explain the perpetual deferral of Mexican national modernity

by diagnosing essential pathological defects in the male psyche. The malformed macho overlaps with the invented categories of "el pelado" and "los hijos de la chingada" formulated by these writers but extends beyond them to encompass an array of despised gender characteristics marking the legitimate social coordinates of justifiable violence, containment, exclusion, regulation, and discipline.[4]

In the sphere of national cinema, malformed man manifests as a threatening criminal, a bandit, a gangster, a pimp, a usurer, a cheat, a rapist, a thief, an alcoholic, an absent or abusive husband/father, an incompetent worker, an idler, an excessive gambler, a wastrel, a buffoon, a primitive barbarian. Any social authority he appears to hold is illegitimate. He is almost invariably of the lower classes, since the bourgeoisie and elite tend to have individualizable moral flaws and are often redeemable, while the signs of masculine malformation ascribed to the commoner tend to denote an inherent deficiency. Malformed man is often located somewhere on the spectrum between "indio" and "mestizo," categories reflecting the racializing logic that inaugurated an ongoing project of coloniality disguised as a process of nation-building, integration, and modernization. His complexion typically appears dark, his physiognomy may be some version of cinema's familiar "native" type, but his racialized otherness may be encoded by other signifiers, such as clothing (or lack thereof), hairstyle, and manner of speaking.[5] Whatever shape it takes, his malformation metonymizes racial inferiority. He may partly coincide with stereotypes of the effeminate or the homosexual, especially when manifested as a weakling or a coward. He more often exhibits frustrated or overaggressive heterosexual virility, sometimes implicitly masking repressed homosexual desire. Any attentive viewing of most Golden Age films will yield multiple sightings of, or allusions to, malformed man, for without his presence the idealized macho could not exist. He does not necessarily occupy the role of the principal antagonist as he may not make a worthy adversary for an archetypal hero or heroine. Very often, malformed man is a secondary character, or even merely a part of the mise-en-scène. He may provide a moment of comic relief, an incremental rise in narrative tension, or a temporary obstacle on the road to triumph or tragedy.[6]

A key premise of this book's arguments is that the matrix of codified masculinities in Mexican cinema contain meanings much like those Roger Bartra attributes to the metadiscourses pervading intellectual projects that sought to define the national character in terms of a distorted ontology whose parameters would be aligned with an authoritarian agenda. What Ramos and Paz and other elite members of the state-sponsored intelligentsia

presented as the "definition of 'the Mexican' is rather a description of how he or she is dominated and, above all, how exploitation is legitimated" (Bartra 6).[7] Far more than definitive models of national identity to be emulated by ordinary male subjects, the spectacles of machismo in national cinema served as mechanisms to symbolically delineate broad constituencies of men marked as perniciously defective, helping to secure the continuance of Mexico's hierarchal social order throughout the postrevolutionary period. The insidious mode of power discursively enacted through the wider articulation of this pattern of dominant cultural meanings of masculinity transformed signs of unwanted difference or opposition into confirmation of the malformity, thereby selectively justifying violent forms of control on land, resources, and especially laboring bodies.

This strategy has proved adaptable over the long run of Mexico's state-led transition to a neoliberal economic regime in which cultural production in general, and cinema in particular, increasingly belong to the domain of transnational capitalism. In the new state-corporate alliance, private and public investments in Mexican filmmaking respond primarily to the logic of a marketplace of aspirational identities supporting the structural expansion of the current phase of global capitalism. Hence, the most revered expressions of masculinity in recent cinema tend to be structured in the cosmopolitan values of Western modernity rather than any kind of recognizable Mexicanness. Yet present-day networks of power rely on architectures of oppression built in the past. Today, vast populations of mostly impoverished Mexicans are being made ever more vulnerable, disposable, disappearable, and killable for the sake of securing the stability of the neoliberal order. The cultural politics that naturalizes this expansive social scenario of economic precarity, territorial expulsion, labor exploitation, disappearance, and violent death derives at least part of its discursive authority from a rearticulated repertoire of mythic malformed masculinities that originated with national cinema. The cultural repository of mexicanidad continues to exist as a sinister legacy of images and discourses frequently redeployed by neoliberal projects to reinforce contemporary perceptions of defective and dangerous men. Current filmmakers ineluctably contend with this heritage. Wittingly or not, many draw upon its ready supply of threatening and contemptible signs of masculine malformation, reproducing the dominant representational logic that organized earlier regimes of cultural politics. Others interrogate the protean figure of malformed man and its enmeshment with structures of power in the neoliberal state. These distinct trajectories of contemporary Mexican cinema are the main topic of this book.