Carefully-draped rebozos, smoldering cigarettes, and sequined skirts. These hallmark accessories of poblanas, or women of Puebla, made them instantly recognizable as their likenesses crisscrossed the U.S.-Mexican border in the mid-nineteenth century. In the decades following Mexican Independence (1821), images of poblanas in the public sphere became increasingly associated with Mexican identity to domestic and foreign audiences. In the U.S. context, the poblana became a symbol of the impropriety of Mexican women and the inability of Mexican men to control women’s bodies, affectively sexualizing Mexican women and emasculating Mexican men during the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48).

This presentation centers on the images of poblanas created for U.S. audiences, and contextualizes them within mid-nineteenth century U.S. visual culture to examine gendered expectations of who should occupy public space. Wartime images overwhelming featured hypermasculine men who embodied bravery and strength. However, depictions of Mexican women in public spaces also played an important role in bolstering support for the U.S. war effort, as they encouraged the Othering of Mexicans and provided visual confirmation that the war was necessary to “civilize” the Mexican people through control. By examining these images in contrast to the depictions of U.S. women as mothers and wives who faithfully waited in the home for the return of their soldiers, I intend to demonstrate that images of women during the U.S.-Mexican War were an integral component of the war effort through their ability to impress continuity in gender expectations on the home front and vilify the enemies’ subversion of these social norms.