



**“The fluttering gait and the powder puff are unheard of here”:**

**Gay Travel to Revolutionary Mexico**

Winning essay of the 2016 Graduate-level Baptista Essay Prize

by

**Josh Mentanko**

**Baptista Prizewinning  
Essay**

March 2016

## **BAPTISTA PRIZEWINNING ESSAYS**

The Baptista Prizewinning Essays include papers submitted as coursework at York University that have been nominated by instructors and selected annually by a committee of CERLAC Fellows. The selection committee does not suggest any editorial changes, and prize-winning essays may be slated for publication elsewhere. All responsibility for views and analysis lies with the author.

The Michael Baptista Essay Prize was established by the friends of Michael Baptista and the Royal Bank of Canada. This \$500 Prize is awarded annually to both a graduate and an undergraduate student at York University in recognition of an outstanding scholarly essay of relevance to the area of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, from the humanities, social science, business or legal perspective.

**Reproduction:** All rights reserved to the author(s). Reproduction in whole or in part of this work is allowed for research and education purposes as long as no fee is charged beyond shipping, handling, and reproduction costs. Reproduction for commercial purposes is not allowed.

### **CERLAC**

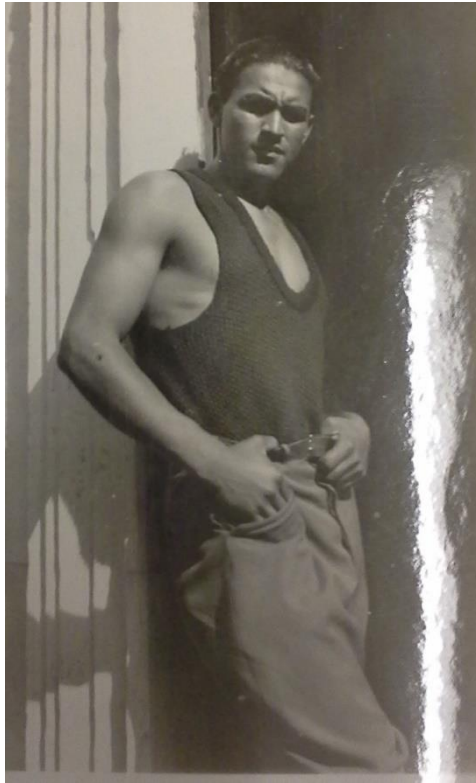
8<sup>th</sup> floor, YRT  
4700 Keele Street  
York University  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada M3J 1P3

**Phone:** (416) 736-5237

**Email:** [cerlac@yorku.ca](mailto:cerlac@yorku.ca)

# **“The fluttering gait and the powder puff are unheard of here”: Gay Travel to Revolutionary Mexico**

By Josh Mentanko



**Figure 1 – The “Son” of Francisco (Pancho) Villa’s Chief Dynamiter. From *Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections***

American modernist poet Hart Crane took this photograph during his year-long stay in Mexico, between 1931 and 1932. The two photos of this man taken by Crane can be found in a composite scrapbook of Hart Crane’s held by Columbia University.<sup>1</sup> This photo also travelled into the private collection of Solomon Grunberg, a gay bookseller and friend of Crane’s.<sup>2</sup>

Grunberg was one of a few men with whom Crane shared details of his sex life. Crane sent

---

<sup>1</sup> Photograph Album, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University.

<sup>2</sup> In the interest of clarity, this essay uses the term “gay” to designate men who generally only had sex with other men. That does not mean that they identified as “gay” or “homosexual” during the period of analysis. Hart Crane, for instance, never identified himself as homosexual, although he admitted to belonging to a “brotherhood.” See Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood, February 14, 1932, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 1-6, 277.

Grunberg and other gay men postcards and photographs from his travels, and it is possible that he also enclosed this photograph with a letter. On the back of the photo that Crane sent to Grunberg, the poet wrote in his distinctive epistolary style: “One of the reasons why I like Mexico... his father was Villa’s chief dynamiter!”<sup>3</sup>

What led Crane to introduce the man in the photograph using a Pancho Villa reference? Or should we direct our attention to the phrase, “chief dynamiter?” Without knowing the accompanying letter, it is difficult to piece together the photo’s context. But the content of the photo reinforces textual evidence for Crane’s erotic interest in Mexican men, whom he idealized as potentially aggressive and culturally Indian. The man’s deliberate posture suggests the photographer’s heavy-handed intervention in staging the scene, and it is likely that Crane encourage the man to grasp the waistband of his rumpled, military trousers which are tucked into knee-high black boots. In both of the photos, the man’s hands direct the gaze towards the groin, framing his crotch. If he had been wearing a coat, he had since disrobed for the photo session, which likely took place in the patio area of Crane’s sprawling house in Mexico City’s southern reaches. The plunging neck line of the undershirt reveals muscled arm and chest. If the man’s upper body invites an intimate reading, his deliberately aggressive posturing and scowl suggest barely-contained aggression. Intimacy and the possibility for violence are entwined.

Crane never spoke great Spanish, and the man photographed possibly had something to gain by agreeing to whatever story Crane projected onto the scene. Scholars across disciplines have attended to the relationship between sexuality and formal and informal imperialism since

---

<sup>3</sup> Photograph Album, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University. Underline from Hart Crane.

the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> More recently, historians examining sexuality in imperialist contexts have flipped the categories of colonized victim and imperial victimiser.<sup>5</sup> Crane's frequent descriptions of fantastic violence and delight at what he imagined to be Mexico's surfeit of dangers rendered him a likely dupe for a story about Villa's chief dynamiter's son. While it is difficult to know where Crane heard this story, his message to Grunberg illuminates the small but significant ways in which images of violence and danger from the 1910 Mexican Revolution were braided into depictions of Mexico in the United States. This photo's erotic meanings hint at the informal and unscientific ways in which travel generated knowledge about sexuality in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

In both his photos and letters home, Crane depicted Mexico as ancient, dangerous, and erotic. In doing so, he drew on and contributed to a broad range of licit and illicit documentation and conversation that sedimented the relationship between race and sexuality in the context of a gay male world.<sup>7</sup> If some nineteenth-century American travellers to Mexico sought to show Mexico's potential for industrialization and investment by capturing technological developments, like railroads and telegraph lines alongside crumbling ruins,<sup>8</sup> Crane's photos show his exclusive

---

<sup>4</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin A. Cowan, Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, and Jason Ruiz, "Sexing Empire Editors' Introduction," *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 123 (October 1, 2015): 1–8, 4.

<sup>6</sup> There is no strict way to separate an "anthropological" or "tourist" gaze in much of the materials dealing with Mexico connected to Crane. He drew equally on social sciences and lurid gossip in seeking to understand and enjoy Mexico. In order to distinguish between more rigid differences in contemporary tourism, I generally use travel instead of tourism to describe Crane and the American colony in Mexico City to which he belonged. Of course, the difference between travel and tourism is slippery, too. For an analysis of the role of anthropology in the Americas in helping articulate norms of sexual orientation, see Rudi Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Crane participated in a social and cultural world of gay men that existed in 1920s New York City. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Jason Ruiz discusses how American travelers to Mexico during the Porfiriato sometimes portrayed Mexico as "in transition" between ancient and modern. See Jason Ruiz, *Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Mexico in the U.S. Popular Imagination, 1876--1920* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 57. For more on photographic representations that sought to promote the "uplift" of Mexicans through contact with American progress, see

preoccupation with the architecture, rituals, and landscapes of a pre-Columbian world. Of course, nineteenth-century travellers focused on these landmarks, too. What is significant is not that a trope of pre-modernity permeated a broad array of travellers' accounts about Mexico, but that in Crane's case, such depictions were synergized by his erotic attraction to indigenous men. His photography and literary descriptions of indigenous men mobilize the erotic within a primitivist discourse. Crane understood Mexico in the shadow of the 1910 Revolution, where accounts of masculine heroism and violence helped construct especially borderland Mexico as violent and dangerous.<sup>9</sup> Relying on gossip about native sexuality from esteemed travellers such as Waldo Frank and Malcom Cowley, Crane pictured indigenous men in Mexico as hyper-masculine, a quality which seemed to assure their sexual interest in both men and women. In Crane's photos and letters, he affirmed Mexico as the desirable Other to American modernity, sexual and otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

Microhistory has the benefit of close-reading a small experience to identify the idiosyncratic ways in which individuals navigated discourses of gender and race. Deploying a microhistorical approach on a transnational plane has the added benefit and challenge of showing how those discourses are contingent, a realization that also dawned on Hart Crane. Historians of sexuality have long been accustomed to blending materialist analysis with poststructuralism, accounting for actions as tangible as movement through space while showing how ideas about

---

Fredrick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature*, 1st ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 172.

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Marie Guidotti-Hernández argues that "violence is an ongoing social process of differentiation for racialized, sexualized, gendered subjects in the U.S. borderlands in the nineteenth century and early twentieth." Nicole Marie Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries*, Latin America Otherwise : Languages, Empires, Nations (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

gender and sexuality mapped onto those actions, rendering them socially meaningful.<sup>11</sup> Yet, many of the major historical works on sexuality in the Atlantic World focus on a single place, often a city, told as a case study. But the history of sexuality, particularly of the creation of shared, cultural sensibilities across different spaces, demands an approach that also moves across space.

This paper follows one person as he moved through space, and made sense of the erotic through ideas about race and culture that also travelled and gained meaning through national borders. In this article, I build on the work of Victor Macias-Gonzalez, who has examined the diffusion of ideas of gay domesticity from homophile publications to elite gay men in Mexico City and Jason Ruiz, who has charted how American travelers to Mexico during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz produced images and stereotypes about Mexico that portrayed it as the logical place for American expansionism. Examining the rich archive of Hart Crane's travel shows the enduring importance of gender, sexuality, and race in travel accounts of Mexico between the 1910 Revolution and the beginning of mass beach tourism in the 1940s and 1950s, and it also signals the impact of domestic US gender and sexuality and the Mexican Revolution on the ways knowledge about sexuality and gender were worked out in the context of pleasure travel.

### **(Homo)Sexual Modernity**

Hart Crane's short life encompassed some of the most consequential events for twentieth-century Mexican and United States history. While he spent his youth living in Ohio and traveling on family vacations to Cuba, Mexico passed through decade-long revolution that was given heavy coverage in the American press. When Crane decided to become a poet in the late 1910s

---

<sup>11</sup> George Chauncey's use of "sexual topography" to describe this in interwar New York City is an example of this. See ,” George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994).

and moved to New York City, Greenwich Village had already become a hotbed for radical politics and artistic experimentation. As Crane drew increasing acclaim for his poetry through the 1920s, he lived and traveled to some of the capitals of literary modernism. His travels were always motivated by more than the opportunity to hobnob with literary stars, although he was always conscious of his position in this circuit. Crane's precarious finances, his strained relationship with parents who had divorced and remarried when he was still an adolescent, and his active participation in partially underground homosexual sex economies all played a role in inspiring his geographic mobility throughout the 1920s. When the Great Depression took hold in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash, Crane shifted his eyes to Mexico as a place to inspire his art and energize his sex life.

Scholars have credibly demonstrated "stable and fixed identities" as one of the salient fictions of sexual modernity.<sup>12</sup> Maintaining the distinction between homo and heterosexuality provided fretful labour to many in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> The popular sedimentation of a hetero-homo binary was accomplished through a discursive explosion: medicine and psychology attending to the individual; criminological and sociological discourses produced accounts of populations and deviant groups. Culminating around mid-century, homosexuality appeared in legal codes in municipal, state, and federal levels, and it became incorporated into the operating procedures of institutions of social control, prisons and asylums.<sup>14</sup> But a discourse of sexual

---

<sup>12</sup> "Only in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did the now-conventional division of men into "homosexuals," based on the sex of their partners, replace the division of men into "fairies" and "normal men" on the basis of their imaginary gender status as the hegemonic way to understand sexuality," George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); James Naylor Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the ways in which sexuality became legible to the US state in the postwar period, see Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, *Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).



orientation also helped shift subjectivities as people across the globe adopted or adapted to the primacy of a homo-hetero binary, spread in part through imperial pathways.<sup>15</sup>

This essay posits a connection between sexual modernity and another discourse of modernity: primitivism. Primitivist depictions in the early twentieth century depicted people designated as primitive as violent, libidinous, childlike, and in tune with nature.<sup>16</sup> Jackson Lears has noted a tendency to idealize similar qualities of brutality and nature as a reaction against “overcivilization” in the United States.<sup>17</sup> The gendered and racialized aspects of this tendency have been analysed by Gail Bederman, who argues that models of white American manhood around the turn of the twentieth century turned toward valorising the mastery of a repertoire of racialized tropes of manhood, from hunting and fishing to boxing.<sup>18</sup> I argue that primitivist depictions of foreign travel can also be understood in relation to domestic American anxieties about gender and modern civilization.<sup>19</sup>

The urban homosexual was a quintessential modernist character. Crane, while largely interested in sex with men, most likely did not see himself as a homosexual and certainly did not consider the men he was having sex with to be homosexual. He never used the word homosexual to describe himself or the men he had sex with.<sup>20</sup> He divided his sexual world into gendered types – “fey” feminine men and obviously masculine men. In his letters, he never expressed any bitterness when his romantic partners later fell for women. Where homo/heterosexuality derived identity from anatomical sex, Crane only ever acknowledged membership in a sexual economy

---

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>17</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> That is not to say that people around Crane did not describe him as a “homosexual.” See <sup>20</sup> Porter, Katherine Anne, *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter*, ed. Isabel Bayley (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 84.

that idealized a particular, masculine gender style. Crane's compass for sexuality was calibrated more to gender presentation than sexual identity.

In traveling to Mexico, Crane did not seek a land overflowing with men who identified as homosexual. He sought a place where boundaries of sexual identification meant little, and masculine men were willing to have sex with him, if only for a price. One of the effects of sexual modernity was the birth of a sexual economy organized around the valorisation of "trade" – of masculine men who normally had sex with women, who subjectively preferred having sex with women, but whose sexual preferences could be temporarily purchased.<sup>21</sup> In the gay male hustler culture of the 1920s to the 1950s in New York City, gay men such as Crane sought out sex with sailors and working-class men, often racialized as Puerto Rican or Italian. Like other men with similar tastes, Crane was probably used to paying for the kind of sex that he liked.

### **An Inspired Voyage**

Thanks to insight from friends, Crane was initially confident that Mexico an ideal place to find unproblematic sex.<sup>22</sup> He also had to grapple with sometimes conflicting representations of Mexico circulating in the United States after the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, American politicians observed developments in revolutionary Mexico with unease and suspicion. Mexico's revolutionary reputation was sustained through this period by the distribution of millions of acres of land to peasants, rural education programs, and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1938, but Mexico's flirtations with Bolshevism ultimately

---

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of representations of New York hustlers in mid-century American culture, see Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 188-227.

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1980), 54.

allowed for the strengthening of the centralized state while largely protecting private property.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, American businessmen, upset by the redistribution of millions of acres of American-owned property and rumblings about oil nationalization throughout the 1930s, maintained a steady propaganda war against the Mexican government during the 1920s and 1930s.

In the midst of sometimes tense geopolitics, a tension only heightened by a history of American intervention in Mexico during the Revolution and the extensive American investment in Mexico during the Porfiriato, cultural relations provided a sort of contact zone between the two nations.<sup>24</sup> Helen Delpar labelled the uptake of Mexico in American artistic and consumer culture during the 1920s and 1930s as the “enormous vogue of things Mexican.”<sup>25</sup> Cooperation between the United States and Mexico was furthered by private philanthropy which brought Americans to Mexico and Mexicans to the United States with the goal of furthering cultural understanding. Hart Crane benefited directly from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, which established a special Latin American Exchange Fellowship in 1929, one that Crane received in 1930.

The Guggenheim Fellows of 1931 joined a crew of American expatriates in Mexico. Langston Hughes was drawn to Mexico as a way to escape the color line in the United States. William Spratling was spending his fortune acquiring Mesoamerican antiquities. Writer Katherine Ann Porter, whom Crane stayed with during his first few months in Mexico City, first arrived in 1921. In an interview, she described her reason for going:

---

<sup>23</sup> Alan Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1910-1940: An Interpretation* (San Diego, CA: University of California Press, 1987), John M Hart, *Empire and Revolution the Americans in Mexico since the Civil War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> I owe “contact zone” to Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Phrase thanks to Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

New York was full of Mexican artists at that time, all talking about the renaissance, as they called it, in Mexico. And they said, “Don’t go to Europe, go to Mexico. That’s where the exciting things are going to happen.” And they were right! I ran smack into the Obregón Revolution, and had, in the midst of it, the most marvellous, natural, spontaneous experience of my life. It was a terribly exciting time. It was alive, but death was in it. But nobody seemed to think of that: life was in it, too.<sup>26</sup>

The revolutionary credentials of the American expatriates in Mexico City are easy to overemphasize. Certainly the milieu described by scholars like Rick Lopez, Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, and Barry Carr was of a different political hue than the Americans who resided in Mexico City during the Porfiriato; the historic American presence in Mexico City was composed of people who were conservative, jealous of their economic privileges, and did not hide their racism.<sup>27</sup> Nor were the American writers and artists who formed Crane’s social network were hardly the equivalent of Spanish republicans or Latin American revolutionaries who settled in Mexico City throughout the twentieth century. For the most part, theirs was a vague leftism, oriented towards a rejection of American cultural mores and the perceived inauthenticity of its technological progress rather than a mortal need to escape the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Crane was lured to Mexico by literary and pictorial representations which, in addition to conversations with friends, heightened its appeal. Several of the key texts that fed this migration of Americans to Mexico were Anita Brenner’s *Idols behind Altars*, Stuart Chase’s *Two Americas*, and D. H. Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*. All of these works painted Mexico as dangerous, communal, and ancient and claimed that these essentially Mexican qualities were only to be found in rural, undeveloped parts of the country where indigenous cultures still thrived.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Thompson Davis, “Katherine Anne Porter, The Art of Fiction No. 29,” *Paris Review*, Winter-Spring 1963, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4569/the-art-of-fiction-no-29-katherine-anne-porter>.

<sup>27</sup> Hart, *Empire and Revolution the Americans in Mexico since the Civil War*, 73-268.

<sup>28</sup> Paul L. Mariani, *The Broken Tower: A Life of Hart Crane* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1999), 403.

<sup>29</sup> Crane explicitly mentioned all of these books in his correspondence, highlighting them for their supposed accuracy or describing how they helped to inspire his own journey to Mexico. For a description of Brenner’s book,

American press coverage of Mexico throughout the 1910s showed endless images of soldiers and violence, in contrast to the images of ruins and the poverty of indigenous peasants that had predominated during the Porfiriato.<sup>30</sup> After the Revolution, American travel photography continued to focus on indigenous Mexicans, or at least people imagined to be indigenous, emphasizing their white clothing and showing them in groups.<sup>31</sup> Photographs and paintings by Americans took “folk” art as their subject, while exhibitions of Mexican art in the United State continued to emphasize works by artists like Rivera, who worked with the visual discourse of *indigenismo*, rather than works by artists like Carlos Merida, whose experimentations fused Latin American and European artistic developments. For Crane, the emphasis on indigenous peoples, rural settings, and potential for violence struck the note of authenticity that American modernists were searching for in their own artistic expressions.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Optics of “Indian”**

You should see these native Indian people – not the people “in power” – of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. They’re dumb as hell in a thousand ways, but wiser, I think, than all our mad, rushing crowd up north. I’m cultivating (as you may observe) the virtues of UN-thought for awhile! The beautiful brown, “it’s toasted” – flesh, dark eyes, big white hats, white pyjama suits, sandals, dirt, indigestion, faith, doubt, elation,

---

see Hart Crane to Caresse Crosby, March 31 1932, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5. For a description of the impact of Chase, see Hart Crane to Samuel Loveman, September 11, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5. For Lawrence: Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood, February 14, 1932, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 1-6, 277.

<sup>30</sup> Jason Ruiz, *Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Mexico in the U.S. Popular Imagination, 1876--1920* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 19-64. James Oles et al., *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1917-1947* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 59-61. On depictions of revolutionary violence, see John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, 1st ed, The William and Bettye Nowlin Series in Art, History, and Culture of the Western Hemisphere (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Ruiz, *Americans in the Treasure House*, 31-2.

<sup>32</sup> See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1981). Lears describes antimodernism as “the recoil from an “overcivilized” modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience supposedly embodied in medieval or Oriental cultures.”

resignation – but always something fundamental, a contact with the soil and the earth and the blue of mountains hereabouts!<sup>33</sup>

Crane's distinguishing between Indian and "mixed blood" people was a standard line in traveller accounts of Mexico. In his letters back to the United States, Crane also used Indian as a shorthand for sexual availability. We can trace where Crane formed the connection between Indians and sexual availability to at least one source. While Crane was still deciding to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship, Malcom Cowley, literary editor of *The New Republic* since 1929, suggested that he visit Mexico. Cowley had spent time in Mexico the previous year. He told Crane that servants were cheap and Mexicans had "sexual customs not unlike those of the Arabs."<sup>34</sup> In light of contemporary tropes about the "sexual customs not unlike those of the Arabs," it seems that Malcom Cowley was attempting to paint Mexico as a place of abundant sexual possibilities.<sup>35</sup> Katherine Ann Porter, who hosted Crane when he first arrived in 1931, wrote to a friend that "Malcom and others had told him [Crane] that all Indians were openly homosexual and incestuous, that their society was founded on this, he would encounter no difficulties whatever." When Crane returned to Ohio in the middle of his Fellowship in order to attend to his father's affair after his death, he wrote a letter in which he pondered traveling to North Africa after the end of the Fellowship in Mexico. "I feel ready for anything beyond the compromises necessary here [in Ohio]," he wrote.<sup>36</sup> Crane not only sought a particular model of manhood in foreign travel, but license to act as he wished.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, October 21, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5. Elspeth Brown has suggested that the phrase "it's toasted" refers to a contemporary Lucky Strike advertisement slogan. Crane worked in advertising in New York City in the 1920s.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1980), 54.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), xxi.

<sup>36</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, February 25, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5.

The loose white pants and shirt of men in rural central Mexico provided an easy shorthand for indigenous masculinity in Crane's letters and photos. The white outfit of male *campesinos* was a dominant trope for signifying indigeneity in photography even during the Porfiriato.<sup>37</sup> In the writings of Brenner, Lawrence, and Chase – Crane's principal sources for decoding Mexican culture – the white outfit was also used to identify this rural, Indian type. And Crane picked up and redeployed both the language – “white pyjamas” – and the visual tropes of Indians wearing white clothing that had long predominated in representations of rural Mexico.<sup>38</sup>

Crane's letters reveal a frank attitude towards his sex life, although he prevaricated more or less depending on the destination of the letter. In a 1931 letter to Wilbur Underwood, he expounds on the attraction of “the Indian.”

The nature of the Mexican Indians, as Lawrence said, isn't exactly “sunny”, but he is more stirred by the moon, if you get what I mean, than any type I've ever known. The fluttering gait and the power puff are unheard of here, but that doesn't matter in the least. Ambidexterity is all in the fullest masculine tradition. I assure you from many trials and observations. The pure Indian type is decidedly the most beautiful animal imaginable, including the Polynesian – to which he often bears a close resemblance. And the various depths of rich coffee brown, always so clear and silken smooth, are anything but negroid. Add to that – voices whose particular pitch will make the welkin ring – and you have a rather tempting setting for an odd evening. Even Lawrence, with all his “blood-fear” of them, couldn't resist some lavish descriptions of their fine proportions.<sup>39</sup>

“Stirred by the moon” is, in my assessment of Crane's double entendre, another way of saying “aroused.” Crane let a similar message slip in several of his letters, referring to Mexico as “my darling Babylon,” writing that listing his encounters since arriving would take a book.<sup>40</sup>

From the account of Katherine Ann Porter and other acquaintances, Crane was not

---

<sup>37</sup> Ruiz, *Americans in the Treasure House*, 31-2.

<sup>38</sup> Oles et al., *South of the Border*, 175.

<sup>39</sup> Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood, November 30, 1931, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 1-6, 277.

<sup>40</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, October 29, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5.

exaggerating.<sup>41</sup> He found plenty of men to have sex with, and he found them particularly abundant, or at least desirable, in rural parts of Mexico. He was interested in “Mexican Indians,” not the “fluttering gait and power puff,” which he associated with the poor imitators of Baudelaire in Mexico’s capital.<sup>42</sup> This quote from Crane overlaps closely with DH Lawrence’s depictions of Mexico’s Indians.<sup>43</sup> Their “fine proportions” are specified in some detail in Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*, which Crane references. Although the book never broached any motifs of homosexuality, its general depiction of indigenous masculinity was suffused with eroticism and violence, as noted by Marianna Torgovnick.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to an unsystematic racial discourse just detailed, ideas about gender provided one way in which Crane signalled sexual desire. In the United States, he divided the world off men who had sex with men into two categories: “trade” and “fairies.”

Just walk down Hollywood Boulevard some day – if you must have something out of uniform. Here are little fairies who can quote Rimbaud before they are 18 – and here are women who must have the tiniest fay to tickle them the one and only way!<sup>45</sup>

Crane insinuates that an affinity for French symbolist poetry denoted fairies. In much the same way, the clothing of trade and military uniforms in his photos reproduced the image of a masculine ideal. Crane’s interest in seeking out sex with men in uniform, particularly sailors, for short and long term assignments is evident from the accounts of his acquaintances as well as

---

<sup>41</sup> The tension between Crane and Porter drew on Crane’s late hours, drunkenness, and uninvited guests.

<sup>42</sup> Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood, November 30, 1931, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 1-6, 277.

<sup>43</sup> “There is some Indian quality which pervades the whole. Whether it is men in blue overalls and a slouch in Mexico City, or men with handsome legs in skin-tight trousers, or the floppy, white, cotton-clad labourers in the fields, there is something mysteriously in common. The erect, prancing walk, stepping out from the base of the spine with lifted knees and short steps. The jaunty balancing of the huge hats. The thrown-back shoulders with a folded sarape like a royal mantle. And most of them handsome, with dark, warm-bronze skin so smooth and living, their proudly-held heads, whose black hair gleams like wild, rich feathers. Their big, bright black eyes that look at you wonderingly, and have no centre to them. Their sudden, charming smile, when you smile first.” D. H Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1954), 81.

<sup>44</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 159-175.

<sup>45</sup> Hart Crane to William Brown, February 22, 1928, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 2-6, 250



from his own letters. In a telling anecdote, at a party in Brooklyn thrown in the late 1920s, Hart Crane was introduced to the queer Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca, but they quickly ditched each other to mingle with the sailors in the room.<sup>46</sup>

Crane did not only have sex with men who fell into the category of “trade,” and, indeed, he never used that category in the letters examined for this paper. That said, his idealization of sailor and military uniforms signal an interest in the working-class masculinity covered by the category of trade. Crane recognized the availability of “types” of men other than sailors, some of whom he identified by race. In Mexico, he described men of interest as “Indian.” In light of the broader American valorization of a “primitive” masculinity, used to model the new manhood in forums as diverse as boxing and fishing, the association between indigeneity and primitive masculinity in Crane’s records has a certain logic.<sup>47</sup> Together with the ways in which the money from the Fellowship and rumours from Malcom indicated to Crane the availability of sex in Mexico, it is possible to see the ways in which Crane constituted his desire in relation to key signals of masculinity, including racial difference, sex for pay, and class status. In his letters and photos, Crane produced erotic accounts of primitivism’s favourite subject: the pristine Indian.<sup>48</sup>

### **Dominance and Danger**

In a letter to Wilbur Underwood, Crane wrote that “ambidexterity is all in the fullest masculine tradition” in Mexico.<sup>49</sup> It is possible that Crane used ambidextrous to describe Indian men who were willingly have sex with both men and women. A second possibility is that he meant Indians were willing to be both penetrating and penetrated sex partners. I see no reason to

---

<sup>46</sup> Recounted in Jose Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 45.

<sup>47</sup> See Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915* (Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood, November 30, 1931, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 1-6, 277.

exclude either definition. The category of masculine trade paradigm according to which Crane framed his desires often implied an active penetrative role, but it did not always. It also frequently meant that the masculine partner did not exclusively have sex with men, but there were no requirements about what the ratio of male to female partners was. Just as “homosexual” was rife with contradictions and inconsistencies, so was the category of trade. It is thus possible that ambidexterity referred to versatility in both sexual position and gender preferences. But to be “ambidextrous in the fullest masculine tradition” linked masculine gender style to a kind of bisexuality. From the photographic evidence and textual evidence, including Lawrence, indigenous masculinity was imagined to be sexually dominant, aggressive in interpersonal relations. In a trade sex economy, dominance was understood in proportion to markers of masculinity, like a sailor uniform. In light of this, it is likely Crane used “fullest masculine tradition” to designate a sexual dynamic of undifferentiated sexual interest and a masculine appearance. He sought, and thought he found in Mexico, a plethora of masculine men with fluid interest in men and women.

Crane’s association of Mexico and violence is not merely another way in which he used the erotic subculture of the West as a palimpsest to understand Mexico. In early twentieth- and twenty-first century queer life, danger and violence were not just inevitable and unfortunate accompaniments to an underground sexual economy, but also served to demarcate the eroticism of “contact zones.” Mary Louise Pratt defined contact zones to describe “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>50</sup> The docks of Los Angeles, metropolitan parks at night, and even public washrooms with plain clothed policemen had the potential of danger, and while the desired outcome was probably not corporal violence, the dominant affect linked to

---

<sup>50</sup>Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 5.

those experiences was, as Edmund White said, “fear” at the possibility for violence or entrapment.<sup>51</sup>

The eroticization of violence also lurked within a broad discourse of primitivism and the valorised styles of masculinity in post-World War One United States. But Crane likely also drew on mainstream American representations of Mexico as dangerous. American magazines and newspapers covered the Mexican Revolution, paying attention to the violent antics of Pancho Villa by filming him in actual battles. John Reed’s description of the Mexican Revolution’s internecine battles, *Insurgent Mexico*, was a best seller.<sup>52</sup> The Pershing Expedition’s search for Pancho Villa after he raided Columbus, New Mexico failed in its aim, though at the peak of US efforts to capture Villa over 100 000 American soldiers were in the country. Unprofessional photos of Mexican soldiers taken by American soldiers emerged as another trope in representations of Mexico during the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>53</sup>

Comparing Tepoztlán to Middletown, Connecticut in *Two Americas*, Stuart Chase claimed that Tepoztlán exhibits the “superior common sense.”<sup>54</sup> There, “the weak die early. Only the strong survive.”<sup>55</sup> One was apt to witness a “weird primitive chant which sent chills up one’s spine.”<sup>56</sup> Chase’s account dwells on the idea of sacrifice and cannibalism among the Aztecs, contrasting it with an imposed Christianity. Crane, too, travelled to Tepoztlán and commented on its “lurking and suave dangers that gives the same edge to life here that the mountains give to the

---

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 98.

<sup>52</sup> John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico* (New York, London: D. Appleton and Company, 1914).

<sup>53</sup> Oles et al., *South of the Border*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Stuart Chase, *Mexico - A Study of Two Americas* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1950), 17.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

As Crane explored Mexico, he wrote letters which hinted at his fascination with blood and violence. Some of these letters belie easy interpretation, such as this one he sent a few months before his return:

Here in this pre-Columbian World, one often wonders how much longer the fat will fry or the Indians resist a wholesale and picturesque slaughter. It is all this typewriter can do to resist a rape of the tutelary Virgin.<sup>57</sup>

He continued, “I’m still ignorant about guns, despite my sojourn in this gun toting country,” and finished by saying “I’m here in Mixcoac for some time yet, I conjecture, reckon – and fear.” Crane’s distinctive epistolary style – dashes, offset phrases, coded messages in quotation marks, frequent underlining – add caustic wit and dry amusement to all of his letters.

Is he just playing with this idea of Mexico as dangerous – au courant a mere decade after the Revolution and five years after the publication of Lawrence’s book – or do these quick detours reveal something about the imagined space of Mexico, of which Crane had his own idiosyncratic contribution? Crane was not alone in producing ethnographic insights which seemed to confirm Lawrence’s fantastic predictions. Anita Brenner, a major figure in American interpretations of Mexico, was born in Mexico to Jewish parents from Eastern Europe. She earned a PhD in Anthropology from Columbia. Crane called her interpretive history of Mexican art and culture from prehistory to the 1920s, *Idols behind Altars*, a “monumental book.” In it, she makes the case for a “concern with death... [as] an organic part of Mexican thought.” The thesis of the work is that behind Catholicism, ancient traditions lurked, and that the “Indian deliberately ignored their conquest.”<sup>58</sup> Outside of Mexico City and its mestizos lurked the

---

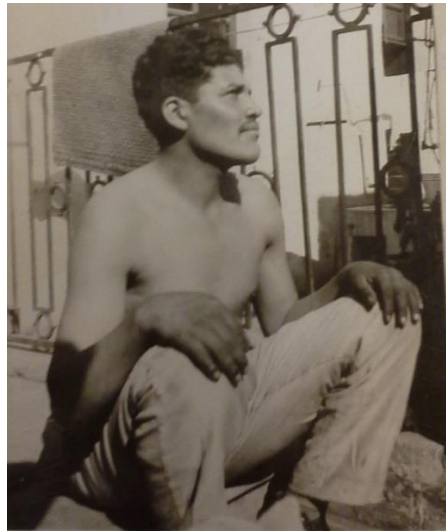
<sup>57</sup> Hart Crane to Malcom Cowley, February 18, 1932, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 2-6, 251. Paul Mariani has interpreted this letter to refer to the “gringo invasion” of Mexico. See Paul L. Mariani, *The Broken Tower: A Life of Hart Crane* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars: The Story of the Mexican Spirit*, Second (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1970), 122.

primitive, sacrificing Aztec traditions of Western fantasy. All that was needed to find them was to go to those territories.

### **Mapping Masculinity**

Crane described numerous encounters with indigenous men in Mexico. From his letters alone, it would seem that he found all his sexual partners “swimming in mountain pools with handsome Indians (whose courtesy, especially in the outlying towns and districts is phenomenal).”<sup>59</sup> This is odd, considering Crane seemed to adamantly despise Mexico City and never eroticizes it. Despite this, his photos of semi-nude men were shot in his Mexico City garden, signalling that it was much easier for Crane to stage erotic photo shoots in the comfort of his own home than it was in public spaces where he went cruising for sex. Even in Mexico, Crane’s erotic life was contained by his access to private space [figures 3 and 4].



**Figures 3 and 4<sup>60</sup>**

Like Lawrence, Brenner, and the expatriates described by scholars, Crane disliked Mexico City.<sup>61</sup> He rented a house there at the beginning of his Fellowship, which he carefully

---

<sup>59</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, October 20, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5.

<sup>60</sup> Photograph Album, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University.

furnished, but after visiting the countryside he almost immediately regretted the lease and spent much of the rest of his Fellowship trying to rid himself of it. He dismissed the capital's citizens, linking them a bit too easily with "those in power" of "mixed Spanish and Indian blood."<sup>62</sup> Like Brenner, Crane linked the city with mestizos and rural Mexico with Indians and Indian culture.

Crane travelled through parts of Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, and Morelos. In the summer of 1931, the silver magnate William Spratling trusted Crane to take care of his "timeless, or rather, dateless idols" in Taxco while he travelled to New York.<sup>63</sup> Crane's itinerary corresponded rather closely to Mexican and American-expatriate tourist circuits: Taxco, Tepoztlán, Mexico City. He was aware of and defensive of this connection to American tourists. He only grudgingly admitted that "Taxco is so extremely beautiful – and the townsfolk still so affable – that whatever one has to say about the Yankee occupation (and that ultimately seals its doom) it's still one of the pleasantest places to be."<sup>64</sup>

Of all Crane's destinations, Tepoztlán drew the most praise. His letters seamlessly mix admiration for folk traditions, the people he met, and the scenery.

I wish I could tell you something about my travels into the country places hereabouts, finding ancient Aztec idols in the cornfields, swimming in mountain pools with handsome Indians (whose courtesy, especially in the outlying towns and districts is phenomenal) beating the ancient drum of Tepoztecatl at Tepoztlán during the recent festival (on top of the church and to the tune of a pagan fife – and in view of the ancient Aztec temple perched on the lofty cliffs) etc. etc. But that would take a book. So would my sex life down here!... Mexico is more foreign than anything remaining in the farthest districts of Europe. I'm glad I didn't go back to France, even though this country is a perfect Calvary in a thousand ways...<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 150 and 158.

<sup>62</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, October 21, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5.

<sup>63</sup> Hart Crane to Malcom Cowley, June 2, 1931, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 2-6, 251.

<sup>64</sup> Hart Crane to Malcom Cowley, January 9, 1932, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 2-6, 251.

<sup>65</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, October 21, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5

Tepoztlán was well-established as a pilgrimage site for tourists looking for “authentic” Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1930, Anthropologist Robert Redfield published *Tepoztlán, a Mexican village: A study in folk life*. Stuart Chase’s 1931 bestseller *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* popularized Redfield’s ethnographic insights, contrasting communal, authentic Tepoztlán to the technology-driven, inauthentic individualism of Middletown in the United States. Crane explicitly drew on Chase’s work in an extended description of a festival in Tepoztlán.<sup>66</sup> *Two Americas* reiterates some of the insights graphically described by Lawrence and Crane, although like Crane, Chase would snort at what Crane called Lawrence’s “blood fear.”<sup>67</sup> Both Chase and Crane work with many of Lawrence’s basic assumptions about the essential paganism lurking behind the three hundred years of colonialism, which the Indians have resisted thanks to their “magnificent inertia.”<sup>68</sup> Chase deplores both the presence of Americans and the “white Mexicans” of Mexico City.<sup>69</sup> Like Crane, he contrasts the zones of American “penetration” to the “virgin” areas of Mexico, showing only the latter, such as Tepoztlán, as representing authentic Mexico. And for Chase, part of that authenticity was the fact that he stated boldly, “there are no sexual inhibitions.”<sup>70</sup>

Crane’s representations of Mexico show influences from ideas about Mexico found in literature written in English and published in the years before he visited Mexico. Crane’s reasons for visiting Mexico fused elements of broader discourses to the particular frames of desire he acquired in homosexual subcultures, eroticizing primitive masculinity as another variety of sexual encounter, approximating but distinct from “trade.” And while “trade” encounters were

---

<sup>66</sup> Hart Crane to William Wright, September 21, 1931, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 2-6, 282.

<sup>67</sup> Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood, November 30, 1931, Hart Crane Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL-37, 2-6, 277.

<sup>68</sup> Stuart Chase, *Mexico - A Study of Two Americas* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1950), 304.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 270.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 310.

often linked to urban environments, or at least ports of call, Crane identified rural Mexico with erotic opportunity.



**Figures 5 and 6<sup>71</sup>**

Crane's photography collaborated with a tradition of American photography in Mexico in its repetition of rural sites, frozen images of Indian faces, and focus on folk objects.<sup>72</sup> The net effect of these discursive strategies presented Mexico in its timeless authenticity, juxtaposing ancient ruins with people whose clothing, traditions, and style of life seemed to contradict modernity. In his photo of two boys absurdly balancing on a maguey cactus, Crane found a way to combine his love for tequila with his eye for young boys [figure 5]. As James Oles has pointed out, the cactus and the maguey in particular figured into American representations of Mexico – both painting and photography – during the decades leading up to 1930.<sup>73</sup> Those photos not taken in the confines of Crane's high-walled garden are also notable for what they reveal and occlude

---

<sup>71</sup> Photograph Album, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University.

<sup>72</sup> See Oles et al., *South of the Border*.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 147.



about Mexico, namely, any signs of technological modernity. Instead, Crane photographs boys use “natural” backdrops, a tightly circumscribed shot showing only a rock face or a foliage draped wall [figure 6].

### **Dissolving Boundaries**

Crane spent his first several weeks in Mexico City staying with the writer Katherine Ann Porter in her suburban Mexico City home. She later attributed the dissolution of their friendship to Crane’s actions while her guest. His immediate antipathy towards her is clear.<sup>74</sup>

Crane committed suicide in 1932 by jumping overboard a ship returning to New York City from Mexico. Writing to a friend about the incident, Porter claimed:

He simply came into an atmosphere different from what he had expected, he told me what he had hoped for in Mexico, he had been misled by stupid, frivolous untrue accounts of homosexuality in Mexico, and to find that even there he must observe at least the fundamental rules of decent behavior, infuriated him. He would not listen to me when I told him he could not treat Indians as he wished to. Malcom and others had told him that all Indians were openly homosexual and incestuous, that their society was founded on this, he would encounter no difficulties whatever. He told me he wished to let himself go, he had come to Mexico for that, he was sick of living in two worlds. I said, it could be done, but he must at least observe one or two small rules of human relationships.<sup>75</sup>

Whether Crane viewed all Indians as homosexual – and used that word – is certainly open to interpretation, as Crane never used the word homosexual in his own correspondence. Given Crane’s lack of attraction to homosexuals as such – designated by exclusive interest in having sex with men, regardless of their particular gender style– this word is probably Porter’s construction of Crane’s particular desire for “sexual customs of the Arabs”. Edward Said wrote that orientalist accounts of “Arab sexuality” carry an “undercurrent of sexual exaggeration” and portray the men as feeling an “undifferentiated drive.”<sup>76</sup> In light of Cowley’s assertions and

---

<sup>74</sup> See Mariani, *The Broken Tower*, 368-387.

<sup>75</sup> Porter, Katherine Anne, *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter*, ed. Isabel Bayley (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 84.

<sup>76</sup> Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Crane's well known preferences, it seems more likely that what Crane identified Mexico's Indians similar to a category approximating trade: assuming a masculine gender style and openness to sex with men and women.

More relevant for this analysis are the phrases where Crane claimed to be "sick of living in two worlds" and eager to "let himself go." Porter's annoyance with Crane extended beyond his bad houseguest tendencies. In a letter to her friend, she goes on to describe in allusive yet gory terms another penchant that Crane developed while in Mexico.

He was frightened to find that he no longer had the power to feel except by the most drastic and cruel stimulants. ...He confessed that his sexual feelings were now largely a matter of imagination, which drove and harried him continually, creating images of erotic frenzy and satisfactions for which he could find no counterpart in reality... These are not his words, but the substance. He said, he now found himself imagining that if he could see blood, or cause it to be shed, he might be satisfied: and he continually talked of the little fourteen year old carpenter's apprentice – you remember that ghastly episode – as a virgin, who might bleed when deflowered... These things he said sober, so I will leave unsaid the things he shouted when drunken.<sup>77</sup>

There is additional textual evidence for Crane having sex with very young men or boys. A police report from Taxco shows that he was thrown in jail after being accused of having groped silver baron William Spratling's houseboy.<sup>78</sup> Porter's descriptions of Crane's increasingly violent sexual tastes are conveyed in a shocked tone, but it should be kept in mind that she was relaying, with the exception of the story of the carpenter's apprentice, Crane's fantasies. However, it is clear that his behaviour in the year leading up to his visit to Mexico was characterized by increasingly violent – verbal and physical – episodes, particularly when he was drunk.

The possibility of Hart Crane's sexual interest in boys can also be assessed via the visual evidence. The photos of boys reveal different levels of familiarity between the photographer and

---

<sup>77</sup> Porter, Katherine Anne, *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter*.

<sup>78</sup> Mariani, *The Broken Tower*.

subject, in addition to being taken in different settings. All of them are poor and of indigenous descent. While one photo reveals an artistically-directed posing on a maguey cactus, another is simply a tightly cropped facial shot of a small boy during a public festival. With the exception of a group shot of six, some of whom are men, all of the photos show male youths.<sup>79</sup>



**Figure 9<sup>80</sup>**

Most of Crane's photos of boys are innocuous, but in light of Porter's claims, Figure 9 potentially points to an erotic, possibly troubling, *frisson* between the photographer and his subjects. As Joseph Boone and others have shown, pederasty dominated representations of the sexuality of the colonial other through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>81</sup>

Homoerotic fantasies of the harem were filled with youth, and numerous European men, including Andre Gide, specifically sought sex with boys when they travelled to North Africa. Crane was clearly aware of these stereotypes and even mentioned a desire to travel to Tunis

---

<sup>79</sup> See note 88 or Figures XX

<sup>80</sup> Photograph Album, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University. There is a strong possibility that the two boys in the photograph are the sons of Crane's gardener, Daniel.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph A. Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Susan H. Edwards, "Pretty Babies," *History of Photography* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 1994): 38–46, 5.

during a break in his Guggenheim Fellowship.<sup>82</sup> In the Porfiriato, American travellers photographed rural children, producing visual arguments for American intervention, sometimes by evoking erotic desire.<sup>83</sup> Jason Mraz has highlighted the special entwining of “poverty and pornography” accompanying in photos of nude children by foreign photographers.<sup>84</sup> Children were a malleable metaphor for establishing an affective attachment to Mexico’s progress, but the genre also held the possibility of erotic readings.

Just as Crane’s attraction to indigenous masculinity drew both on associations with the culturally-specific category of “trade” and his decision to go to Mexico was influenced by a transnational homosexual understanding of “other” sexual customs, so too does the photograph of boys tap into the conventions of travel photography for its references. The boys’ nudity exemplifies the dynamic of unequal power, in terms of generation, money, and national origin – a pictorial dynamic in which American representations of Mexico, even at the height of fascination with its Revolutionary politics, nevertheless partook. It fits with an historical trend of depicting Mexican children where nakedness showed poverty. Yet, the latent eroticism of these depictions gains in significance when these photos are understood in the context of transnational references, including the well-established tropes of homoerotic depictions of pederasty as one of “the sexual customs of the Arabs.”<sup>85</sup> Rather than pursuing the “facts” about relation between Crane and these boys, this photo underlies the relation between latent (homo) eroticism and photographic representations of rural Mexico in this period. In the context of material inequality,

---

<sup>82</sup> Hart Crane to Solomon Grunberg, February 25, 1931, Hart Crane Papers, Columbia University Libraries Archival Collections, Columbia University, 1-5.

<sup>83</sup> Jason Ruiz, *Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Mexico in the U.S. Popular Imagination, 1876--1920* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 32-3.

<sup>84</sup> Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1980), 54.

Crane could purchase the private space to stage a homoerotic scene using well-established conventions of traveller depictions of Mexico.

Crane's sexual tastes in Mexico pushed boundaries around gender as well as generation. For the first time in his life, he had an intense months-long romantic affair with a woman, Peggy Cowley, who was married to his friend, Malcom.<sup>86</sup> Crane's possibly troubling erotic interest in indigenous youth sits uneasily alongside an interest in hyper-masculine men that we have so far concerned ourselves with. Bringing together his turn to sex with men, women, and possibly young boys is his economic situation in Mexico, and the license it gave him to conduct affairs in relative privacy. But the convergence of dissolving boundaries along the axes of gender and age held in common a particular fantasy about the possibilities of Mexico where, as Porter alludes, it was possible to fully live in "another world." By refashioning a malleable discourse of primitivism, Crane produced evidence for the pre-modernity and uncivilized sexuality just south of the border. His photos and letters, which made their way to gay men in the United States, constituted both pathway and source for a new kind of knowledge about sexuality in which Mexicans were desirable precisely for their resistance to the strict binary of modern sexual identities.

---

<sup>86</sup> Mariani, *The Broken Tower*, 395.

## Archival Collections

Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, United States.  
Columbia University Library, Special Collections, Columbia University, New York, New York, United States.

## Primary and Secondary Sources

- Aldrich, Robert. *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Beachy, Robert. *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*. New York, NY: Knopf, 2014.
- Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Berger, Dina. "A Drink Between Friends: Mexican and American Pleasure Seekers in 1940s Mexico City." In *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism Beyond the Border*, edited by Nicholas Dagen Bloom, 13–34. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006..
- . *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry: Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006..
- Bleys, Rudi. *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995.
- Bloom, Nicholas Dagen. *Adventures Into Mexico: American Tourism Beyond the Border*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Boone, Joseph Allen. *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=991305>.
- Brenner, Anita. *Idols Behind Altars: The Story of the Mexican Spirit*. Second. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1970.
- Briggs, Laura. *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002..
- . *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Calderón de la Barca. *Life in Mexico; the Letters of Fanny Calderón de La Barca, with New Material from the Author's Private Journals*. Edited by Howard T Fisher and Marion Hall Fisher. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966.
- (Cand.), Rudi Bleys PhD. "Homosexual Exile." *Journal of Homosexuality* 25, no. 1–2 (November 17, 1993): 165–82. doi:10.1300/J082v25n01\_11.
- Cano, Gabriela. "Unconcealable Realities of Desire: Amelio Robles's (Transgender) Masculinity in the Mexican Revolution." In *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern*

*Mexico*, edited by Jocelyn H. Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano, 35–56. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Carr, Barry. “Radicals, Revolutionaries and Exiles: Mexico City in the 1920s.” *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies*, Fall 2010, 26–30.

Chase, Stuart. *Mexico - A Study of Two Americas*. New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1950.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994.

Colligan, Colette. “‘A Race of Born Pederasts’: Sir Richard Burton, Homosexuality, and the Arabs.” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 1–20.  
doi:10.1080/0890549032000069131.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2005): 829–59..

Cowley, Malcolm. *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s*. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1980.

Delpar, Helen. *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1992.

Earle, Rebecca. *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Findlay, Eileen. *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

Fisher, Clive. *Hart Crane: A Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Gonzalez, Gilbert G. *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1880-1930*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004.

González Mateos, Adriana. “Between Pederasty and Dandyism: Distressed Masculinities in Intellectual Circles of Mexico and Argentina (1930-1984).” New York University, 2008.

Green, James Naylor. *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Hart, John M. *Empire and Revolution the Americans in Mexico since the Civil War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.90008>.

Hayes, Joy Elizabeth. "National Imaginings on the Air: National Radio in Mexico, 1920-1950." In *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, 243–58. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Hurewitz, Daniel. *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.

Hyam, Ronald. *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1990.

Irwin, Robert McKee. *Mexican Masculinities*. Vol. 11. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Joseph, Gilbert. "Toward a New Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Cultural Relations." In *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, edited by Gilbert Michael Joseph and Catherine LeGrand, 3–22. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

Joseph, Gilbert M., Emily S. Rosenberg, Dina Berger, and Andrew Grant Wood, eds. *Holiday in Mexico: Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. [http://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=20Jr\\_G-f2EgC&oi=fnd&pg=PP8&dq=holidays+in+mexico+dina+berger&ots=b5GBqq56RW&sig=pwwIM\\_9bd8OHWCmq70axWsYiyY](http://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=20Jr_G-f2EgC&oi=fnd&pg=PP8&dq=holidays+in+mexico+dina+berger&ots=b5GBqq56RW&sig=pwwIM_9bd8OHWCmq70axWsYiyY).

Kaplan, Amy, and Donald E Pease, eds. *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

Kimmel, Michael S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Knight, Alan. *U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1910-1940: An Interpretation*. San Diego, CA: University of California Press, 1987.

Lawrence, D. H. *Mornings in Mexico*. Edited by Michael Squires. New York, NY: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2009..

———. *The Plumed Serpent, Quetzacoatl*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994.

Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1981.

Littlewood, Ian. *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002.

Lopez, Rick. "The Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts: Two Ways of Exalting Indianness." In *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, 23–42. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Macías-González, Víctor. "Transnationalism and the Development of Domesticity in Mexico City's Homophile Community, 1920- 1960." *Gender History* 26, no. 3 (October 2014): 519–44.



- Macías-González, Víctor M., and Anne Rubenstein. *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012.
- Mariani, Paul L. *The Broken Tower: A Life of Hart Crane*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1999.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Novo, Salvador. *Pillar of Salt: An Autobiography, with 19 Erotic Sonnets*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014.
- Oles, James, Marta Ferragut, Yale University, and Art Gallery. *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1917-1947*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- Open Borders to a Revolution : Culture, Politics, and Migration*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013.
- Porter, Katherine Anne. *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter*. Edited by Isabel Bayley. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007.
- Quiroga, Jose. *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000.
- Reay, Barry. *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010.
- Rubenstein, Anne. "Bodies, Cities, Cinema: Pedro Infante's Death as Political Spectacle." In *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Ruiz, Jason. *Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Mexico in the U.S. Popular Imagination, 1876--1920*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Schmidt, Heike Ingeborg. "Colonial Intimacy: The Rechenberg Scandal and Homosexuality in German East Africa." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2008): 25–59.  
doi:10.1353/sex.2008.0011.
- Sigal, Peter Herman. *From Moon Goddesses to Virgins the Colonization of Yucatecan Maya Sexual Desire*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- . *Infamous Desire: Male Homosexuality in Colonial Latin America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Spring, Justin. *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

———. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

———. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Rhings*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Trillo, Mauricio Tenorio. *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Vaughan, Mary Kay. "Mestizaje and Musical Nationalism in Mexico." In *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, 95–118. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Walther, Daniel Joseph. "Racializing Sex: Same-Sex Relations, German Colonial Authority, and Deutschtum." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2008): 11–24.  
doi:10.1353/sex.2008.0001.