

PRIMORDIAL CULTURES AND CREATIVITY IN THE ORIGINS OF "LO MEXICANO"

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Every moribund or sterile society attempts to save itself by creating a redemption myth which is also a fertility myth, a creation myth.... The society we live in today has also created its myth. The sterility of the bourgeois world will end in suicide or a new form of creative participation.
(Paz 1961:212)

When someone asks for a good introduction to Mexico, and specifically for a cultural description of what it means to be Mexican, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961) by Octavio Paz is a most commonly recommended reading. In this paper¹ I wish to examine certain writings of the twentieth century, including *Labyrinth*, which have been seminal in the intellectual construction of Mexican cultural identity. This essay forms part of a larger project which examines the relationship between cultural identity and social class in Mexico. Here, I will explore what certain key figures have had to say regarding "lo mexicano" and in the process consider three issues: First, why are examinations of "lo mexicano" so often closely tied to stories of primordial cultural origins? Second, to what extent are Paz and others such as Samuel Ramos engaged in the process of cultural *creation*, that is, a top-down imagining of national identity (see Anderson 1991) and inventing of traditions (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and not simply reflecting beliefs and activities of their times? Third, why and how is national identity as formulated by Ramos, Paz, and others equivalent to male identity?

Amidst calls from Manuel Gamio in 1916 to forge a new fatherland and from José Vasconcelos in 1927 to build *la raza cósmica*, the cosmic race which was to include everyone in Latin America, the intellectual upsurge in Mexico following the Revolution of 1910 was marked by a nationalist agenda full of promises for a new Mexico constituted and mediated by a new Mexican culture. This new culture could only be founded, however, on the basis of tracing the primordial roots which had led to this new nation-state. Perhaps the emphasis on tracing their direct cultural origins back 500 or more years simply reflects the innate sense of timelessness which is supposedly one of the common national characteristics of Mexicans,

and that there may be nothing new under the sun in Mexico, as Knight (1990:87) writes in another context.

I hope to show, however, that in the search for antediluvian culture traits are hidden the myths of a very real, dominant culture which in part serves to legitimize the twentieth-century Mexican state. As Carlos Monsiváis comments, "cultural nationalism is always a political function of the State" (1976:634). Further, while the elaborate mexicanisms of Paz and Ramos, for example, are indeed creative cultural constructions, they also may be read as concealing some of what they would reveal about the great mass of peasants and proletarians in Mexico. In contrast, the recent work of scholars such as Roger Bartra has emphasized especially the question of *new* cultural creativity in descriptions and analyses of Mexico. These writers' concern with cultural agency and production is related to a vision of history which is anchored not in an eternal Mexico but instead with an understanding of the repeated upheavals and turns experienced in Mesoamerica. In the period under review, 1492-1992, this refers particularly to Spanish conquest and colonization, the first and second Mexican revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the contemporary crises of neocolonial modernization.

Samuel Ramos and Cultural Origins

Samuel Ramos, 1897-1959, philosopher and professor at Mexico's National University, wrote *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México (Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* [1962]) in 1934. Ramos' stated ambition in *Profile* is to "establish a theory which would explain the real character of Mexican man and his culture," to discover "certain national vices" present in Mexico (1962:4). Appearing at the beginning of the radical nationalism and state consolidation of the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), *Profile* was "our first serious attempt at self-knowledge," as Paz (1962:160) later remarks.

In what he terms the psychoanalysis of the Mexican, Ramos locates the essence of *mexicanidad*, that is mexicanness, as being a "sense of inferiority." The historical origins of this sense of inferiority are to be found in the conquest and colonization of Mesoamerica by the Spanish beginning in 1519. In his formulation concerning inferiority complexes, Ramos was influenced by the theories of early practitioners of psychoanalysis, especially Alfred Adler. He was most impressed by notions of psychological complexes and birth traumas (see Stabb 1967).

Ramos illustrates his theory of Mexicans' inferiority complex and irrational tendencies to imitate others through the example of the *pelado*, the archetype of everything that is wrong with "lo mexicano." The *pelado*, says Ramos, "constitutes the most elemental and clearly defined expression of [Mexican] national character ... he belongs to a most vile category of social fauna; he is a form of human rubbish from the great city ... explosive ... an animal whose ferocious pantomimes are designed to terrify others ... [whose] real position in life ... is a nullity" (1962:58-9). The *pelado* is, thus, a male member of the urban lower classes, vulgar and poorly educated. Of cardinal importance, Ramos says that the *pelado* himself associates "his concept of virility with that of nationality, creating thereby the illusion that personal valor is the Mexican's particular characteristic" (1962:63). According to Ramos, "The most destitute of Mexican *pelados* consoles himself by shouting at everyone that 'he's

got balls' (*muchos huevos*)," while another of his favorite expressions is "'I am your father' (*Yo soy tu padre*)" (1962:60).

Ramos in these passages shows the lower class Mexican male as preoccupied with his own superficially aggressive masculinity, with procreation as a test of manhood, and with the coincidence between gender and national identities. As in most myth making of this kind, by attributing to the *pelado* himself the connection between national and male identities, Ramos, perhaps unintentionally, utilizes prejudices against the urban proletariat and thereby asserts as already established fact what many since then have uncritically repeated as documented truth about Mexican male identity. While my research is still too fragmentary to draw firm conclusions, it appears that numerous stereotypes, both popular and social scientific, regarding a uniform and ubiquitous Mexican male "machismo" — a condition which is supposedly most pronounced in the working class — received great impetus during the 1930s and 1940s in Mexico. Indeed, not only was this period during the presidencies of Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho especially crucial in the formation of Mexican national identity, but many currently accepted folk wisdoms about Mexican men can be traced back to their appearance at this time in the writings of those like Ramos. Further, as Limón pointedly notes, Samuel Ramos' "interpretive tradition unintentionally helps to ratify dominance through its negative psychologistic interpretation of the Mexican male lower class and their language" (1989:85).

We should recall that *Profile of Man and Culture* is not some antiquated tirade against the hoi palloi. This book is, in the recent words of one historian, "of transcendent importance in the history of ideas and is read by all who enter Mexican studies" (Schmidt 1978:157).

Central to Ramos's thesis is a particular resolution to the theoretical conundrum posed by Mexico's heritage of ethnic conquest. I refer to *mestizaje*, the term used to denote "mixing." English must borrow from Spanish the word *mestizo*, for which there is no exact English translation, meaning one of mixed Indian (mother) and Spanish (father) ancestry. The Spanish excelled in fine distinctions between different racial mixtures, as evidenced by the following list from eighteenth century New Spain (from Morner 1967:58):

1. Spaniard and Indian beget mestizo
2. Mestizo and Spanish woman beget castizo
3. Castizo woman and Spaniard beget Spaniard
4. Spanish woman and Negro beget mulatto
5. Spaniard and mulatto woman beget morisco
6. Morisco woman and mulatto woman beget albino
7. Spaniard and albino woman beget torna atrás
8. Indian and torna atrás woman beget lobo
9. Lobo and Indian woman beget zambaigo
10. Zambaigo and Indian woman beget cambujo
11. Cambujo and mulatto woman beget albarazado
12. Albarazado and mulatto woman beget barcino
13. Barcino and mulatto woman beget coyote
14. Coyote woman and Indian beget chamiso
15. Chamiso woman and mestizo beget coyote mestizo
16. Coyote mestizo and mulatto woman beget ahí te estás

In Mexico, however, nationalist ideologues since 1910 have often favored *the myth of the mestizo*, that is, the romantic notion of a syncretic culture in Mexico which is neither Indian nor Spanish but whose elements are clearly traceable to one or the other. Ramos holds that while there was a *mestizaje*-mixing sexually, this was not the case culturally "because as a result of the contact between conqueror and native, the culture of the native was destroyed" (1962:26). Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica submitted to the conquest quite possibly because they were "naturally inclined to passivity," Ramos writes (1962:34). According to him, this is not to say the Indians were inferior, but simply that they were different than the Spaniards.

This passivity and fatalism is linked in Ramos to campesinos, whom he associates exclusively with indigenous peoples, and to the *pelado*. In contrast to the lower orders, Ramos heralds the cosmopolitan as the hope for Mexico's future: "The active group is that of the mestizos and whites who live in the city" (1962:63). This in the lap of the peasant revolution of 1910!

The nationalist program promoted by Ramos beginning in the 1930s and quite influential at least through much of the 1960s in Mexico called for a *mestizo* culture rooted in the recognition of Spanish conquest over the indigenous peoples. Today Mexico City's Plaza of the Three Cultures (Tlatelolco) bears a bronze plaque which reads:

On August 13, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc [the last Aztec emperor], Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernán Cortés. This event was neither a victory nor a defeat. It was the painful birth of the Mestizo people, the people of Mexico today. (cited in Friedlander 1975:xiv)

Whether one points to cultures obliterated or elevated by Spanish conquest or to the resiliency of indigenous lifeways or to culture as a historical product and historical force that is shaped and is being shaped as Roseberry rightly stresses, the question of origins is settled by Ramos (1962:74) through resort to "ethnic mental traits" (1989:53). Though never explicitly defined by Ramos, ethnic mental traits together with historical heredity and environmental peculiarities "determine the evolution of life with a rigidity that individual wills can never alter" (1962:74). Although there must be a special national character to culture in Mexico, Ramos writes, because "[our] race is a branch of a European [conquering] race.... [to] believe we can develop in Mexico an original culture unrelated to the rest of the world constitutes a total misunderstanding" of culture as primarily a matter of innate spirit (1962:108,106). Culture therefore cannot be created; at most one may become conscious of one's culture and reconciled to its life-determining forces. We shall return to notions of innate, primordial cultures, and their rigid ways.

Octavio Paz, Masculinity, and Nationalism

Octavio Paz is one of the great intellectuals of the twentieth century. *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* [1961]) was first published in Mexico in 1949, fifteen years after Ramos's *Profile of Man and Culture*. In the words of Monsiváis:

The book establishes a cultural criterion in a flash of great brilliance, and its flowing and classical language carries the conviction to explain and recover society beginning with this (debatable) investigation regarding its primordial impulses and myths. On the other hand, many of its very debatable hypotheses have become popular commonplaces. (Monsiváis 1988:1472)

I will confine my comments about this remarkably influential book² to Paz's discussion of "a specific group made up of those who are conscious of themselves, for one reason or another, as Mexicans" (1961:11). For the history of Mexico, Paz writes, is "the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins" (1961:20). In this respect, Paz bases many of his conclusions and insights on Samuel Ramos, whom Paz approvingly cites and whose own findings coincide with startling consistency with the substance of those found in *Labyrinth*.

In scrutinizing this book, it is crucial to keep in mind that, among other things, Paz in *Labyrinth* was going against a tide of disparagement of Indianness and "a will to eradicate all that has gone before" (Paz 1961:87). For example, as Adams notes, an objective of the Casa del Estudiante Indígena (Indian Student House) in 1927 was to "eliminate the evolutionary distance that separates the Indians from the present epoch, transforming their mentality, tendencies and customs ... to incorporate them within the Mexican community" (cited in Stephen 1991:92). The problems in forging a national identity in Mexico are manifold: "The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard," says Paz (1961:87), "[n]or does he want to be descended from them.... He becomes the son of Nothingness." And this nothingness would avoid or even worse deny "the vitality of the pre-Cortesian cultures" (Paz 1961:89). Paz takes great pains to show that: "The only truly original forms of art, thought, myth or government — and of course I do not exclude the United States — were pre-Columbian"³ (1961:103). On this basis, Paz issues a plea for Mexicans to break free of their "hermeticism" and cast off the defensive masks which prevent them from identifying with their nourishing Aztec origins, what Paz elsewhere calls the "secret political continuity since the fourteenth century" in the area today known as Mexico (1972:85).

Coming to terms with their Aztec roots in part involves acknowledging the gendered characteristics of Mexican society. Paz writes quite explicitly about these issues:

In a world made in man's image, woman is only a reflection of masculine will and desire.... The Mexican woman quite simply has no will of her own. Her body is asleep and only comes really alive when someone [male] awakens her ...[W]oman is always vulnerable...the misfortune of her 'open' anatomy.... (Paz 1961:35-38)

Mexican women embody passivity, according to Paz, and in *Labyrinth* (as in forging a nation) it is not the *chingada*, the violated and raped female, but rather the *chingón*, the active and dominant male who must be valorized. In *Labyrinth*, the *chingón* was given both pride of place as well as a lineage: the Son of La Malinche. But this filiation could be traced only if the son recognized his mother's betrayal and refused to forgive her for it (see Paz 1961:75-86).

La Malinche — also known as Malintzin and Doña Marina — was the Nahua woman sold to the Maya who later became mistress and translator for Hernán Cortés. Interpretations of Malinche's legend have depended over the centuries on contemporary events and sentiments rather than on knowledge of the facts of her life, about which little is known. Nonetheless, as Cypess (1991) clearly demonstrates, "the Malinche paradigm is a key subtext for female-male relations in Mexico" throughout the last 500 years (1991:70; see also Phillips 1983). For Paz and for many others, she has served as what Franco (1989:xviii) calls a "mythic scapegoat":

[I]t was not until Mexico became an independent nation and the problem of national identity surfaced that Doña Marina, transformed into La Malinche, came to symbolize the humiliation — the rape — of the indigenous people and the act of treachery that would lead to their oppression. (Franco 1989:131)

Male — and national — inferiority complexes thus may be portrayed as stemming from Malinche's sleeping with and translating for the enemy, which in turn has given rise to a solitude peculiar to Mexico. To hide from this reality, the Mexican protects *himself* with multiple masks. One way or another, like Gamio's (1916) forging of an indigenous soul and Vasconcelos's (1927) cosmic race, Ramos and Paz may well have more to teach us about the formation of the dominant culture in Mexico in the twentieth century than about the beliefs and behavior of most people in Mexico.

We see in Ramos and Paz at least three notable similarities: first, each credits the Spanish Conquest as the point of departure in understanding culture in Mexico today, whether for the triumph of the Spanish in the case of Ramos, or for the defeat of the Aztecs in the case of Paz. Second, and relatedly, their manner of tracing contemporary culture in Mexico back 500 or more years may nullify the creativity of cultures in Mesoamerica since the Conquest except in terms of resuscitation and timeless repetition. Third, Ramos and Paz each explicitly links his vision of Mexican identity to an inveterate, invented Mexican masculinity.⁴ Rather than as simple chroniclers of culture in Mexico, therefore, they must both be considered as part of the process described by Fox: "A national culture emerges from the confrontation over what the nation should and will be among nationalist ideologies" (1990:4).

Ramos and Paz should be given far more credit as creators rather than mere chroniclers of Mexican culture in the modern era.

Beyond Diffusion

In 1960, George Foster wrote *Culture and Conquest*, in which he discusses America's Spanish heritage. Following detailed comparison of Spanish and Latin American cultures,

Foster concludes that while various material aspects of culture — such as types of plows, wheeled transport, and the use of certain domestic animals — were more easily traceable to Spain. Discerning the origins of contemporary nonmaterial elements of culture such as folklore, beliefs, superstitions, folk medicine, folk festivals, and the like was far more difficult (see Foster 1960:16). I find this distinction useful: the task of determining the provenance of cultural ideas is more vexing than is the tracing of material culture artifacts.

One of the contributions made by Foster and others of his generation was to criticize notions of simple trait diffusion and insist that cultures be understood as complex processes and not just analytically separable component parts. Holism of various kinds has, of course, long been a hallmark of anthropology. The difficult part comes in identifying the ingredients and recipes with which cultures are cooked, to use Bartra's felicitous phrase (1987:21), and to extend the metaphor, determining whether the cultural-culinary elements in use today are simply the remnants of initial cultural configurations which are to be forever recombined.

In late summer 1949, the Wenner-Gren Foundation sponsored a seminar in New York City in which prominent anthropologists of Mesoamerica — including Ralph Beals, Julio de la Fuente, George Foster, Robert Redfield, Sol Tax, Alfonso Villa Rojas, and Charles Wagley — discussed the "Heritage of Conquest" (see Tax 1952): Among other things, participants drew up what they called an "Index of Acculturation" in which "retention of pre-Columbian traits" was charted. Perhaps in response to efforts such as these, Wolf writes that:

By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls. (1982:6)

In the case of the Index of Acculturation, as shown below, the Lacandón in the forest-selva of southern Mesoamerica, for instance, had not changed a bit in 500 years while the Tarascans of Michoacán had almost "made it" to full acculturation, that is, *mestizaje*. Other implicit assumptions being made with this Index coincide with Redfield's (1941) folk-urban continuum, in this case an indigenous-mestizo continuum, with Indians exhibiting one unitary world view and practice as the representatives of the "original" members of their tribes.

INDEX OF ACCULTURATION					
<i>Retention of pre-Columbian Traits</i>					
	Mono-lingual-ism	Tech-nology	Social Organi-zation	Re-ligion	Total
1. Lacandón	100	100	100	100	400
2. NW Guatemala (Huehuetenango & Ixil)	90	85	80	90	345
3. Tzeltal	70	90	90	80	330
4. Quintana Roo	100	90	40	40	270
5. Soteapan (Popoluca)	65	50	60	90	265
6. Chinantec	70	90	70	30	260
7. Mazatec	80	40	70	60	250
8. Mixe	75	55	50	50	230
9. Midwest Guate- malan High- lands	90	75	40	20	225
10. Sayula (Popoluca)	80	60	50	25	215
11. Totonaca	60	70	50	25	205
12. N. Guatemala (Kekchi)	80	75	30	15	200
13. E. Guatemala (Chorti, Pokoman)	20	70	80	30	200
14. Mixteca	60	40	40	50	190
15. Otomí	60	60	40	30	190
16. Huasteca	60	40	50	20	170
17. Zapotec	70	30	30	25	155
18. Maya of Yucatán	40	40	30	30	140
19. Tepoztlán	10	20	40	30	100
20. Tarascan	25	10	0	10	5

(Source: Tax 1952:263-4)

A view which negates culture change over a time span of centuries for certain groups while recognizing (or at least emphasizing) simply the adoption of one or another preexisting culture trait on the part of other groups is founded ultimately on a peculiar view of cultural stasis and in some cases stagnation. The recent work of several anthropologists and others in Mexico directs our attention instead to the genesis of cultural innovations whose history is used to illuminate without blinding their contemporary manifestations.

Beyond National Character and *Mestizaje*

In *La jaula de la melancolía (The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis of the Mexican)*, anthropologist Roger Bartra writes that the Mexican national character has only a literary and mythological existence, and that from the beginning of this century, through Paz at least, ancestral barbarism has been appealed to to explain the Mexican nation (1987:17,21). And as Bartra (1987:49) alludes, perhaps Redfield must take some of the blame for the fact that the stereotyped melancholy *campesino* has become one of the most important elements constituting the so-called Mexican national character and culture. Bartra is an uncommonly keen interpreter of the cultural lifeways of Mexico. Inventing apt phrases to characterize what happens as a result of the "contact" between cultures has long been a growth industry in anthropology and ethnohistory. The term "contact" is itself often used in studies of the sixteenth century experience in the Americas as a way of delicately avoiding the facts of conquest, invasion, plague, decimation, and empire. Depending upon their usage, the phrases "hybridization," "fusion," "syncretism," "*mestizaje*," and even "acculturation" may all reflect such delicate sensibilities. They also can reveal a seemingly greater emphasis on historical product rather than on continual cultural production, on culture as constituted and not also constituting.

But modernity, as Roseberry and O'Brien suggest, "has involved the constant creation of new expressions of cultural difference as well as fundamental redefinitions of old ones" (1991:1). Golden ages may reemerge with quite altered form and meaning through their creative reinvention. Phelan links the origins of Mexican nationalism in the eighteenth century to what he calls "Neo-Aztecism," that is, "the adoption of the Aztec world as ... American classical antiquity" (1960:761). Although the difference between what remains from the past and what represents something genuinely new under the sun are admittedly often difficult to delineate, we must try.

Analysts of a would-be uniform "national character" (or culture) of Mexico often resort to origin myths, downplaying class, gender, and ethnic divisions within the geographic boundaries of the nation state, and also discount the fact that new and significant cultural features have emerged since the Revolution and Independence. Victor Turner writes that during the Mexican independence movement of 1810 it was necessary to unite diverse strata around common concerns and goals. Central to this process of political and military unity was discerning a shared cultural history, what Turner calls the revolutionary paradox: "to go forward, to achieve progress, one must at the same time go backward, to an age of freedom" (Turner 1974:144). Such an intellectual construction of a common culture — in this case of a

past egalitarian epoch — requires that creative processes be understood as if "'antiquity' were...the necessary consequence of 'novelty'" (Anderson 1991:xiv).

The ethnographic record has been considerably strengthened in the last ten years with regard to the necessary distinction between institutions and rituals which are often ancient in form, and the frequently more obscure cultural content involved in their contemporary utilization. For instance, adopting the formal rituals of Catholicism does not necessarily tell us much about the meanings or ramifications of their practice by Christianized indigenous groups. Wasserstrom (1983), for example, writes of the creative uses to which the institution of *cofradía* (religious brotherhoods) was put in colonial Chiapas: "highly stratified forms of religious service developed ... when Indian communities tried to protect themselves against the depredations of both the Church and civil officials" (1983:246). Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, these attempts at maintaining their independence proved unsuccessful. In neighboring Oaxaca, Stephen (1991) shows how weaver women's central roles in the ceremonial system — especially through the institutions of *respet* (ritual authority), *guelaguetza* (ritual labor and goods exchange), and *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship) — relate to expanding class differences between merchant and weaver women.

Such ethnographic descriptions run counter to twentieth-century notions of "lo mexicano" which posit an original and unchanged mexicanness stemming especially from two events: the landing of Cortés in Tabasco in 1519 (involving the original "betrayal" by La Malinche) and the sighting in 1531 of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's National Symbol, the Mother and Queen of the Mexican, the Mother of the Indians — for she spoke in her historic sighting to the Indian Juan Diego in the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs (see Lafaye 1976; Wolf 1958). These two sixteenth-century episodes involving La Malinche and La Virgen have provided the fertile seeds of Mexican nationalism in the twentieth century.

Lafaye (1976:299) writes that the cult of Guadalupe "is the central theme of the history of ... Mexican patriotism," but that the cultural content embodied in this cult has been far from constant through the centuries. In particular:

Beginning with the period of Independence, we observe a change in the image of Guadalupe; from the protectress against epidemics that she had chiefly been, she becomes the 'goddess of victory' and liberty. (Lafaye 1976:310)

The duality of La Malinche and La Virgen constitutes what Bartra today calls the image of Chingadalupe in Mexico (1987:222). It also prompts Jean Franco to write:

The problem of national identity was thus presented [in writers like Paz] primarily as a problem of *male* identity, and it was male authors who debated its defects and psychoanalyzed the nation. (Franco 1989:131)

For our purposes, what is most significant are the myths built up around Malinche in particular, for she exemplifies in much nationalist discourse "talent sacrificed, loyalty misplaced, or idealism betrayed" (Cypess 1991:153), in other words, the nagging sins from Mexico's past which unless exorcised will continue to punish (male) Mexicans in the present.

In this cultural nationalist version of history, it is men today who suffer the consequences of these historic sins which have almost by definition been brought about by women.

More popularly, La Malinche is sometimes said to be one and the same figure known as La Llorona (The Weeper). "All through central Mexico," writes Ingham, "stories are told about a wicked woman, a female personification of evil" (1986:110). As Alarcón shows, "more than a metaphor or foundation/neomyth as Paz would have it," La Malinche represents "a specific female experience that [is] being misrepresented and trivialized" (1989:72). For instance, Malinche has been seen among some Chicanas as a rebel against family norms for women (see Alarcón 1989:70). What Malinche herself stood for or may have believed is not only impossible to say, it is also irrelevant.

Ramos writes that, owing to their epochal history, "Up to now, Mexicans [that is, the *pelados*] have known only how to die; it is time that they learned [from middle class culture] how to live" (1962:11). Paz echoes: "The Mexican's indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life" (1961:58). Such supposed disdain for death also is held to originate in the fatalism of ancient Mexica culture. Bartra (1987:87) comments on this discussion by Paz and Ramos of Mexican self-contempt: "To suppose that there are peoples who are indifferent in the face of death is to think of these peoples as bands of wild animals," which means, among other things, to make an ultimately biological argument for human behavior. This is a familiar refrain present also in some contemporary anthropology in the U.S., one designed to account for not only violence in cultures, for example, but also reflective of the search for some past, pristine innocence and virtue lost under the regime of industrial capitalism.

Paz, though long preoccupied with the sins of the modern era, still operates within the framework of a national "we," one in which divisions internal to the population in Mexico are at the least put to one side "for the moment" (see Rowe and Schelling 1991:165). One product of this populist vision is popular culture, about which Monsiváis writes: "The term ends up capriciously unifying ethnic, regional and class differences..." (cited in Rowe and Schelling 1991:165). As Bartra remarks, national myths in Mexico are not a reflection of the conditions in which the masses of people live, nor certainly are they merely a reflection of false consciousness on their part (1987:238); instead, these national political myths are part of the cultural landscape as social conflicts are extended by other means.

Cultural fragmentation is not suddenly affecting Mexico today. There have always been "many Mexicos," and it behooves us as anthropologists to learn about, document, and analyze this cultural diversity as an historical *and* ongoing, creative process. *Lo mexicano* may have originated in the minds of those such as Ramos and Paz, the myth makers of Mexican nationalism, and not with "the Mexican" herself. Yet this should not be taken to mean that the *pelados*, *peladas*, and *chingones* of all stripes are not in turn themselves engaged in creative and continual self-imagining and invention about what it means to be women and men in Mexico in 1992.

Notes:

- 1 My thanks to Alex Saragoza, Gwen Kirkpatrick, Rebecca Dobkins, Stanley Brandes, George Foster, and to participants in the Townsend Center Graduate Seminar on "Nationalist Discourse and Representation: 'Mexico Since the Revolution,'" UC Berkeley, Spring 1992, for sharing their ideas on *lo mexicano* and cultural creativity. All translations from Spanish texts are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 2 See Stabb 1967 for the influence of *Labyrinth* both in Mexico and abroad.
- 3 The French surrealist writer Andre Breton once sentimentally remarked that Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo's *oeuvre* was especially noteworthy because it was able to extract "the essence of eternal Mexico" (cited in Ades 1989:218).
- 4 De Barbieri writes that both Ramos and Paz "end up with very stereotyped characterizations of [Mexican] men and women, and likewise with a flat view of historical origins (inherited from the Conquest) and later development" (1990:85).

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