

**"Mexico, from *Mestizo* to Multicultural:
Arts and Identity at the turn of the Millennium"**

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Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the ways in which the arts have been used to construct a specific aspect of Mexican nationalism: that of national identity—and even more precisely the *mestizo* (or Spanish and Indigenous) national identity that was such a central part of Mexico’s post-Revolutionary ideology throughout the twentieth century. The evolving content of this identity is crucial for understanding how Mexicans have confronted colonization, revolution, and now globalization.

I examine this identity through the lens of Mexican art in various forms, from the so-called “fine art” destined for museums, to the bold murals that have received international acclaim, to the political cartoons in the popular media.¹ By exploring some very general references to the early twentieth century Mexican painting and culture, but more intensively focusing on art in the 1990s, I will use representations of the conquest of Mexico as a means to analyze national identity and demonstrate the construction or *deconstruction* the figure of the *mestizo*, as the case may be.

A fundamental premise of this analysis is that the ultimate purpose of a national identity is to *define* the nation's unique cultural, economic, political or demographic

¹ This focus is elaborated at much greater length in my book, *Mexico, from Mestizo to Multicultural: National Identity and Recent Representations of the Conquest* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007).

characteristics in order to *foster national unity* and *patriotism* through the portrayal of community traits and the creation of a sense of belonging.

[FIG. 3 rev1] Following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the State needed to assign certain qualities to the concepts of national identity (*lo mexicano* or *mexicanidad*)-for the good of the country. At the time, national unification was one of the most urgent goals of post-revolutionary governments. [FIG. 4 rev2] The State and its supporting intellectuals proudly declared Mexico a *mestizo* nation in attempts to unify a heterogeneous population. Thus they sought to assimilate and integrate various racial, ethnic, political and economic sectors of society into a single *pueblo*, or people. [FIG. 5 villa-zap].

This construction of a new, collective image involved the elevation of the *mestizo* figure from the status of pariah, a position it had suffered in since colonial times, to that of the emblematic Mexican. Now, it *seemed* viable that the *mestizo*, embodying as it *can* the virtues of cultural and biological mixing, would necessarily foment national unity. However, it is very important to stress the fact that the figure of the *mestizo* carried much unwanted baggage and gave rise to many thorny issues. First and foremost, we must understand that this national identity is based on a racial or biological figure whose origins trace back to the first historical moments of contact—and *conquest*—that took place when the Spaniards arrived on Mexican soil in the sixteenth century. Thus any search for *mestizo* origins would necessarily conjure up images of shameful behavior, forced racial mixing-- rape or submission-- and military conquest.

[FIG. 6 estatua-mest-] For example, a statue placed in the plaza of Coyoacán, one of Mexico City's upscale neighborhoods, in 1982 by the Mexican government

depicts a family--a sixteenth-century Spaniard, an Indian woman and a small child—and is entitled *Monumento al mestizaje* (Monument to miscegenation). At the time, some said it represented the conquistador Hernán Cortés, his translator and concubine Malintzin (*La Malinche*) and Martín, their *mestizo* son. Many balked, assuming that, due to the violent nature of Mexico's conquest, the child "had been the fruit of a violent relationship, and therefore guilty, that it had to be hidden." The statue was removed from the plaza because of the controversy surrounding it and it was placed in a quiet neighborhood park instead. This incident in Coyoacán clearly demonstrates the public's discomfort with the inception of *mestizaje*, or miscegenation, in Mexico even though it long served as a national myth of foundation.

But returning to the post-revolutionary days to examine some of the iconic depictions of *mestizaje*, we see that [FIG. 7 los tres] in the 1920's, in order to teach the populace its history and reaffirm the State's revolutionary origins, the State established the *Escuela Mexicana de Pintura* (Mexican School of Painting). While he was the Minister of Public Education, José Vasconcelos actively employed many of these muralists—most famously David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera—to paint the visual billboards of cultural nationalism in and on government buildings in Mexico. These murals stand as monuments to the country's heroes and revolutionary ideals. The murals 1) laud the indigenous past as the source of Mexico's cultural wealth; 2) condemn the imperialism of both Spain and the United States and 3) sing the praises of liberty, revolution and independence in Mexico. But as we shall see, they do *not* show *mestizaje* as a harmonious, harmonizing process.

Representations of the Conquest

[FIG. 8 Malinche Orozco] Visual representation of the conquest, , and consequently the inception of *mestizaje* from the first half of the twentieth century, help us to understand this discomfort with the figure of the *mestizo*. . In José Orozco’s 1926 mural “Hernán Cortés y la Malinche” we see the so-called Mexican Adam and Eve united by their held hands. Yet, looking closer, we find that Malinche is restrained by Cortes—his arm prevents her from reaching out to the lifeless Indian at their feet (symbolic of her former life) and his right knee prevents her from planting her feet on the ground. Although their union implies synthesis, it is contingent upon the subjugation of the Indian, and indeed, the physical restraint of la Malinche.

[FIG. 9 vivera cortes] Diego Rivera’s Palacio Nacional murals—a monumental series of frescoes depicting Mexican history in its entirety—includes a panel entitled *La colonización o llegada de Hernán Cortés a Veracruz* (Colonization or Hernan Cortés’s arrival in Veracruz). Here, Rivera situates the inception of Mexican *mestizaje*—depicted as the blue-eyed son of Cortés and a faceless Malinche—within a panorama of total destruction of the indigenous world. Cortés is seen paying Christopher Columbus, perhaps for the Indian’s souls he has converted (at swordpoint), and treating the Indians as beasts of burden like his countrymen do in another area of the mural. Even the indigenous breed of dog, the *xoloitzcuintle*, defends his authenticity from the invading beasts. In all, this polemical panel is in keeping with Rivera’s communist beliefs.

[FIG. 10 fusion dos cults] Less politically charged, but no less poignant, is Jorge González Camarena’s 1963 mural entitled “Fusión de dos culturas” (The fusion of two cultures). Here we see clearly the devastating results of the “collision of two worlds”: the Spanish conquistador and the Aztec Eagle Warrior mutually impale each other with

sword and with spear. The red hue of the mural absorbs both the bloodshed and the blazes that would lay waste to the Aztec empire. In contrast to the concepts of the melting pot or heterogeneity that are so prevalent in the United States, where the individual components of mixture or diversity are affirmed and to a certain extent maintained, we see that *mestizaje*—or fusion—emerges only from the solubility and loss of the original components.

[FIG. 11 malinche romantica] In contrast, Jesús Helguera's 1941 portrait of Cortés and La Malinche shows the most *romanticized* version possible of the Spanish conquistador and his Indian princess and translator. Absent are any inferences of sexual assault, Malinche's condition as a slave, violent imperialism or consequent cultural annihilation endured during conquest. Instead, pure sexual innuendo abounds in Malinche's breathless pose of sensual ecstasy, in the bulging muscles of Cortés's steed, his red toreador's cape (bullfighting being a metaphor for sexual conquest) as well as in the dormant volcano—apt to erupt at any moment. *This* is the harmonious fantasy of *mestizaje* on which the State pinned its aspirations for national unity. Yet, as we have seen, in contrast to this harmonious dream, *mestizo* origins **[FIG. 12 malinche orozco]** can be represented as traumatized origins, **[FIG. 13 vivera cortés]** as a point of departure for anti-imperial discourse, and **[FIG. 14 fusion dos cults]** as a loss of a previous identity through cultural—or total—annihilation.

Symbolism in the 1990s

[FIG. 15 pri logo] For almost eight decades after the Revolution, the Mexican State was dominated by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), or PRI. With the exception of the 1968 student protests and

consequent massacre at Tlatelolco in Mexico City, the PRI enjoyed--and actively cultivated--an environment which remained relatively free of opposition until the early 1980s. But the 1980s and 1990s were decades of crises in Mexico. As a result, long-standing concepts of nationhood and national unity were crumbling. Mexicans had witnessed the government's widespread economic mismanagement in the economic crisis of 1982 and **[FIG. 16 quake]** complete official inefficiency in response to the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. In addition, democratization began to emerge in Mexico during the 1988 presidential elections and the appearance of a viable political opposition to the PRI. As the PRIísta political system crumbled, so did the viability of its previous *mestizophile* discourse as the singular, unifying factor in post-revolutionary national identity.

[FIG. 17 Salinas] Also in the 1990s, the Mexican government made radical changes in its official declarations about the nation's ethnic and cultural make-up. In 1992, President Salinas de Gortari unilaterally altered the fourth article of the Constitution. In it, he defined the Mexican nation as having, "a pluricultural composition, sustained originally in its indigenous population." This shift toward multiculturalism represented a dramatic change in State attitudes toward the diversity of the Mexican populace.

[FIG. 18 zap-tlc] But perhaps most importantly, the 1994 uprising in Chiapas brought indigenous diversity and sovereignty to the forefront of national debates, while simultaneously deep-seated fears about the possible effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA or TLC—Tratado de Libre Comercio) ran rampant. Although Mexican society and its government continue to negotiate the terms by which they

approach multiculturalism—be it through indigenous autonomy or not—and a less economically protectionist future in the free-market, the fundamental changes that these re-alignments in Mexico's sense of nation and identity entail cannot be underestimated.

During these years of economic and political instability in Mexico, nationalist feelings were at a low. It was then that a number of Mexican artists created novels, plays, movies and cartoons which interrogate and recreate Mexico's sixteenth-century history in a search for origins, each of which undeniably unfolds within a metaphor of *mestizaje*. These works resulted from the very specific crises, disillusionments and debates of the end of the century and they all reveal the urgency with which intellectuals wrote either to salvage or to rework a national *mestizo* identity that began with the Conquest.

This examination of arts at the end of the Twentieth Century can begin with a film that seeks to revise the figure of the *mestizo* and the process of *mestizaje* by infusing them with more nuanced theories, and conclude with works that represent a backlash fueled by the fears of losing Mexico's unique identity in the shadow of NAFTA.

[FIG. 19 otra conq 1] If, in the twentieth century, the origins of racial *mestizaje* in Mexico were terribly stigmatized, as we saw with the statue in Coyoacán, the opposite can be said about the origins of syncretic religious beliefs during the same historical period. In his 1998 film, *La otra conquista*, Salvador Carrasco recreates the compelling process which takes place as the indigenous protagonist accepts Christianity in the form of a syncretic, Spanish Virgin Mary.

According to theories of syncretism, elements of one religious system are *fused* with those of another to create hybrid gods, practices and beliefs. Mother goddesses like the Spanish Virgin Mary and the Aztec Tonantzin were worshipped as one. The

syncretic model of religious assimilation serves as a perfect complement to those of cultural and racial *mestizaje*, especially in terms of the perception of them as harmonizing and homogenizing. Yet, the spiritual conquest was no less violent than the military conquest. As a result, the allegedly serene meshing of Aztec and indigenous gods in Mexico's uniquely syncretic form of Catholicism is no less conflicted than the biological and cultural clashes depicted in the murals we saw.

La otra conquista, then, returns to the conquest in order to visually represent the past in all its tragic splendor. By doing so, Carrasco's film works against the now untenable notions of *mestizaje* and syncretism as harmonious blends of races and belief systems. As the director himself says, "I think we sometimes fall into the trap of exalting *mestizaje* and syncretism as if they were themselves values, as if they were more or less peaceful cultural processes, carried out within a framework of symmetrical power--as if Mexican identity fused two cultures of equal condition... we wish to highlight... the violence implicit in such processes." Here, Carrasco implies that the concept of transculturation better explains modern Mexican identity and the foundational events which were taking place on Mexican soil in the sixteenth century.

"Transculturation" is an attempt to describe "the complex and multidirectional processes in cultural transformation." It combines the notion of *acculturation* (acquiring another culture) with violent *deculturation* (the loss or uprooting of a previous culture) and *neoculturation* (the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena). Most important to Carrasco and *La otra conquista*, are the notions of multidirectionality and the inherent imbalance of power in such processes.

[FIG. 20 otraconq2] *La otra conquista* tells the tragic and compelling tale of Topiltzin, an Aztec scribe who witnesses the unspeakable destruction of his people at the hands of the Spaniards. We first see Topiltzin, a lone survivor, as he climbs from the ruins of the Templo Mayor after the 1520 massacre. **[FIG. 21 otraconq3]** In every sense, his world is in ruins as he calls for his mother goddess, Tonantzin, but gets no answer.

Topiltzin's initial reaction to the Spaniards' hostile presence is one of intense resistance, yet, he is later captured and forced to renounce his culture and his gods while his feet are being burned and he is made to face a statue of the Virgin Mary. **[FIG. 22 otraconq4]** Topiltzin is spared from death but forced to convert to Christianity under the tutelage of the Spanish clergyman, Fray Diego de la Coruña in the monastery of Nuestra Señora de la Luz (Our Lady of the Light). Topiltzin's resistance continues but is thwarted at every turn. **[FIG. 23 otraconq5]** He then begins the ambiguous and complex process of accepting and appropriating the Spanish Virgin Mary while suffering debilitating fevers and hallucinations. Throughout Topiltzin's trials, Fray Diego has prodded, encouraged and punished him.

These two protagonists, Topiltzin and Fray Diego, are symbolic of the indigenous and Spanish components of Mexico's early, syncretic Christianity, as well as Mexico's *mestizo* heritage. They also demonstrate the popularly held version of how modern Mexican faith was born. Despite the initial trauma, Topiltzin converts by becoming 'Tomás' (his baptized name) and accepting Catholic beliefs. Yet, as mentioned above, the film complicates this popular, but simplistic vision of early evangelization and strives to represent multi-directional transculturation, not harmonious, syncretic mixing. Fray

Diego is ‘converted’ by Topiltzin as well and his close contact with Aztec culture. Fray Diego learns to speak Náhuatl, Topiltzin’s mother tongue, and delivers a benediction for Topiltzin/ Tomás in Nahuátl, saying, “Now that you have left us, wake up. May our venerable mother keep you forever with dignity.” Aztec culture has therefore touched Fray Diego and he has been changed by it.

[FIG. otraconq6] Yet in the final sequence, when Topiltzin commits his ultimate act of assimilation or appropriation, he dies under a statue of the Virgin Mary as it falls into his arms. The Friar believes his work is done, declaring the scene, “a miracle that reflects how two different races can be one through tolerance and love.” This last scene then ends as the camera pans up and out the window of Topiltzin’s cell onto the dawning of a new day.

Although the final scene is decidedly ambiguous and open, I believe it is essentially a problematic conversion and tragic ending of Topiltzin’s lineage. The audience is faced with a pessimistic outcome which signals—whether or not intentionally—the absence of the indigenous in modern Mexican spirituality and identity. For if individual Aztecs appropriated the Virgin into their lives in order to regain a lost Tonantzin, we understand that they did so in a vibrant effort to continue worshipping. Topiltzin, on the other hand, *dies* in the process. *La otra conquista* shows the conflicted, non-harmonious processes and the cultural annihilation of the indigenous symbols and beliefs.

[FIG. 25 joer] Turning now to the 1992 cartoon series *El Ahuizotl*, we see how the cartoonist returns to the nation’s sixteenth century origins to allegorically speak about the profound changes taking place in Mexico in the 1980’s and 1990’s. *El Ahuizotl*’s

cartoons are biting criticisms of Mexico's political and economic path at the end of the last century—most notably the modernization and globalization drives of president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The cartoons also demonstrate Mexicans' sense that they were undergoing yet another conquest at the end of the twentieth century. By drawing a parallel between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries and by casting the Aztecs as today's Mexicans, the *moneros* or cartoonists also comment on the state of national identity at the time. Despite the profound differences in Spanish and North American imperialism, the artists discussed in this chapter conflate the two, thus voicing the deepest fear in Mexico during the 1990s: that the PRI's deteriorating politics, neoliberal economics, and NAFTA would drastically transform Mexico's national identity.

As we see here, the 1992 series of *El Ahuizotl* is artfully crafted to fit into *La Jornada*, one of Mexico's highest circulating daily newspapers, as each of the issues parodies a journalistic, if at times tabloid, presentation of the major historical moments of the sixteenth-century. The set-up of the front page of this issue mimics the tabloid genre with its bold type headlines, dramatic visual and titillating stories to be divulged within.

Here, the Spaniards are awestruck by their first glimpse of Chilangotitlán (a derogatory updating of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capitol) and gasp: “F__k, this is wonderful!!” They are impressed, not by the indigenous achievements in architecture or transportation represented in the pyramids and canals, but by the evidence of industrialization and commercial integration of markets on flashy billboards; for example, they say....

[FIG 26. dollar] In another cartoon, we see Cortés ‘evangelizing’ Moctezuma with a new god: the dollar. The humor lies not only in the deep truth contained within

(that evangelization was secondary to the military conquest for the Spaniards) but also in the satirical derision of the materialism that the Occident—and now the North—have both brought to Mexican soil.

By equating Spaniards and Gringos, the series further lampoons many of the social, economic and political ills of Mexico in the 1990s. **[FIG 27 Iwantyou]** Consider the cartoons that clarify the relationship between the two. They equate the Spanish military invasion with the North American cultural invasion; and the Spanish religious crusade with the North American economic crusade for ‘free trade’. Within this paradigm, then, Cristóbal Colón recruits marines for the colonization of the New World much as Uncle Sam does for the imperialistic goals of the United States, **[FIG. 28 TLC]** and the first news of the Europeans’ presence reaches Moctezuma along with the rough draft for the NAFTA treaty. A messenger, reporting on the first sightings of the Spaniards along the coast says, “They have the body of a deer, hair all over their faces, their feet stink and they sent you the first draft of NAFTA.” Here, we laugh as we recognize the parallel drawn between a treaty that wrenches open previously protected markets and a colonial economic monopoly that figuratively rapes a country (wrench/ rape obviously evoking a great Mexican pun or double entendre of *chingar* (vulgar term for “intercourse”).

[FIG. 29 turistas1] In another example of drawing parallels between the “conquests,” we are asked to consider if the Spaniards were met with such clichéd marketing as today’s tourists in coastal Mexico are. One of Cortés’s first interpreters, Jerónimo de Aguilar, welcomes the Spaniards with trinkets and a sign that reads: “Interpreter, translation, I move my belly, ceviche (marinated fish).” **[FIG. 30 turistas2]**

In addition, the ambivalence with which many Mexicans greet shopping tourists today is reflected in the obviously insulting message on the cloth they are accepting as a gift:

“The hieroglyphs say I hope they go straight to hell.”

[FIG. 31 gunboat] The parallels drawn between the Spanish colonization and the Gringo globalization of Mexico easily extend into the realm of the military as well. The impromptu boats or *bergantines* that the Spaniards built in 1521 in order to take Tenochtitlán by water are drawn clearly as American gunboats and are described as “therefore constituting the first motherf__king naval force, direct antecedent to the feared Marines.” **[FIG. 32 op_tormenta]** The battles on Mexican soil are also labeled with such names as “Operation Lagoon Storm // Operación Tormenta en la Laguna” much like Operation Desert Storm of 1991, and perhaps betraying the Mexican fear that its oil fields, too, were dangerously of interest to the United States—and dangerously close to being within their grasp if NAFTA offered up the national petroleum company, PEMEX, to foreign ownership.

The cartoons of *El Ahuizotl* not only play with the similarities between sixteenth and twentieth century history, but they also evoke—very forcefully--the deepest and most urgent fears of Mexican society in the 1990’s. Then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari had promised it was ‘morning in Mexico’ and that he would make Mexico into a First World nation. That both energized and terrified many of his countrymen. **[FIG. 33 como-sobrevivir]** These very fears are evident in the fact that the *monero* El Fisgón published a book of cartoons entitled *How to Survive Neoliberalism and Still Be Mexican* in 1996.

Into the Twenty-first Century

Admittedly, since these works emerged, dramatic democratization, continued negotiations with indigenous groups, and nearly two decades of neoliberal policies in Mexico have further altered Mexico's national identity and brought many new nuances to the fore. Yet, the core issues discussed in these works remain pertinent. First, Mexico's origins—be they political, racial, spiritual or cultural—continue to be a dramatic source of storytelling. And those stories, in turn, will always speak to *who* Mexicans are today. History is ever-present in Mexico and continues to be used to construct and deconstruct national identity. And lastly, race—indigenous, European, *mestizo* or 'other'—will continue to challenge this nation whose *mestizophile* identity discourse skewed many Mexicans' notion of their nation for a very long time.