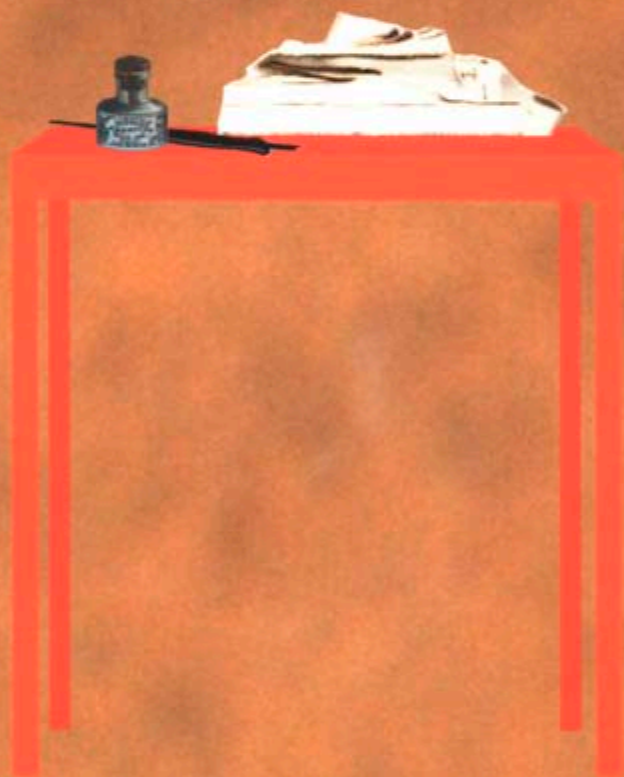


# BLOOD, INK, AND CULTURE

Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition



ROGER BARTRA    Translated by Mark Alan Healey

Blood,

Ink,

and

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## Preface

There is a culture of blood and a culture of ink. These two cultures confront each other and intertwine with each other. I would like to say we are leaving an age of blood behind, to enter into an age of ink, but there is little basis for such optimism. At best, we might think that the space of ink has spread considerably. In fact, it seems to me that—with ideologies in crisis—we can see a return, and perhaps a strengthening, of this tragic duality.

The culture of blood exalts identity, religious fidelity, revolutionary struggle, and the defense of the fatherland. The culture of ink praises the multiplicity of writing and drives its arguments home on printed paper, not on the battlefield. The culture of blood is stained with the red color of life, but it is willing to trade that life in, for the good of the class or the homeland. It contrasts with the blackness that stains the minimal arguments of writers, although sometimes the culture of ink exchanges its ideas for a plate of beans. To strengthen these metaphors, we could turn to the ancient Nahua's images of black and red ink (*tlilli*, *tlapalli*) in a legendary land, the country of wisdom. But even there, in the inks that the wise used to paint the codices, this unsettling duality made its appearance, confronting the dangerous mysteries of the night with the bloody forces of life.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, the essays in this book are the result of drinking ink, as Shakespeare put it, and eating paper. Many writers and intellectuals have abandoned the old activism of the political culture of blood, and our texts sprinkle ink over the history pages that others would print with tides of violence. We no longer

1. On Nahua uses of red and black ink in codices, see Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). [Trans.]

live in the region of the open veins, not because exploitation and misery have come to an end, but because we believe that not everything in this world is rivers and swamps of blood.<sup>2</sup> We are no longer pleased by the invocations of a revolutionary Eucharist that transforms the bread and wine of daily life into martyred bodies and sublime hemorrhages. Yet with the collapse of political dogma, part of the Left has unfortunately drawn closer to religious symbolism, feeding the broken idols of traditional orthodoxy with the blood of the suffering.

Back in the eighties, we could still describe cultural battles as a confrontation between what I called, using the mythology dreamed up by Julio Cortázar, the “*cronopy* of the *famas*” and the “*famistics* of the *cronopios*.”<sup>3</sup> The division was between epicurean exuberance and chronicles of barbarism (also known as magical realism) on the one side and a refined serenity of gothic souls and iron-bound structuralism on the other. This opposition could divide, to put it crudely and schematically, Gabriel García Márquez or Carlos Fuentes from Jorge Luis Borges or Octavio Paz. By century’s end what is more dominant, it seems to me, is the opposition between the cultures of blood and ink, although that earlier duality has not disappeared. A series of events has set a new dynamic in motion: the collapse of socialism and the rise of ethno-religious regional conflicts; the erosion of authoritarianism and the expansion of democracy and globalization; the wars in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. In Mexico the end of the millennium is marked by the rupture of 1988, the appearance of Zapatista guerrillas in 1994, and the terminal crisis of the authoritarian political system in 2000.

The images of blood and ink were imposed on me by the course of events, especially the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas. The Zapatista army threatened to wash the country in blood, but what it actually produced was a vast ink stain: fortunately, more letters than bullets came out of Chiapas. Since then, the metaphors about the battle between blood and ink have showered down on us. Some seemed to take their unsettling exclamations from the Koran: “If your enemies attack you, wash them in their own blood.” Some of us replied: “Let’s wash ourselves in the enemy’s ink.” That is to say: let’s listen to others’ arguments, let’s learn to read inks of various colors, and let’s dip our pens in pessimistic inks before we plunge them into the sanguine optimism of coagulated identities.

2. This is a reference to the sixties leftist classic by Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973). [Trans.]

3. The terms are drawn from Julio Cortázar, *Cronopios and Famas*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969). Roughly speaking, *cronopios* are intuitive, effusive, spontaneous, expansive, temperamental, and disorganized; *famas* are rigorous, restrained, prudent, scientific, dispassionate, and ordered. [Trans.]

Of course, the exaltation of ink has its risks. Next to the learned stand a legion of pen pushers; the unpleasant experts in friendly inks conceal disputes; and multicolored plurality is often diluted into halftones of opportunism and incoherence. Once one sets out to sweat ink, the arduous labor of putting ideas down on paper often ends up producing blank pages. But a blank page after nights of sterile sleeplessness is far better than the fire-eating verbiage of bloody-minded politicians ready to bleed civil society dry in the slaughterhouse of the fatherland. I prefer a useless ink sucker to a bloodsucker who lives off the consanguine loyalties of political mafias. And even worse are those leeches of ethnic identity who call for battle against neoliberal vampires: the result is the atrocious war that tears Balkanized societies apart. All this is done in the name of the blood with which borderlines are drawn between cultures and religions, tongues and nations.

These essays revolve around themes of identity, intellectuals, and the political culture of the Left. They form part of larger polemics, and they welcome debate. They open with an essay offering a critique of the Mexican calling—that nationalist will to define Mexicanness—and its worship of blood. Another essay is articulated around irony, referring to the Zapatista movement as “Tropical Kitsch,” that cloying form of the art of politics which takes advantage of the popular taste for sensationalism and sentimentalism. Since this essay was cooked up over seven years (1994–2001), it is soaked through with the debates it provoked or responded to. In one way or another, the essays gathered in this book critique the culture of blood: they celebrate the post-Mexican condition, they reject the wailing wall some want to substitute for the fallen Berlin Wall, they criticize nationalism, and they praise the Left—but as a democratic luxury, not a historical necessity. And they include, as a guide for the perplexed Left, some thoughts on how to escape from the hermeneutic cage.

In closing, I should confess that I have spilled a few drops of blood into the inkpot I dip my pen into. I have noticed that without those drops, the ink never dries. They say the same happens with those who invoke blood rights: if they don’t mix the life-giving fluid with ink, it evaporates without leaving any trace. This mix, and others, are what keep hope alive.



Blood,

Ink,

and

Culture



**I  
BLOOD  
AND  
INK**



## *The Mexican Office: Miseries and Splendors of Culture*

**T**o hide its nakedness in times of want, Mexican “official culture” has sent its jewels and treasures to New York, the metropolis of the north.<sup>1</sup> It dreams of flaunting the splendors of its art before the stunned eyes of savage millionaires, to warm the cold industrial heart of the United States. And as ever, it aims to affirm its identity by confronting Anglo-American culture, attempting to shore up the waning legitimacy of the Mexican political system.<sup>2</sup>

This essay was written for a conference entitled “Mexico: Here and There” at Columbia University, organized as a critical response to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1990 exhibition “Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries.” An earlier translation of this essay by Coco Fusco was published in *Third Text*.

1. This essay is built around the ironic use of the terms “office” and “official culture” in ways slightly unfamiliar to American readers, so a few definitions may be in order. As Merriam-Webster reminds us, “office” refers not only to a place of business but also, and more importantly for our purposes, to “a special duty, charge or position,” to “the proper or customary action of something,” to “a religious or social ceremonial observance” (a rite), and to “a prescribed form or service of worship,” such as the Divine Office, the “office for the canonical hours of prayer that priests and religious say daily.” Bartra’s notion of the Mexican Office refers to all of these dimensions, to the sacralized ritual practice of cultural arbiters within the Mexican state—“official culture”—setting out the canonical forms and norms of Mexicanness. In this sense, the Mexican Office could be seen as a calling, a vocation in the Weberian sense. The essay is broken up according to the hours of the Divine Office and closes with references to the policing power of the Mexican Office, which recall those of the Holy Office, better known as the Inquisition. [Trans.]

2. Out of the political struggle of the revolution (1910–1920) there emerged a single political party that has come to dominate the Mexican political system. First formed in 1928, it has been known since 1946 as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI). The central concern of this book is the formation of a complex web of relationships

Mexican “official culture” is showing the world thirty centuries of splendor. I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on how “official culture” is generated. The concept can be understood from two angles. First, as an ethnographer, I can confirm that there is a culture that emanates from the offices of government and saturates the exercise of authority. This is an ensemble of habits and values that mark the behavior of the Mexican political and bureaucratic class: this swarm of *licenciados* and leaders share customs and folklore worthy of being carefully cataloged to be stored away in museum vaults. Painters have already begun this task: in his celebrated painting *The Bone*, Covarrubias portrayed the typical Mexican functionary with extraordinary irony.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we find that those very same government offices issue a seal of approval for artistic and literary production, in order to restructure it according to established canons. This peculiar reconstruction also makes up part of what I call “official culture,” but it should be clearly understood that this does not mean that the writers and artists themselves are the official spokespeople of government culture (although that is the case for a few). Nonetheless there is a close relationship between the folkways of government offices and the form the official reconstruction of Mexican culture takes: together they can be seen as the practice of a Mexican Office.

Just as there is a Divine Office that marks off the hours of the canonical day with prayers, psalms, and hymns, so there is a Mexican Office that marks off the days of the nation according to officially established canons. There is a Mexican Office that sings and tells of the national splendors. That Mexican Office is the “official culture” that stamps its *nihil obstat* on the works of time.<sup>4</sup> That Mexican Office is what decrees that Mexico has been resplendent for Thirty Centuries.

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between the PRI, national culture, civil society, and the democratic opposition, and the transformation of this web during the prolonged political and economic breakdown of the eighties and nineties. Two useful overviews of modern Mexican history are Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910–1989*, trans. Luis Alberto Fierro (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); and Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley, eds., *The Oxford History of Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). [Trans.]

3. Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957) was a painter and exceptionally astute caricaturist who worked extensively in Mexico and the United States. See Adriana Williams, *Covarrubias*, ed. Doris Ober (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). [Trans.]

4. *Nihil obstat* was the stamp that the Holy Office placed on books indicating that they were safe for the faithful’s consumption. [Trans.]

## Matins

At the dawn of history, the Olmecs raise their strange and enormous heads to look upon us. In the tradition of the old counterpoint Roger Fry noted at the beginning of this century, those first Mexicans are there to remind us that modernity is born stained with primitiveness.<sup>5</sup> Those faces of primeval art are there so that we, modern Mexicans, can recognize ourselves in them and see reflected in their otherness the buried and hidden part of our national being. This is an old and well-known theme in art history, but in Mexico it was made useful again by the frantic search for “Mexicanness” that accompanied the postwar modernizing boom.

So the origins of contemporary Mexican art should be found on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, not in the Mediterranean or the Middle East. Contrary to appearances, it has been decreed that our roots lie more in the figures of pre-Columbian codices than in the verses of the Old Testament. This is a cultural decision that fully makes sense only if we read history against the flow of time: it is from our here and now—from the perspective of the present-day Mexican state—that the Thirty Centuries of Mexican art have a unified meaning. Reasons of state, when applied to culture, become naturalized. Nature is the first element that gives unity and continuity to cultural history. Geography is turned into an immense living frame for history. The earth becomes a fertile mother in whose body the deep roots of national culture grow. According to this idea of nature, volcanoes, forests, valleys, lakes, flora, and fauna are no longer part of geography but have metamorphosed to become the anatomy of the living body of culture. That is why José María Velasco and Doctor Atl are considered indispensable elements of Mexican art: they are at the same time witnesses and creators of the palpitating landscape that defines the outline of the nation-state.<sup>6</sup>

I do not mean to say that the awareness of a certain *origin* and a *landscape* is simply an ideological formation created by the Mexican state to trick a dominated population. Cultural processes have a legitimating, homogenizing, and unifying effect, but not because they are mere “instruments” of the ruling classes. Even “official culture”—which *does* have an instrumental character—

5. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920).

6. José María Velasco (1840–1912) painted idealized landscapes of the Mexican countryside. Dr. Atl (born Gerardo Murillo, 1875–1964) was best known for his series of volcano paintings and his aerial landscapes. He also was an important intellectual ally of the victorious group in the Mexican Revolution, led by Venustiano Carranza, as well as being the designer of a monument to Carranza after he was assassinated. [Trans.]

cannot be explained except as a function of the complex process that feeds it, and that process is the creation of an articulated ensemble of myths about Mexican identity.

Despite Weber's claims, modern society has not ceased to generate myths. One of those myths is precisely the myth of national character. In Mexico that myth has crystallized into what I have playfully called the *axolotl* canon. That canon orders and classifies the features of Mexican character according to a basic duality: Mexicans are amphibious beings who shift between the rural savagery of melancholy Indians and the artificial and playful aggressiveness of urban *pelados*. In my book *The Cage of Melancholy*, I carry out an anatomical dissection of that mythical amphibious creature, Mexican national identity. The results of the operation may surprise many sociologists, because it shows that the rationality inherent to the unification of the modern state requires a mythological structure to give it legitimacy. There is no such thing as a purely rational legitimacy produced by capitalist economic structures and modern bureaucracy. The legitimacy of modern political systems generates a mythology capable of creating the "subject" of the capitalist state. That mythology is developed around the notion of national culture and, more specifically, around the conception of a national character.

## Lauds

We can praise the first twenty-five centuries of Mexican splendor that represent the solitary primeval otherness without which national culture apparently could not exist. But our praise cannot create a continuity that was broken by conquest and colonization; ancient artistic traditions were annihilated within a few years. Still, some insist on speaking of a cultural continuity that would span a bridge over the abyss opened by the conquest, between pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and colonial and independent Mexico.

We can recognize an intense search by twentieth-century Mexican artists for formal or spiritual values in pre-Hispanic cultures. What they found undoubtedly enriched their creations, but it is doubtful that it contributed to filling the immense void left by the destruction of ancient societies. "Official culture" has also taken a great leap across the centuries to search for the foundations of the modern state in ancient Mesoamerica.<sup>7</sup>

7. The archaeological excavation of the Templo Mayor, in the center of Mexico City, is an example of the use of spectacles to connect the present with pre-Columbian history.

Many consider it useless to look to history for the formal or stylistic continuation of pre-Columbian art into colonial or modern Mexico. The only real continuity is not usually accepted anywhere but in ethnographic museums: the millions of marginalized indigenous peoples are the only battered bridge left. They are a symbolic referent to the past, but they are usually rejected as an active presence.<sup>8</sup> In his introductory essay to the exposition catalog, *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, Octavio Paz indicates how the continuity problem has been resolved: all across an incredible variety of forms, we find the persistence of a single *will*, the will to survive in and through form. An attentive and loving look can perceive a continuity that is not manifest in either style or ideas, but in something deeper, in a sensibility.<sup>9</sup> This will for form is nothing more than the transposition of reasons of state onto the Mesoamerican past, an artistic past where the figure, the form, reveals the metamorphoses of a single will.

This game of transformations, of transfigurations, perfectly exemplifies an intellectual process that has been used frequently by modern nationalism and in theology is called figural interpretation. Elsewhere, I have already pointed out this curious phenomenon, which goes beyond the imaginative metaphorical relationships artists establish between distant epochs and distinct cultural spheres.<sup>10</sup> We are facing a delicate and complex process that manages to establish in collective consciousness a structural relationship between two unrelated cultural dimensions. This structural link operates on two planes simultaneously: as *mimesis* on one, and as *catharsis* on the other. Mimesis finds a similarity between ancient cultural features, for instance of the Mexica or the Maya, and colonial or modern history. I am not going to go into depth on this issue, but I would like to mention some of the themes in which this metahistorical link is usually found: sacrifice, guilt, cyclical events, baroque exuberance, dualism, the worship of the Virgin, et cetera. We find a transposition of current themes and conflicts onto a more or less imaginary past, where a prefiguration of the modern scene is to be found. This transposition onto an imagined past is similar to the one that takes place in modern mythology's reconstruction of the *Homo*

8. For decades, the political actions of the National Indigenous Institute have been an example of the strange combination of an official policy of exalting "deep Mexico" with a governmental practice of burying the indigenous people progressively deeper in the mud of modern society.

9. Octavio Paz, "The Will for Form," in *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1990), 4.

10. Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, trans. Christopher J. Hall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

*mexicanus*, an android whose anatomy must be examined because it will give us the keys to what I call the institutionalization of the national soul. A line reaches from the stooping Indian to the mestizo pelado, passing through the major points of articulation of the Mexican soul: *melancholy–idleness–fatalism–inferiority / violence–sentimentalism–resentment–escapism*. This line marks the voyage the Mexican must undertake to find himself, from the original Eden of nature to the industrial apocalypse.

## Prime

The spectacle of this cultural simulacrum allows us to indicate the importance of the other plane, that of catharsis, in the link between real and imaginary dimensions. The stage set of national culture is a space where the feelings of the people can be released. That is where nationalism can achieve its greatest effectiveness, by managing to identify politics with culture.

Nationalism is the transfiguration of the supposed characteristics of national identity onto the terrain of ideology. Nationalism is a political tendency that establishes a structural relationship between the nature of culture and the peculiarities of the state. In our country the official expressions of nationalism tell us: If you are Mexican, you must vote for the institutionalized revolution. Those who do not either are traitors to their deepest essence or are not Mexican. Nationalism is, then, an ideology that disguises itself with culture to hide its intimate means of domination. But for this identification of politics with culture to be successful, a process of sedimentation must have taken place already, separating elements socially held to be national from those that are not specifically held to be so. This is a complex process that cannot be produced artificially. That is to say, neither the state nor the ruling class can direct this process from above. This is a global process shaped by the interplay of several factors, including the very formation of the national state. On the basis of this process, the ruling class may be able to establish its cultural hegemony by using a nationalist ideology. But this is not the only way in which a social class can gain hegemony. I would say that the nationalist path is one of the most dangerous ways for achieving it and can lead—as it has in Mexico—to the institutionalization of a pernicious authoritarian system. And this system is all the more pernicious when nationalism produces a collective catharsis, through which it legitimates one way of doing politics as the only way of being Mexican.

## Terce

We live in the age of the collapse of great ideological blocs, and because of that, cultural critique becomes more important every day. There are different ways of conceiving of cultural critique. In Mexico it has been common to offer a critique from the perspective of nineteenth-century rationalism, that is, from the perspective of modernity, which says that it is crucial to “modernize” Mexican culture to adapt it to the needs of industrialization and mass society. This approach quickly leads to a dilemma: should we remake national culture along the lines of “true” popular culture, or should we accept the transnationalizing invasion of the new mass culture? But this dilemma is soon revealed to be a false one. It is false because our present-day national culture is precisely the amalgam of these two options, which are therefore complementary. With this I mean to say that the modernization of Mexican culture has already taken place. What I call the exercise of the Mexican Office is precisely the result of the modernization of national culture, and not some archaic and premodern leftover that must be redirected, or even destroyed, to open the way to modern culture.

What I am critiquing is precisely the modernity of national culture. It is its modernity that oppresses us, since that is where the authoritarianism that characterizes the Mexican system came from. Our choice at present is therefore not between a populist option or a transnational proposal: we need only turn on Mexican television to realize that hegemonic culture has already managed to overcome that contradiction, by imposing on us a deeply jingoistic culture that is aggressively aligned with U.S.-produced mass culture. By approaching these problems from the perspective of postmodernity, I am suggesting that the dividing lines have shifted and the contradictions have been displaced onto new terrain. We can no longer critique Mexican culture in the name of modernity, of a liberal-inspired modernity that raises up the banner of “progress.” We have to critique modernity from the standpoint I call dismodernity, or better yet—taking a cue from *desmadre*, Mexican slang for disorder—*dismotherernity*.<sup>11</sup>

## Sext

These observations lead us to conclude that we should distinguish between three phenomena: national identity, political culture, and official cultural policy. In examining the relationship between these three, we see that this is a mat-

11. *Desmadre* is slang for excess, chaos, disorder, and *madre* means mother. [Trans.]

ter of the ties between the formation of a myth (identity), its insertion into institutional life (political culture), and the ideology that attempts to explain and direct the process (official culture).

The myth of national identity is not a merely ideological phenomenon manipulated by the ruling class or the government. For the myth to be incorporated into political culture in what we might call a “natural” and lasting way, several conditions are necessary, which it would be excessive to explain fully here. Suffice it to say that this is a matter of the accumulation of a series of historical moments through which various elements are transfigured and transposed until political culture becomes relatively homogeneous and coherent. For its part, government cultural policy is an ideological practice that, in addition to many other tasks, uses cultural expression to legitimate the system. An example: the circulation of Mexican culture defines the officially national space, yet official cultural policy only slightly modifies the constitution of Mexican political culture. *Fotonovelas*, commercial television, comics, commercial music, detective novels, popular best-sellers, and romance or pornographic novels continue to exercise enormous influence. No matter how much they are denounced as “foreign,” they still form an integral part of Mexican political culture. On the other hand, the myth of the “Mexican soul” has managed not only to successfully survive the avalanche of “foreign” influences but to stake out a lasting place in political culture.<sup>12</sup>

The “Mexican soul” has held a stable place in political culture precisely because it appears as something non-Western. The myth of Mexican being has contributed to the legitimation of the political system, but it has taken on a mythical form hardly consistent with the Western capitalist development typical of the twentieth century’s end. Of course, if one wishes to see it this way, the myth did correspond to the peculiarities of a backward, corrupt, and dependent capitalism. Hence the contradictions contemporary Mexican culture is living through: the myth of national identity is becoming dysfunctional. But this dysfunctionality comes in great measure from its “popular” and “anticapitalist” origins. The myth stores up a good dose of protest, bitterness, revolt, and resistance: this circumstance explains the popularity of the stereotype of the Mexican.

12. On mass culture in modern Mexico, see Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Anne Rubinstein, “Mass Media and Popular Culture in the Postrevolutionary Era,” in Meyer and Beezley, *The Oxford History of Mexico*, 637–70. [Trans.]

None

The idea of the boundary, the tear, or the border is an important ingredient in the constitution of national identity. In Mexico this should be understood in at least two senses. First, as an inner tear or wound: Mexicanness split between the destroyed ancient autochthonous world and the colonial, Christian, and modern world. Second, as the great border dividing Mexico from the potentially hostile territory of Anglo-American culture. Without any doubt, confrontation with the northern Other has spurred the definition of Mexican identity. But here we come across a pious medieval Christian idea: one had to go to the land of the Moors, one had to undergo temptation and suffering, to reaffirm the faith. The border is a permanent danger. The border is a constant source of contamination and threats to Mexican nationality. The mere existence of the border is what permits nationalist passions to remain tense. It permits, we might say, a permanent state of alert against outside threats. Clearly this functions mostly on a symbolic level, since the demographic reality of the thousands of Mexicans who come and go across the border (more going than coming) generates a sociocultural process of *mestizaje* and symbiosis that no nationalist discourse could bring to an end.

Although this dialectic between Self and Other has been important, we should also recognize that the very long border has also been a wide space of interaction. From a cultural perspective, I do not think that we should be alarmed by what happens on the border. What is usually called the "Americanization" of border life is not a particularly damaging and threatening process. As an anthropologist, I cannot conceive of a border territory between two cultures in which transculturation processes do not take place. Any attempt to block this would be utopian at best. Some in the United States are also alarmed by the "Mexicanization" of border life: they have the same conservative and reactionary impulses as Mexican chauvinists.

This does not mean that there are no problems on the border. But for the most part, these are political problems of the relationship between two states. One is a very rich state headed by imperialist governments, and the other a very poor state monopolized by authoritarian governments. A mechanical transposition of political problems onto the territory of culture will only manage to deform our understanding of an extraordinarily complex situation.

Every Mexican (and Latin American) who has lived in the United States knows that Latin America does not end at the Río Bravo: the Latin continent has penetrated deeply into the Anglo-American sociocultural world. Within the United States, the "Hispanic" sector of society, economy, politics, and culture is enormous and exercises notable pressure on the American system. Mexican

nationalism has traditionally refused to recognize this fact, since this “Mexicanization” of life in the United States is usually seen instead from a different perspective, as the “Americanization” of Mexicans. As they say, some see the glass half empty, some see it half full.

## Vespers

On the eve of a new era that will lead us who knows where, Mexican culture is experiencing tensions that are tearing it apart.<sup>13</sup> The Thirty Centuries of Splendor fall on the heads of Mexican writers and artists like a bewildering avalanche. Yet all around us there is nothing to be seen but an eternal present, collapsed onto itself. It seems as if our cultural context was put up yesterday and is on the verge of falling down. In our everyday cultural landscape—as in our urban surroundings—the past barely exists, and we live in the fragility of a dream that ends each morning when we awaken to a miserable and backward reality. An armor-plated aesthetic of willful resplendence chases after cultural creators and hides from them the dark side of the myth. They are compelled to express an identity that is not theirs; they are forced into a millennial originality that they do not understand. Everyone must create bleeding from the same wound, aching from the same border, or from the same fracture. Everyone must be a native of one and the same landscape, and suffer in the same way from that geography.

On the eve of a drab financial battle that should open up to Mexico the doors of the mercantile paradise of the northern powers, official culture has adapted Napoleon’s famous speech to the present day: Soldiers of culture, from the heights of these pyramids Thirty Centuries are watching you! This adaptation has ten centuries fewer than those that watched over Bonaparte in Egypt in 1798, since it did not seem wise to mention the barbarism of descendants who are all too close to Tepexpan man.<sup>14</sup> This triumphalist vision of Mexican cultural history seems to follow the old recipes of Orientalism, which often concentrated the entire history of non-Western peoples into great packages of shining exoticism. This is a service in praise of museum culture, composed of the cumulative sum of great blocks built into monuments of pyramidal splendor in which the

13. The “eves” at the opening of these two paragraphs are plays on the timing of vespers, prayed at evening each day, with the coming of dusk. [Trans.]

14. Napoleon had spoken of a distance of thirty centuries between the builders of the pyramids and his soldiers; the distance from Tepexpan man to present-day Mexico would be more like forty centuries.

nuances of individual creation are lost, smothered by the mass of symbols: jaguars, eagles, baroque angels, violently colored tropics, inflamed revolutionaries, and long-suffering women. In the cracks of these great granite symbols, living intellectuals are often smothered, intellectuals who inhabit a world whose new signs they have not yet learned to decode. So writers and artists run the risk of ending up trapped in the solitude of a dense jungle of national symbols or embarked on a war against words, in an effort to lead those words toward the triumphant splendor of the signs of identity like a flock of sheep.

## Compline

The canonical hours of national identity are complete. The circle of immanence has closed, the Office has reached its end, and we have had our fill. Nationalism has invented a Mexican who is the very metaphor of permanent underdevelopment, the image of blocked progress. This devalued being only makes sense inside the networks of official political power. He or she is a being who lives on thanks to the state. This individual is seen as an incomplete larval being whose metamorphosis can take place only in the bosom of the revolutionary state.

But the revolutionary state is coming to an end, and this Mexican Office is becoming an office for the dead. It is not modernization that brings on its extinction, but postmodernity, that is to say, the tensions provoked by an excess of modernity in a context of weak modernization. Here I am making use, hopefully not in an abusive way, of the literary notion of modernism, translated into political theory. Modernity is a revolt against the rigidity of the old oligarchic order in search of political forms that are free although they are circumscribed and unified by national symbolic and imaginary structures. Thus modernity is a specific form adopted by civil society, a structure of cultural mediations that legitimates the political system. Modernization is, according to the usual sociological terminology, the capitalist transformation of society, based on industry, science, and secular institutions. Modernity is the imaginary country whose legitimating networks trap civil society. Modernization is the actual state of capitalist economic and social development.

In Mexico we have had an excess of modernity, so much that its weight has become unbearable: national identity in excess, exorbitant nationalism, revolution beyond measure, abuses of institutionality, a surplus of symbolism . . . We have put up with just sixty years of institutionalized modernity, but it seems like thirty centuries! By contrast, as the crisis that began in 1982 has revealed, our modernization is weak and flawed in many ways. The country is crammed

full of modernity, but thirsty for modernization. This is the unpleasant paradox: behind the "Splendors of *Thirsty Centuries*" we discover the "Miseries of Thirty Centuries."

Even with all its bitterness, postmodernity has nonetheless brought us the hope of escaping these smothering metadiscourses. The experience of a fragmented Mexico—the Mexico of "Here and There"—and the constant transgression of all borders, political and cultural, is one of the most stimulating signs of recent years. Far from closing off the creative impulses of Mexican intelligence, this lived experience has on the contrary opened up new vistas. One the most refreshing effects of what Guillermo Gómez-Peña has called the "borderization" of the world is proof that it is possible, we could say, to be Mexican without being subject to a state and a territory.<sup>15</sup> That deterritorialization and destatification of intellectuals is beginning to shape the outlines of postmodern society. We don't know where this trail will lead, but let's hope the only possible future of cultural life is not on a pedestal under glass in a museum.

15. See Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika: Essays, Performance Texts, and Poetry* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1993).