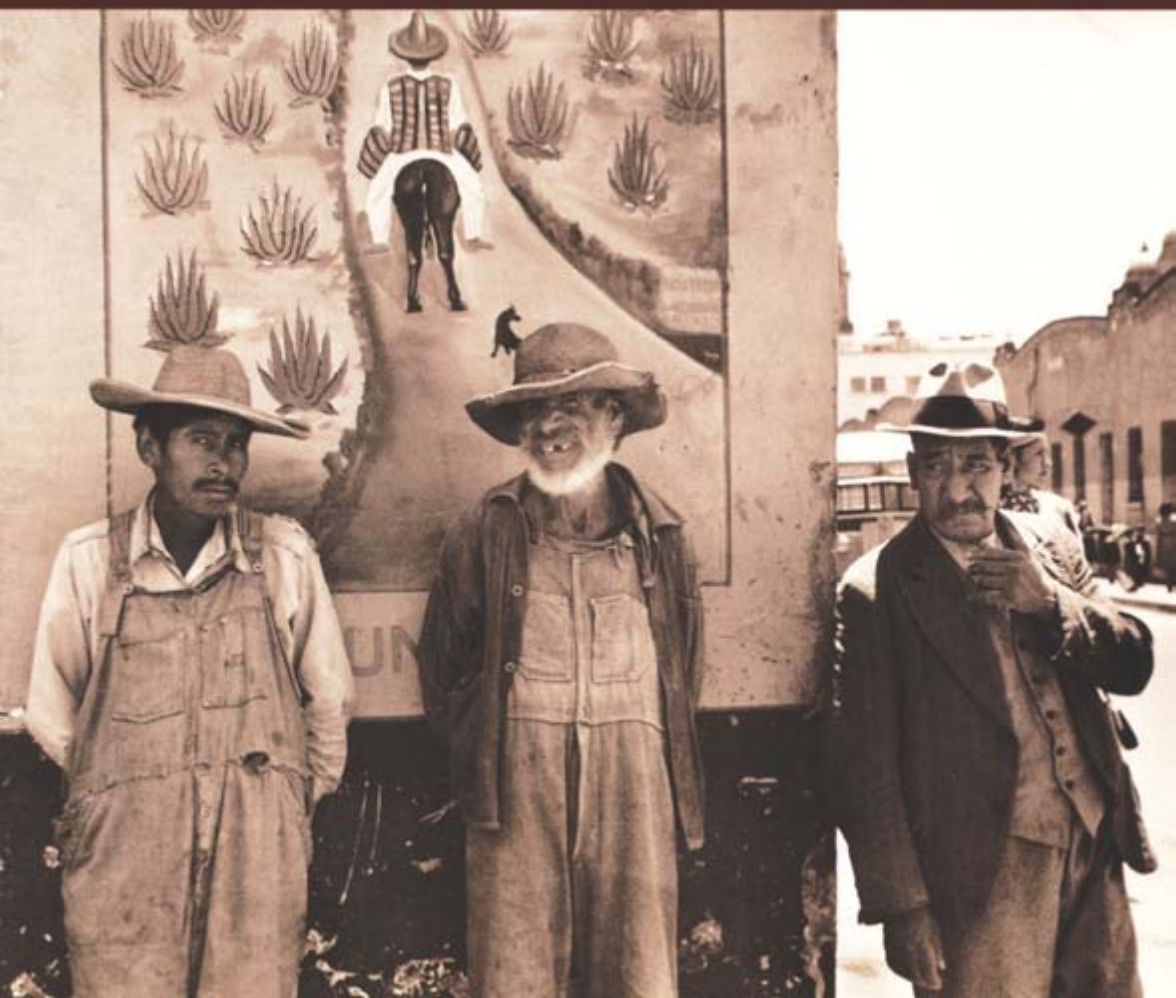


THE MEXICO READER

*History,
Culture,
Politics*

GILBERT M. JOSEPH & TIMOTHY J. HENDERSON, EDITORS



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THE MEXICO READER

History, Culture, Politics

Edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson

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*Dedicated to the memory of Pat Bradley,
colleague and friend*

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A Note on Style

In doing the translations for this volume we have attempted as much as possible to remain true to both the flavor and meaning of the original text. We have tried to choose English words that are as close as possible to the Spanish counterparts, though translation is an inexact science. In instances where it seemed essential to provide some further explanation, we have used brief and unobtrusive brackets whenever possible. At times, however, a brief footnote was in order. Many of the selections were substantially abridged, and for this we offer apologies to the authors. With respect to proper names, we have made a practice of rendering these as they appeared in the original text. Some names—for example, Moctezuma—have many different spellings, and several of those spellings appear in the pages to follow. We hope readers will bear with us.



Introduction

Mexico has always exercised a tremendous hold on the imagination of outsiders. Over the centuries, visitors have marveled at its tremendous economic possibilities and been lured by its “exotic,” expressive cultures. Standing atop one of the great pyramids of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) in 1519, one of Hernán Cortés’s Spanish lieutenants was barely able to contain his awe at the tableau that spread out before him:

We were astounded at the great number of people and the quantities of merchandise, and at the orderliness . . . that prevailed, for we had never seen such a thing before. . . . Every kind of merchandise . . . had its fixed place . . . with dealers in gold, silver, and precious stones, feathers, cloaks, and embroidered goods, and male and female slaves to be sold in the market. . . . We saw pyramids and shrines in these cities that looked like gleaming white towers and castles: a marvelous sight to behold.¹

Three centuries later, a “scientific conquistador,” the German Alexander von Humboldt (hailed in his time as “the monarch of the sciences”), spent a year of intense investigation in Mexico, then published a book in 1810 that celebrated the virtually boundless economic potential of Mexico’s agricultural and mineral resources. Observing that there was not a single plant in the rest of the world that could not grow in its soil, Baron von Humboldt predicted a bright future for Mexico.² Almost two hundred years later, in the early 1990s, U.S. political and business leaders regaled the American public with latter-day images of a cornucopia of trade and investment that would be realized as soon as the United States ratified NAFTA (the North America Free Trade Agreement).

Mexico’s cultural complex — that is, both its aesthetic realm and its political culture — has riveted foreigners at least as much as its enticing landscapes and natural resources. Enlightenment philosophes and nineteenth-century liberal intellectuals were obsessed by the intriguing mixture of artistic achievement and bloodcurdling brutality — of “civilization and barbarism” — that they saw as the hallmark of Mexico’s pre-Columbian societies, most notably the Aztec empire. In the aftermath of Mexico’s epic Revolution (1910–1917), *norteameri-*

canos, titillated (and unsettled) by the violent careers of telluric revolutionary chiefs like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata and captivated by revolutionary artists like Diego Rivera, reencountered Mexico, celebrating the cultural and political triumphs of *La Revolución*. The “enormous vogue of things Mexican” among U.S. artists, intellectuals, and activists in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, played itself out on one level in a “discovery” of Mexico’s “timeless” and exotic popular culture. Rustic songs and dances, folk cuisine and handicrafts, the exuberant murals painted on the walls of public ministries and cantinas alike, “primitive” *retablos*, and the evocative woodcuts of Mexican revolutionary artist José Guadalupe Posada—all generated a powerful romantic appeal among waves of “revolutionary tourists” disaffected with the excesses of U.S. capitalist society and modernity itself.³ Significantly, the new Mexican revolutionary state did what it could to promote these desires, eager to perpetuate notions of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) rooted in an “authentic” *mestizo* rural culture of which it was the legitimate custodian and beneficiary.

In the decades that followed, as postrevolutionary governments “institutionalized” the revolution and “modernized” the country under the aegis of an immovable party, the message that the nation’s leaders wished to convey to the world was that Mexico was now, all at once, cosmopolitan, folkloric, and *safe*. Thus, the “Amigo Country” was both on the cutting edge of modernization and laid back; capable of staging high-profile events like the Olympics and the World Cup but also impromptu dawn serenades by mariachis; a mecca simultaneously for high-powered investors and countercultural tourists seeking a road less traveled.⁴ As this essay was being written, following the turn of the new millennium, one multinational tourist promotion trumpeted the attractions of the “new, exclusive Explorian Resort in tropical Mexico.” Here, tourists in the post-Indiana Jones mold could rise early to bask in nature’s secluded, early-morning splendors; ride motor bikes deep into the recesses of a Mayan jungle, spotting parrots and monkeys and unearthing ancient artifacts and treasures along the way; and then return in the afternoon to sample all the comforts and excitements of a luxurious hotel and sports complex.⁵

In the world beyond the rhetoric of state builders and tourist promoters, however, modernity has been fraught with perils for Mexico. *The Mexico Reader* has assembled a wealth of materials that afford the reader an opportunity to reflect on the broader, uneven process whereby Mexico became “modern.” Read together, these selections call into question linear notions of modernization as an inexorable and overwhelming historical current. They show how Mexicans at all points on the social spectrum have shaped the content, pace, and direction of modernization. In the process, the anthology unpacks the enduring images of Mexican political economy and culture that many for-

eigners nurture of Mexico—images that are themselves an important dimension of Mexican history and in whose shaping both Mexicans and outsiders have often colluded. Longtime *New York Times* correspondent Alan Riding has remarked in his book *Distant Neighbors* that no two countries that share a common border understand each other less than the United States and Mexico.⁶ This collection aims to provide a deeper understanding in the north of our neighbor south of the Rio Grande.

Any deeper understanding of Mexico must begin with acknowledgment that, for all of its historic economic potential and its much-publicized entry into an “integrated” North American economy in 1994, Mexico remains closer to its Third World past than to its supposedly inexorable First World destiny. Despite its continuing recovery from the economy’s disastrous “meltdown” in 1995—a recovery that has witnessed a rise in exports and wages—per capita income is barely \$5,000 a year, and 40 million of Mexico’s 90 million citizens are poor by any standard. Mexico has become the United States’ second largest business partner (Canada is no. 1, Japan no. 3). It has produced fabulous fortunes in business, politics, oil, and the drug trade, with more billionaires in recent decades than any other country save the oil emirates. Still, as many as 150,000 Mexicans are driven to migrate illegally to the United States each year, owing to a lack of real economic opportunities in the countryside or the cities. Quite simply, most Mexicans have remained outside the periodic booms of recent decades while participating fully in the busts that have preceded and followed them. Moreover, despite the pronouncements by Baron von Humboldt and others regarding the country’s agricultural and mineral abundance and the rich cultural endowments of its people, it has always been thus.

These perpetual frustrations are partly explained by the country’s history, geography, and politics. Mexico has always presented formidable challenges to economic development and governance, in part owing to the tremendous diversity of its peoples, languages (even today there are still almost sixty indigenous languages spoken), and regions. No doubt the country’s notoriously difficult topography—particularly the existence of two rugged cordilleras that run from north to south, effectively cutting off the western and eastern portions of the country from the central corridor, while isolating many of the center’s fertile valleys from one another—has played an important role in the regionalization of the country. Even today in an age of globalization, the small farmer of Tamaulipas, who cultivates flat, irrigated fields of sorghum and speaks the mixed Spanish-English border patois, can hardly recognize a fellow countryman in the highland *campesino* of Chiapas, who speaks a Maya-inflected version of *castellano*, if he speaks Spanish at all, and who tends a miserable plot of corn. In Mexico City, the teeming urban heart of Mexican

civilization, high-rise buildings loom above colonial churches, which in turn overshadow the blackened ruins of the destroyed indigenous civilization. The city is home to the rich and powerful, but also to shantytown dwellers and street beggars. All of this makes Mexico difficult to grasp as an abstraction; it must be appreciated in its specificity. As made clear in the title of Lesley Byrd Simpson's classic history, there are indeed "many Mexicos"—and ruling them effectively has never been easy.⁷

The task of governing Mexico and unleashing its economic potential was made more formidable still by the lingering trauma of the Spanish conquest, and by a colonial legacy of exploitation, racism, and paternalistic authoritarian rule. It was further complicated by the extraordinary economic, political, and ideological power of the Roman Catholic Church, which has played dramatic, ambiguous, and often contradictory roles in the nation's history. And it was embittered by the fact that, since independence at least, Mexico's leadership has shown itself determined to doggedly pursue the chimera of "modernity." Generations of would-be reformers and social engineers—liberals, revolutionaries, and technocrats—have found themselves repeatedly frustrated by stubborn Mexican realities. It has seemed to them that each time they have had their nation poised to make its debut in the company of "developed," "First World" countries, they have been blindsided by some manifestation of what anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has called "*México profundo*" (the old, "deep Mexico").⁸ The recent indigenous rebellion of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas, which followed hot on the heels of the signing of NAFTA, is only the most recent case in point. And if the modernizers' hopes have not been undone by recalcitrant internal forces, they have often been dealt the *golpe de gracia* by the perverse logic of the modern world economy itself, and Mexico's highly vulnerable, dependent status in it. Thus, in the 1980s, the oil-export boom evaporated, leaving only a mountain of debt; more recently, the nation's overvalued peso collapsed immediately after NAFTA was signed, with countless millions of dollars of portfolio ("hot money") investment fleeing the country at the stroke of a keyboard. Indeed, there have been few periods in Mexico's national history that have *not* been characterized as times of "crisis." Of course, for those Mexicans who do not share the "developmentalist" vision of their leaders, or whose families' livelihoods and mores have been disrupted by it, terms such as *crisis* (and *modernity* itself) take on a very different meaning.

While Mexico is certainly a unique and extraordinary country, it is also true that the multistranded examination of Mexican history, culture, and politics presented in this volume can shed a good deal of light on central problems facing the so-called "developing world" as a whole. Specifically, Mexico pro-

vides a compelling case study for examining such nations' historical struggles to achieve effective modes of governance and sustainable economic growth. Although Americans often take these things for granted (especially in times of economic prosperity!), throughout most of the so-called "Third" or "developing" world, and certainly in Latin America, almost two hundred years after the achievement of formal independence there is still no tried-and-true formula for political stability and broad-based economic development. Why is this the case? Why, on virtually every economic and social indicator, are the Latin American nations (not to mention their African and Asian counterparts) so far behind the United States, which won its independence at roughly the same time? Why—despite the dazzling fortunes of a favored few—is the gap between North and South apparently widening, notwithstanding all the optimistic forecasts that were made at the onset of NAFTA and the "New World Order"? And finally, what roles have the United States (and other foreign powers) played in the quest of countries such as Mexico to attain effective, representative governance and balanced economic development?

We believe that the themes explored by our contributors will provide grist for discussion and debate of these and many other questions. At the core of the volume lies an attempt to convey something of the multiple histories of Mexico's development as a nation—histories "from above," "from below," and in between; histories shaped by forces and agents inside and outside the country. Unlike much of the prevailing pedagogical literature on Mexico, *The Mexico Reader* seeks to show how these histories intersect, illuminating the tension between long-running processes of global economic expansion, national state-formation, and the responses these larger trends have produced at the grass roots. In this sense, the volume will likely pose a challenge to many introductory texts on Mexico, since the linkages between the state's political-economic and cultural projects of transformation, on the one hand, and local equations of resistance, accommodation, negotiation, and popular empowerment, on the other, are at once central to the Mexican past yet still not adequately understood.

Thus, like *The Peru Reader*, which initiated this series, this volume seeks to integrate political-economy and cultural approaches in an effort to understand the past and present of a complex society and to tease out the manner in which the former has shaped the latter. And like our Andean predecessor, while we strive to present a broad range of perspectives and eschew "totalizing" renditions of history, such as overwrought theories of "imperialism" or "dependency," we also seek to avoid a "postmodern carnival of polyphony."⁹ This anthology examines a country whose history is bound up with what Mexico's late Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz described as "cycles of conquest."¹⁰

Not for nothing, then, do we take pains to examine the structures of power and privilege—caste and class, ethnoracial, and gendered—that have undergirded Mexican society. Some of the readings focus on enduring forms of class exploitation; others suggest how gender ideologies interlock with hierarchies of class and ethnicity, giving the lie to the kind of unitary notions of Mexican-ness that postrevolutionary state builders advanced throughout the twentieth century. The collection underscores that class oppression does not eliminate ethnic, gendered, or generational identities, though it may speak through them with important consequences for collective political action. The volume also demonstrates that although it is fashionable these days to bash Marxist theories of imperialism and dependency—and, to be sure, their simple correlation of Third World ills with First World domination often caricatures more than it explains—foreign intervention runs throughout the course of Mexican history and has been an unmistakable factor in the nation's poverty and internal conflicts.

Guided by these larger questions, goals, and assumptions, our criteria for selecting pieces for this anthology have been relatively straightforward. First, we have sought to evoke a variety of actors and environments, so that the patterned complexity of *muchos Méxicos* will emerge vividly over the centuries, in a manner that inflects the country's class, ethnic, gender, generational, regional, and ideological axes of difference. Second, we have put a premium on Mexican voices that are of critical importance but presently inaccessible to English-speaking readers. Many of the selections, therefore, appear for the first time in translation. Finally, we have made every effort to avoid readings that are arcane, overly technical, or require extensive previous knowledge of a given topic. Most of the pieces we have chosen were originally written for a general audience; each, we hope, will be successful in clarifying issues, piquing interest, and stimulating thought. Most of the readings presented herein are relatively short, but we have included a final section offering suggestions for further reading for those who wish to delve more deeply.

The timing of this anthology is quite propitious. In the elections of July 2, 2000, the virtual political monopoly of Mexico's ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—long besieged by the growing assertiveness of nongovernmental organizations, indigenous rebels, opposition forces on the right and left, and a public weary of crisis and corruption—was definitively broken. Writers in Mexico and throughout the world lauded the transparency of the elections and welcomed a new era of openness and democracy under the iconoclastic leader of the center-right National Action Party (PAN), Vicente Fox. Along with a flurry of well-deserved congratulations and premature predictions of cataclysmic change, we have seen the beginnings of serious efforts

within the government and civil society to sort out long-standing problems, to comprehend the mistakes of the past in order to take full advantage of the apparent new opportunities. We hope that this anthology can play a role in this process by introducing a new generation of Americans to Mexico in a way that will make them at once more sympathetic toward Mexico's historical problems and more appreciative of its cultural richness and transformative potential.

THE BOOK CONTAINS eight parts. Part I examines the theme of *mexicanidad*. It inquires into the reasons behind the national obsession with "Mexican-ness" and chronicles the attempts by generations of thinkers and politicians to celebrate or deconstruct the national essence, to find some sort of Mexican archetype. While consensus on the issue is obviously impossible, more certain is the construction or politicization of "national character" by the postrevolutionary state to legitimize its rule. Parts II through V examine Mexico's history from pre-Columbian times through the consolidation of the Mexican revolution at the conclusion of the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1940. The country's historical evolution has profoundly influenced present-day Mexico and will powerfully shape the nation's prospects in the twenty-first century. These sections are designed to be of interest in themselves, but they also foreground the themes we take up in parts VI through VIII, which are almost entirely dedicated to Mexico since 1940. These final sections, which focus on the contradictions and costs of postrevolutionary modernization, the rise of civil society (particularly since 1968), and the dynamic transcultural zone that is articulated by the two-thousand-mile U.S.-Mexican border, are designed to resonate with one another. They are also intended to provoke discussion about a new Mexico—and a new United States—whose citizens, as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai puts it, are no longer as "tightly territorialized [and] spatially bounded," and where such fundamental categories as "foreign" and "domestic" become increasingly blurred.¹¹

Notes

1. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, translated by J. M. Cohen (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 232–35. More of Díaz del Castillo's classic eyewitness account appears in Part III of this volume.
2. José Miranda, *Humboldt y México* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1962).
3. Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

8 Introduction

4. Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); see, especially, the editors' introduction and the essay by Zolov, "Discovering a Land 'Mysterious and Obvious': The Renarrativizing of Postrevolutionary Mexico."
5. This promotion was aired frequently on New York radio stations in 2000.
6. Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), ix–xi.
7. Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
8. Guillermo Bonfils Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, translated by Philip Dennis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). A selection from *México Profundo* appears in Part I of this volume.
9. Orin Starn, Carlos Iván Degregori, and Robin Kirk, eds., *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 9.
10. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, translated by Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachael Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1985). A selection from *The Labyrinth of Solitude* appears in part I of this volume.
11. Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1991), 191; see also Gilbert M. Joseph, "Close Encounters: Towards a New Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations," in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvadore (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 3–4.

The Search for “Lo Mexicano”

Since the concepts of “nationality” and “nationalism” came into existence some two centuries ago, it has been a common presumption that different peoples exhibit characteristics peculiarly their own. The term *nation* itself, which is derived from the Latin *natio*, meaning “birth,” suggests something innate and inevitable, traits which are shaped by genetics and environment—traits which can be analyzed, but changed only with great difficulty.

Mexicans, perhaps more than most peoples, have long been preoccupied with defining what it means to be Mexican, such that the terms *lo mexicano* and *mexicanidad* have become standard intellectual fare. Yet musings on the topic have seldom been celebrations of Mexico’s vibrant national spirit; they have more typically been tortured reflections on the country’s apparent inability to emerge from a prolonged and troubled adolescence. Some have sought explanations in the social structures inherited from centuries of colonial rule; others have located the problem in the unique attributes of the Mexican “race.” Among the first to adopt this latter perspective were foreigners like U.S. Ambassador Joel Poinsett, who held that the Mexican “race” was weak and degenerate. The advent of modern psychology led to more nuanced and sympathetic analyses, such as those of Octavio Paz and his mentor, the psychologist Samuel Ramos. These have been criticized for exaggerating supposed personality traits and reifying culture. Recent “postmodern” thinkers tend likewise to be skeptical of analyses which find unalterable attributes of different nationalities, since often “nationality” comes to seem a polite code word for “race.” Race, these thinkers claim, is more a “social construction” than a matter of biology. Moreover, the postrevolutionary Mexican state seized upon some of the supposed elements of “*mexicanidad*” to legitimize and sustain its rule, adding an unfortunate political dimension to the question.

While consensus on so slippery an issue is clearly impossible, we present in this section several classic statements on the topic of the Mexican character. Fundamentally, all seek to account for the apparent fact that Mexico has

not quite become “modern,” positing characteristics that are profoundly at odds with those commonly attributed to North Americans or Northern Europeans. The final reading by Alma Guillermoprieto poses a crucial question: In this age of globalization of capital and media, could the image of “*lo mexicano*”—whether we view it as a good or bad thing—be threatened finally with extinction?

The Mexican Character

Joel Poinsett

Today, Joel Roberts Poinsett's chief claim to fame in the United States is as the man who brought home the Mexican "Christmas flower," which came to be called the poinsettia. Despite this innocent association, however, few figures in Mexican history have excited quite such passionate controversy. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, Poinsett (1779–1851) first became involved in Latin American affairs in 1811 as special envoy from President James Monroe to Chile. Returning to the United States in 1813, he pursued a political career in the South Carolina legislature and in the U.S. House of Representatives, to which he was elected in 1821. In 1822 he traveled to the Mexico of Agustín Iturbide and authored a short book on the subject, Notes on Mexico. In 1825 he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. He later would serve as Secretary of War in the cabinet of President Martin Van Buren.

From the outset of his tenure as ambassador to Mexico, Poinsett was an outspoken proponent of U.S.-style liberalism: decentralized, constitutional, republican government; anticlericalism; and free trade. A substantial number of influential Mexicans found such activity decidedly pernicious, and their antipathy toward him was exacerbated by the fact that the ambassador advocated extending the southern boundary of the United States to the Rio Grande. Poinsett found like-minded cohorts in the York Rite Masonic Lodge, which he helped to organize in Mexico. The York Rite Masons (or Yorkinos) were rivals of the Scottish Rite Masons (or Escoceses), and the two lodges increasingly emerged as bitter, secretive political clubs. The sub rosa nature of these political organizations was conducive to conspiratorial thinking, and Conservative Escoceses became increasingly convinced that Poinsett was a subversive foreign agent seeking deliberately to weaken and undermine Mexico.

As will be seen from the following excerpt from an 1829 letter to Secretary of State Martin Van Buren, Poinsett had a pessimistic view of the Mexican character and of the nation's potential for progress. Poinsett's generalizations might serve as a compendium of North American stereotypes of Mexicans to this day.

The character of this people cannot be understood, nor the causes of their present condition be fully developed without recurring to the oppression

under which they formerly laboured. It would lead you into error to compare them with the free and civilized nations of America and Europe in the Nineteenth Century. They started from a period nearer to the age of Charles the fifth, and it is even a matter of some doubt whether this Nation had advanced one step in knowledge and civilization, from the time of the conquest to the moment of declaring themselves Independent. No portion of the Spanish dominions in America was watched over by the Mother Country with such jealous care as Mexico. Its comparatively dense population, its extensive and fertile territory, its rich and varied productions, and especially its mineral wealth, rendered it a source of great profit to Spain; while the history of the ancient splendour of Mexico, and the glory of its conquest could not fail to enhance the value of its possession in the eyes of that chivalrous people. In order to preserve that possession every precaution was taken that human prudence could devise to prevent the access of strangers to Mexico and to keep the people in profound ignorance of their own strength and resources as well as of their relative position with regard to other Nations. . . .

The nobility and gentry then as now, inhabited spacious hotels, built after the fashion of those of the mother Country, solid and substantial; but still more destitute of all comfort or convenience. Their style of living was not generous or hospitable, although they sometimes gave costly and ostentatious entertainments. From their absurd pretensions to rank and from their unmeaning jealousy of each other, there never did exist that social intercourse among the higher orders, which in every other Country forms the chief charm of life. Here every man of distinction considered it beneath his dignity to visit his friends or neighbours, and remained in his own house, where in a large gloomy apartment dimly lighted and miserably furnished he received a few visitors of inferior rank who formed his tertulia [social gathering] of every night. It is not to be wondered at therefore that the sons of these men, equally uneducated with themselves, fled from the gloomy mansions of their fathers to the Theatre, the coffee houses or the gambling table; and this circumstance united to the absence of all excitement to industry, from the preference given by the Council of the Indies to Europeans for all appointments, rendered the Aristocracy of Mexico an ignorant and immoral race. The same state of society existed among the higher orders of the clergy and marked their character in the same unfavorable manner. The regular clergy formed from the very dregs of the people, was then and is now disgustingly debauched and ignorant. They have lost the influence they formerly possessed over the common people, and so sensible are they of the universal contempt which they have brought upon themselves by their unworthy conduct, that they would

not oppose a thorough reform of their orders if the Government had courage to attempt it.

But what more particularly distinguishes the condition of the people in the Spanish colonies is the character of the labouring classes. That portion of America conquered by Spain was inhabited by a people in a high state of civilization for the age in which they lived. The higher classes fell [as] a sacrifice to the cruelty and rapacity of their Conquerors, and the common people were reduced to a state of the most abject slavery. The existence of this degraded race had a singular effect upon the character of the Spanish Settler. The poorest white man scorned to be placed on a level with the unfortunate Indian. His colour ennobled him, and Spaniards and their descendants would have perished rather than degrade their caste in America by working in the field, or by following any other laborious occupation in which the Indians are habitually employed. Here therefore is wanting that portion of a community which forms the strength of every nation, but especially of a Republic, a free and virtuous peasantry. The Indians cannot as yet be regarded in that light. They are laborious, patient and submissive, but are lamentably ignorant. They are emerging slowly from the wretched state to which they had been reduced; but they must be educated and released from the gross superstition under which they now labour before they can be expected to feel an interest in public affairs. The only political feeling these people now possess is a bitter hatred of the Spaniards or Gachupines as they call them, a hatred which has never ceased to exist, and which has been kept alive both by tradition and by constantly recurring instances of cruelty and oppression. Less attention has been paid by this Government to the establishment of primary schools than in any other part of Spanish America. This has been a lamentable oversight, for not only do the great mass of the population require to be educated in order that the real principles of a representative Government may be carried fully into operation; but to inspire them with a decent pride and to induce them to more constant labour and to employ their earnings in rendering their habitations comfortable and in purchasing clothing for themselves and their families. At present seven eighths of the population live in wretched hovels destitute of the most ordinary conveniences. Their only furniture a few coarse mats to sit and sleep on, their food indian corn, pepper and pulse,¹ and their clothing miserably coarse and scanty. It is not that the low price of labor prevents them from earning a more comfortable subsistence in spite of the numerous festivals in each year, but they either gamble away their money, or employ it in pageants of the Catholic Church, in which pagan and Christian rites are strangely mingled. All these evils, if not cured entirely, would be greatly mitigated by education. . . .

It appears then that the successful precautions taken by Spain to prevent all intercourse between Mexico and other Countries prevented the light of knowledge from penetrating into this Country. Not only were the Mexicans deprived of the means of keeping pace with the rapid progress of knowledge in other Countries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; but the peculiar circumstances in which they were placed scarcely allowed them to retain the station they occupied at the time of the conquest. The emigrants from Spain who alone were permitted to settle in the Country were among the most ignorant and vicious of that people, who are notoriously a century behind the rest of Christian Europe. They were for the most part the favorites of great men, and came to lord over the creole, to occupy all the offices of honor and emolument and to keep the natives in subjection. As has been already remarked, one mode of effecting this object was to keep them even more ignorant than they were themselves. They were assisted in their efforts to this effect by a variety of causes. The want of means of acquiring knowledge, the absence of all excitement to exertion, the facility of procuring the means of subsistence almost without labour, a mild and enervating climate and their constant intercourse with the aborigines, who were and still are degraded to the very lowest class of human beings, all contributed to render the Mexicans a more ignorant and debauched people than their ancestors had been. Another cause operated still more strongly to produce this effect. The puerile ceremonies of their worship, and the excessive ignorance and shocking profligacy of the clergy. The creoles were taught from their infancy to revere their pastors as Superior beings and it is not therefore surprising that their pernicious example should have produced such melancholy results. When therefore we examine the actual condition of this people, we ought always to bear in mind the point from which they set out. They were in every respect, far behind the mother Country which is notoriously very inferior in moral improvement to all other Nations. They were not even equal to the other Spanish colonies in America, because their comparative importance and their vicinity to the United States rendered Spain more vigilant in preventing all intercourse with foreigners as well as the introduction of all works, which could enlighten their minds and inspire them with liberal ideas.

Note

1. "Pulse" probably refers to *pulque*, a popular beverage made from the fermented juice of the century plant. *Ed.*

The Cosmic Race

José Vasconcelos

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) was among the most important and influential Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century. His childhood was spent partly on the U.S.–Mexican border, where he attended schools in Eagle Pass, Texas. During his formative years, Vasconcelos developed a profound suspicion of Americans, whom he viewed as crassly pragmatic, arrogant, shallow, aggressive, and lacking in spirituality. Undoubtedly, he was also offended by the fact that many Americans continued to endorse ideas like those espoused earlier in the century by their compatriot Joel Poinsett. Like certain other Latin Americans of the turn of the century—such as the Uruguayan philosopher José Enrique Rodó, the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, and the Cuban patriot José Martí—Vasconcelos’s thought developed in part as a reaction against North America and its materialistic values. He felt that Latin Americans must avoid imitating American culture, and that in order to do that successfully they would need a guiding philosophy, one that celebrated their strengths and virtues. In this spirit, he argued that the Latin American mestizo constituted a new race, a “cosmic race,” which combined the virtues of Indians and Europeans. This, Vasconcelos believed, would be the race of the future.

While Vasconcelos’s theory turned the white supremacist racism of the day on its head, it remains at heart a racist theory. By imputing inevitable characteristics to the various races of the earth, Vasconcelos engages in rather reckless stereotyping. His romantic notion of the spiritual essence of his people and of the soullessness of Anglo-Saxon culture, together with his increasing bitterness at the course of events in Mexico, would lead him to embrace fascism and anti-Semitism during World War II.

For all his failings, Vasconcelos remains a uniquely engaging figure. Active in the Mexican revolution from its earliest days, he would serve as Mexico’s secretary of education, and in this capacity he acted with boundless energy and idealism. An advocate of Indian literacy, he greatly increased the presence of education in the countryside; his Ministry of Public Education produced massive quantities of inexpensive workbooks and textbooks; and the ministry’s department of fine arts sponsored the work of some of Mexico’s greatest modern artists, including the muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as musicians Manuel M.



Cortés and La Malinche, a mural by José Clemente Orozco.
(National Preparatory School, Mexico City)

Ponce and Julián Carrillo. At odds with the Mexican government after 1924, he ran unsuccessfully for president in 1929 in an energetic campaign plagued by violence and fraud on the part of the newly formed official government party.

Greece laid the foundations of Western or European civilization; the white civilization that, upon expanding, reached the forgotten shores of the American continent in order to consummate the task of re-civilization and re-population. Thus we have the four stages and the four racial trunks: the Black, the Indian, the Mongol, and the White. The latter, after organizing itself in Europe, has become the invader of the world, and has considered itself destined to rule, as did each of the previous races during their time of power. It is clear that domination by the whites will also be temporary, but their mission is to serve as a bridge. The white race has brought the world to a state in which all human types and cultures will be able to fuse with each other. The civilization developed and organized in our times by the whites has set the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past. . . .

Let us recognize that it was a disgrace not to have proceeded with the cohesion demonstrated by those to the north, that prodigious race which we are accustomed to lavish with insults only because they have won each hand at the secular fight. They triumph because they join to their practical talents the clear vision of a great destiny. They keep present the intuition of a definite historical mission, while we get lost in the labyrinth of verbal chimeras. It seems as if God Himself guided the steps of the Anglo-Saxon cause, while we kill each other on account of dogma or declare ourselves atheists. How those mighty empire builders must laugh at our groundless arrogance and Latin vanity! They do not clutter their mind with the Ciceronian weight of phraseology, nor have they in their blood the contradictory instincts of a mixture of dissimilar races, but they committed the sin of destroying those races, while we assimilated them, and this gives us new rights and hopes for a mission without precedent in History.

For this reason, adverse obstacles do not move us to surrender, for we vaguely feel that they will help us to discover our way. Precisely in our differences, we find the way. If we simply imitate, we lose. If we discover and create, we shall overcome. The advantage of our tradition is that it has greater facility of sympathy toward strangers. This implies that our civilization, with all defects, may be the chosen one to assimilate and to transform mankind into a new type; that within our civilization, the warp, the multiple and rich plasma of future humanity is thus being prepared. This mandate from History is first noticed in that abundance of love that allowed the Spaniard to create a new race with the Indian and the Black, profusely spreading white ancestry through the soldier who begat a native family, and Occidental culture through the doctrine and example of the missionaries who placed the Indians in condition to enter into the new stage. . . . Spanish colonization created mixed races, this signals its character, fixes its responsibility, and defines its future. The English kept on mixing only with the whites and annihilated the natives. Even today, they continue to annihilate them in a sordid and economic fight, more efficient yet than armed conquest. This proves their limitation and is indication of their decadence. The situation is equivalent, in a larger scale, to the incestuous marriages of the pharaohs which undermined the virtues of the race; and it contradicts the ulterior goals of History to attain the fusion of peoples and cultures. To build an English world and to exterminate the red man, so that Northern Europe could be renovated all over an America made up with pure whites, is no more than a repetition of the triumphant process of a conquering race. This was already attempted by the red man and by all strong and homogeneous races, but it does not solve the human problem. America was not kept in reserve for five thousand years for such a petty goal.

The purpose of the new and ancient continent is much more important. Its predestination obeys the design of constituting the cradle of a fifth race into which all nations will fuse with each other to replace the four races that have been forging History apart from each other. The dispersion will come to an end on American soil; unity will be consummated there by the triumph of fecund love and the improvement of all the human races. In this fashion, the synthetic race that shall gather all the treasures of History in order to give expression to universal desire shall be created. . . .

The so-called Latin peoples . . . are the ones called upon to consummate this mission. . . . [They] insist on not taking the ethnic factor too much into account for their sexual relations, perhaps because from the beginning they are not, properly speaking, Latins but a conglomeration of different types and races. Whatever opinions one may express in this respect, and whatever repugnance caused by prejudice one may harbor, the truth is that the mixture of races has taken place and continues to be consummated. It is in this fusion of ethnic stocks that we should look for the fundamental characteristic of Ibero-American idiosyncrasy. . . . In Latin America . . . a thousand bridges are available for the sincere and cordial fusion of all races. The ethnic barricading of those to the north in contrast to the much more open sympathy of those to the south is the most important factor, and at the same time, the most favorable to us, if one reflects even superficially upon the future, because it will be seen immediately that we belong to tomorrow, while the Anglo-Saxons are gradually becoming more a part of yesterday. The Yankees will end up building the last great empire of a single race, the final empire of White supremacy. Meanwhile, we will continue to suffer the vast chaos of an ethnic stock in formation, contaminated by the fermentation of all types, but secure of the avatar into a better race. In Spanish America, Nature will no longer repeat one of her partial attempts. This time, the race that will come out of the forgotten Atlantis will no longer be a race of a single color or of particular features. The future race will not be a fifth, or a sixth race, destined to prevail over its ancestors. What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision. . . .

How different the sounds of the Ibero-American development [from that of the Anglo-Saxons]! They resemble the profound scherzo of a deep and infinite symphony: Voices that bring accents from Atlantis; depths contained in the pupil of the red man, who knew so much, so many thousand years ago, and now seems to have forgotten everything. His soul resembles the old Mayan *cenote* [natural well] of green waters, laying deep and still, in the middle of

the forest, for so many centuries since, that not even its legend remains any more. This infinite quietude is stirred with the drop put in our blood by the Black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust. There also appears the Mongol, with the mystery of his slanted eyes that see everything according to a strange angle, and discover I know not what folds and newer dimensions. The clear mind of the White, that resembles his skin and his dreams, also intervenes. Judaic striae hidden within the Castilian blood since the days of the cruel expulsion now reveal themselves, along with Arabian melancholy, as a remainder of the sickly Muslim sensuality. Who has not a little of all this, or does not wish to have all? There is the Hindu, who also will come, who has already arrived by way of the spirit, and although he is the last one to arrive, he seems the closest relative. . . . So many races that have come and others that will come. In this manner, a sensitive and ample heart will be taking shape within us; a heart that embraces and contains everything and is moved with sympathy, but, full of vigor, imposes new laws upon the world. . . .

We in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race.

The Sons of La Malinche

Octavio Paz

Without a doubt, the most famous essay ever written about “mexicanidad” is Octavio Paz’s The Labyrinth of Solitude, which first appeared in the influential journal Cuadernos Americanos in 1950. Paz (1914–1998) was by then already a major figure in Mexican poetry, and the book marked his brilliant debut as an essayist. The essay is a dizzying intellectual exercise, seeking to explain the Mexican’s “hermetic” personality through an allusive, though at times opaque, combination of Jungian psychology, poetic imagery, and historical analysis. Paz held that Mexico was intent on denying its true heritage, that its evolution was retarded by repeated cycles of conquest, violation, and revolution, and that centuries of history were embedded in the Mexican character.

Paz’s literary career began in the early 1930s. He fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and later undertook a diplomatic career, which included posts in France, India, Japan, and Switzerland. He quit this career in 1968 in protest against the government killings of student protestors at the Plaza de Tlatelolco (see part VII of this volume). While he remained very critical of the Mexican political system, he became increasingly conservative in his later years, which often placed him at odds with other Latin American intellectuals. In 1990 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

All of our anxious tensions express themselves in a phrase we use when anger, joy, or enthusiasm cause us to exalt our condition as Mexicans: “¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!” This phrase is a true battle cry, charged with a peculiar electricity; it is a challenge and an affirmation, a shot fired against an imaginary enemy, and an explosion in the air. Once again, with a certain pathetic and plastic fatality, we are presented with the image of a skyrocket that climbs into the sky, bursts in a shower of sparks and then falls in darkness. Or with the image of that howl that ends all our songs and possesses the same ambiguous resonance: an angry joy, a destructive affirmation ripping open the breast and consuming itself.

When we shout this cry on the fifteenth of September, the anniversary of

our independence, we affirm ourselves in front of, against and in spite of the "others." Who are the "others"? They are the *hijos de la chingada*: strangers, bad Mexicans, our enemies, our rivals. In any case, the "others," that is, all those who are not as we are. And these "others" are not defined except as the sons of a mother as vague and indeterminate as themselves.

Who is the *Chingada*? Above all, she is the Mother. Not a Mother of flesh and blood but a mythical figure. The *Chingada* is one of the Mexican representations of Maternity, like *La Llorona* or the "long-suffering Mexican mother"¹ we celebrate on the tenth of May. The *Chingada* is the mother who has suffered—metaphorically or actually—the corrosive and defaming action implicit in the verb that gives her her name. . . .

In Mexico the word [*chingar*] has innumerable meanings. It is a magical word: a change of tone, a change of inflection, is enough to change its meaning. It has as many shadings as it has intonations, as many meanings as it has emotions. One may be a *chingón*, a *gran chingón* (in business, in politics, in crime or with women), or a *chingaquito* (silent, deceptive, fashioning plots in the shadows, advancing cautiously and then striking with a club), or a *chingoncito*. But in this plurality of meanings the ultimate meaning always contains the idea of aggression, whether it is the simple act of molesting, pricking or censoring, or the violent act of wounding or killing. The verb denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force. It also means to injure, to lacerate, to violate—bodies, souls, objects—and to destroy. When something breaks, we say: "*Se chingó*." When someone behaves rashly, in defiance of the rules, we say: "*Hizo una chingadera*."

The idea of breaking, of ripping open, appears in a great many of these expressions. The word has sexual connotations but it is not a synonym for the sexual act: one may *chingar* a woman without actually possessing her. And when it does allude to the sexual act, violation or deception gives it a particular shading. The man who commits it never does so with the consent of the *chingada*. *Chingar*, then, is to do violence to another. The verb is masculine, active, cruel: it stings, wounds, gashes, stains. And it provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction.

The person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it. The *chingón* is the *macho*, the male; he rips open the *chingada*, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world. The relationship between them is violent, and it is determined by the cynical power of the first and the impotence of the second. The idea of violence rules darkly over all the meanings of the word, and the dialectic of the "closed" and the "open" thus fulfills itself with an almost ferocious precision.

The magic power of the word is intensified by the fact that it is prohibited. No one uses it casually in public. Only an excess of anger or a delirious enthusiasm justifies its use. It is a word that can only be heard among men or during the big fiestas. When we shout it out, we break a veil of silence, modesty or hypocrisy. We reveal ourselves as we really are. The forbidden words boil up in us, just as our emotions boil up. When they finally burst out, they do so harshly, brutally, in the form of a shout, a challenge, an offense. They are projectiles or knives. They cause wounds. . . .

If we take into account all of its various meanings, the word defines a great part of our life and qualifies our relationships with our friends and compatriots. To the Mexican there are only two possibilities in life: either he inflicts the actions implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others. This conception of social life as combat fatally divides society into the strong and the weak. The strong—the hard, unscrupulous *chingones*—surround themselves with eager followers. This servility toward the strong, especially among the *políticos* (that is, the professionals of public business), is one of the more deplorable consequences of the situation. Another, no less degrading, is the devotion to personalities rather than to principles. Our politicians frequently mix public business with private. It does not matter. Their wealth or their influence in government allows them to maintain a flock of supporters whom the people call, most appositely, *lambiscones* (from the word *lamer*: “to lick”).

The verb *chingar*—malign and agile and playful, like a caged animal—creates many expressions that turn our world into a jungle: there are tigers in business, eagles in the schools and the army, lions among our friends. A bribe is called a “bite.” The bureaucrats gnaw their “bones” (public employment). And in a world of *chingones*, of difficult relationships, ruled by violence and suspicion—a world in which no one opens out or surrenders himself—ideas and accomplishments count for little. The only thing of value is manliness, personal strength, a capacity for imposing oneself on others.

The word also has another, more restricted meaning. When we say, “*Vete a la chingada*,”² we send a person to a distant place. Distant, vague and indeterminate. To the country of broken and worn-out things. A gray country, immense and empty, that is not located anywhere. . . . The *chingada*, because of constant usage, contradictory meanings and the friction of angry or enthusiastic lips, wastes away, loses its contents and disappears. It is a hollow word. It says nothing. It is Nothingness itself.

After this digression, it is possible to answer the question, “What is the *Chingada*?” The *Chingada* is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived. The *hijo de la Chingada* is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit. If we

compare this expression with the Spanish *hijo de puta* (son of a whore), the difference is immediately obvious. To the Spaniard, dishonor consists in being the son of a woman who voluntarily surrenders herself: a prostitute. To the Mexican it consists in being the fruit of a violation.

Manuel Cabrera points out that the Spanish attitude reflects a moral and historical conception of original sin, while that of the Mexican, deeper and more genuine, transcends both ethics and anecdotes. In effect, every woman—even when she gives herself willingly—is torn open by the man, is the *Chingada*. In a certain sense all of us, by the simple fact of being born of woman, are *hijos de la Chingada*, sons of Eve. But the singularity of the Mexican resides, I believe, in his violent, sarcastic humiliation of the Mother and his no less violent affirmation of the Father. A woman friend of mine (women are more aware of the strangeness of this situation) has made me see that this admiration for the Father—who is the symbol of the closed, the aggressive—expresses itself very clearly in a saying we use when we want to demonstrate our superiority: “I am your father.” . . .

The *macho* represents the masculine pole of life. The phrase “I am your father” has no paternal flavor and it is not said in order to protect or to guide another, but rather to impose one’s superiority, that is, to humiliate. Its real meaning is no different from that of the verb *chingar* and its derivatives. The *macho* is the *gran chingón*. One word sums up the aggressiveness, insensitivity, invulnerability and other attributes of the *macho*: power. It is force without the discipline of any notion of order: arbitrary power, the will without reins and without a set course. . . .

The essential attribute of the *macho*—power—almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding, humiliating, annihilating. Nothing is more natural, therefore, than his indifference toward the offspring he engenders. He is not the founder of a people; he is not a patriarch who exercises *patria potestas*; he is not a king or a judge or the chieftain of a clan. He is power isolated in its own potency, without relationship or compromise with the outside world. He is pure in communication, a solitude that devours itself and everything it touches. He does not pertain to our world; he is not from our city; he does not live in our neighborhood. He comes from far away: he is always far away. He is the Stranger. It is impossible not to notice the resemblance between the figure of the *macho* and that of the Spanish conquistador. This is the model—more mythical than real—that determines the images the Mexican people form of men in power: caciques, feudal lords, hacienda owners, politicians, generals, captains of industry. They are all *machos*, *chingones*.

The *macho* has no heroic or divine counterpart. Hidalgo, the “father of the fatherland” as it is customary to call him in the ritual gibberish of the Repub-

lic, is a defenseless old man, more an incarnation of the people's helplessness against force than an image of the wrath and power of an awe-inspiring father. Among the numerous patron saints of the Mexicans there is none who resembles the great masculine divinities. Finally, there is no especial veneration for God the Father in the Trinity. He is a dim figure at best. On the other hand, there is profound devotion to Christ as the Son of God, as the youthful God, above all as the victimized Redeemer. The village churches have a great many images of Jesus—on the cross, or covered with thorns and wounds—in which the insolent realism of the Spaniards is mingled with the tragic symbolism of the Indians. On the one hand, the wounds are flowers, pledges of resurrection; on the other, they are a reiteration that life is the sorrowful mask of death. . . .

The Mexican venerates a bleeding and humiliated Christ, a Christ who has been beaten by the soldiers and condemned by the judges, because he sees in him a transfigured image of his own identity. . . . And this brings to mind Cuauhtémoc, the young Aztec emperor who was dethroned, tortured, and murdered by Cortés.

Cuauhtémoc means "Falling Eagle." The Mexican chieftain rose to power at the beginning of the siege of México-Tenochtitlán, when the Aztecs had been abandoned by their gods, their vassals and their allies. Even his relationship with a woman fits the archetype of the young hero, at one and the same time the lover and the son of [a] goddess. . . . He is a warrior but he is also a child. The exception is that the heroic cycle does not end with his death: the fallen hero awaits resurrection. It is not surprising that for the majority of Mexicans Cuauhtémoc should be the "young grandfather," the origin of Mexico: the hero's tomb is the cradle of the people. This is the dialectic of myth, and Cuauhtémoc is more a myth than a historical figure. Another element enters here, an analogy that makes this history a true poem in search of fulfillment: the location of Cuauhtémoc's tomb is not known. To discover it would mean nothing less than to return to our origins, to reunite ourselves with our ancestry, to break out of our solitude. It would be a resurrection.

If we ask about the third figure of the triad, the Mother, we hear a double answer. It is no secret to anyone that Mexican Catholicism is centered about the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the first place, she is an Indian Virgin; in the second place, the scene of her appearance to the Indian Juan Diego was a hill that formerly contained a sanctuary dedicated to Tonantzin, "Our Mother," the Aztec goddess of fertility. We know that the Conquest coincided with the apogee of the cult of two masculine divinities: Quetzalcóatl, the self-sacrificing god, and Huitzilopochtli, the young warrior-god. The defeat of these gods—which is what the Conquest meant to the Indian world, be-

cause it was the end of a cosmic cycle and the inauguration of a new divine kingdom—caused the faithful to return to the ancient feminine deities. This phenomenon of a return to the maternal womb, so well known to the psychologist, is without doubt one of the determining causes of the swift popularity of the cult of the Virgin. The Indian goddesses were goddesses of fecundity, linked to the cosmic rhythms, the vegetative processes and agrarian rites. The Catholic Virgin is also the Mother (some Indian pilgrims still call her Guadalupe-Tonantzin), but her principal attribute is not to watch over the fertility of the earth but to provide refuge for the unfortunate. The situation has changed: the worshipers do not try to make sure of their harvests but to find a mother's lap. The Virgin is the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. In sum, she is the Mother of orphans. All men are born disinherited and their true condition is orphanhood, but this is particularly true among the Indians and the poor in Mexico. The cult of the Virgin reflects not only the general condition of man but also a concrete historical situation, in both the spiritual and material realms. In addition, the Virgin—the universal Mother—is also the intermediary, the messenger, between disinherited man and the unknown, inscrutable power: the Strange.

In contrast to Guadalupe, who is the Virgin Mother, the *Chingada* is the violated Mother. . . . Both of them are passive figures. Guadalupe is pure receptivity, and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passions. The *Chingada* is even more passive. Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides . . . in her sex. This passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the *Chingada*. She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition.

If the *Chingada* is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina³ becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. She embodies the open, the *chingado*, to our closed, stoic, impassive Indians. Cuauhtémoc and Doña Marina are thus two antagonistic and complementary figures. There is nothing surprising about our cult of the young emperor—

“the only hero at the summit of art,” an image of the sacrificed son — and there is also nothing surprising about the curse that weighs against La Malinche. This explains the success of the contemptuous adjective *malinchista* recently put into circulation by the newspapers to denounce all those who have been corrupted by foreign influences. The *malinchistas* are those who want Mexico to open itself to the outside world: the true sons of La Malinche, who is the *Chingada* in person. Once again we see the opposition of the closed and the open.

When we shout “¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!” we express our desire to live closed off from the outside world and, above all, from the past. In this shout we condemn our origins and deny our hybridism. The strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican’s imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved. When he repudiates La Malinche — the Mexican Eve, as she was represented by José Clemente Orozco in his mural in the National Preparatory School — the Mexican breaks his ties with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude.

The Mexican condemns all his traditions at once, the whole set of gestures, attitudes and tendencies in which it is now difficult to distinguish the Spanish from the Indian. For that reason the Hispanic thesis, which would have us descend from Cortés to the exclusion of La Malinche, is the patrimony of a few extremists who are not even pure whites. The same can be said of indigenist propaganda, which is also supported by fanatical criollos and mestizos, while the Indians have never paid it the slightest attention. The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes the son of Nothingness. His beginnings are in his own self.

This attitude is revealed not only in our daily life but also in the course of our history, which at certain moments has been the embodiment of a will to eradicate all that has gone before. It is astonishing that a country with such a vivid past — a country so profoundly traditional, so close to its roots, so rich in ancient legends even if poor in modern history — should conceive of itself only as a negation of its origins.

Our shout strips us naked and discloses the wound that we alternately flaunt and conceal, but it does not show us the causes of this separation from, and negation of, the Mother, not even when we recognize that such a rupture has occurred. In lieu of a closer examination of the problem, we will suggest that the liberal Reform movement of the middle of the last century seems to be the moment when the Mexican decided to break with his traditions, which

is a form of breaking with oneself. If our Independence movement cut the ties that bound us to Spain, the Reform movement denied that the Mexican nation as a historical project should perpetuate the colonial tradition. Juárez and his generation founded a state whose ideals are distinct from those that animated New Spain or the pre-Cortesian cultures. The Mexican state proclaimed an abstract and universal conception of man: the Republic is not composed of criollos, Indians, and mestizos (as the Laws of the Indies, with a great love for distinctions and a great respect for the heterogeneous nature of the colonial world, had specified) but simply of men alone. All alone.

The Reform movement is the great rupture with the Mother. This separation was a necessary and inevitable act, because every life that is truly autonomous begins as a break with its family and its past. But the separation still hurts. We still suffer from that wound. That is why the feeling of orphanhood is the constant background of our political endeavors and our personal conflicts. Mexico is all alone, like each one of her sons.

Notes

1. *La Llorona* is the "Weeping Woman," who wanders through the streets late at night, weeping and crying out. *Trans.*
2. Somewhat stronger than "Go to Hell." *Trans.*
3. The name given to La Malinche by the Spaniards. *Trans.*

The Problem of National Culture

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla

Like Octavio Paz, anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1935–1991) believed that Mexico suffers from a crisis of identity. However, for Bonfil the nature of that crisis is quite different. For the earlier thinkers, the Indian remained a shadowy presence who constituted a “problem,” the only apparent solution to which was assimilation into the Westernized culture of the dominant, usually urban groups. By contrast, Bonfil Batalla argued that the true Mexico, which he labels “México profundo,” is represented by Indians, rural mestizos, and a portion of the urban poor, whose culture is Mesoamerican. The values of this culture are incompatible with those of the elite, who have consistently sought to imitate the culture of Western Europe and to deny the social realities of their own country. Far from an inert mass, Mexico’s Indians remain the bearers of a true, alternative civilization which needs to be reclaimed rather than denied or suppressed.

Bonfil Batalla was among Mexico’s most distinguished anthropologists. He served as director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), founded and directed the National Museum of Popular Culture, and directed the Center for Research and Advanced Study in Social Anthropology (CIESAS). In 1975 he helped to organize Mexico’s first National Congress of Indian Peoples, which reflected his conviction that Indian peoples would profit more from autonomy and self-determination than from efforts, however well intentioned, at assimilation or social welfare.

What explains the absence of a common Mexican culture is the presence of two civilizations that have never fused to produce a new civilizational program. Neither have they coexisted in harmony, to each other’s reciprocal benefit.

To the contrary, the groups of Mesoamerican origin and the successive hegemonic groups dominant in Mexican society, with their versions of Western civilization, continue to be opposed. There has never been a process of convergence, but, rather, one of opposition. There is one simple and straightforward reason: certain social groups have illegitimately held political, eco-

conomic, and ideological power from the European invasion to the present. All have been affiliated through inheritance or through circumstance with Western civilization, and within their programs for governing there has been no place for Mesoamerican civilization. The dominant position of these groups originated in the stratified order of colonial society. It has expressed itself in an ideology that conceives of the future only in terms of development, progress, advancement, and the Revolution itself, all concepts within the mainstream of Western civilization. Cultural diversity and, specifically, the omnipresence of Mesoamerican civilization have always been interpreted within that scheme in the only way possible. They are seen as an obstacle to progress along the one true path and toward the only valid objective. The mentality inherited from the colonizers does not allow perception of or invention of any other path. Mesoamerican civilization is either dead or must die as soon as possible, because it is of undeniable inferiority and has no future of its own.

The presence of two distinct civilizations implies the existence of different historical plans for the future. We are not dealing simply with alternatives within the framework of a common civilization, proposals that might alter current reality in many ways but that do not question the ultimate objectives or the underlying values that all share as participants in the same civilizational project. We are, rather, dealing with different projects, which are built on different ways of conceiving of the world, nature, society, and humankind. They postulate different hierarchies of values. They do not have the same aspirations nor do they understand in the same way how the full realization of each human being is to be achieved. They are projects that express two unique concepts of transcendence. Throughout, attempts at cultural unification have never suggested unity through creation of a new civilization that would be the synthesis of the existing ones. Rather, unity has been attempted through the elimination of one (Mesoamerican civilization, of course) and the spread of the other.

The colonial enterprise engaged in destroying Mesoamerican civilization and stopped only where self-interest intervened. When necessary, whole peoples were destroyed. On the other hand, where the labor force of the Indians was required, they were kept socially and culturally segregated. Indirectly and in a contradictory fashion, the minimum conditions for the continuity of Mesoamerican civilization were created, in spite of the brutal decline in population during the first decades after the invasion. This decline was one of the most violent and terrible demographic catastrophes in the history of humanity. Its intrinsic nature prevented the colonial regime from posing a project of cultural fusion that might have amalgamated the Mesoamerican

and the Western civilizational planes. The ideology that justified colonization was that of a redemptive crusade, thus revealing the conviction that the only path to salvation was that of Western civilization.

The Westernization of the Indian, nevertheless, turned out to be contradictory, given the stubborn necessity of maintaining a clear distinction between the colonizers and the colonized. If the Indians had stopped being Indians in order to be fully incorporated into Western civilization, the ideological justification for colonial domination would have ended. Segregation and difference are essential for any colonial society. Unification, on the other hand, whether by assimilation of the colonized to the dominant culture or through the perhaps improbable fusion of two civilizations, denies the root of the colonial order.

The birth and consolidation of Mexico as an independent state in the turbulent course of the nineteenth century did not produce any different plan, nothing that deviated from the basic intention of taking the country along the paths of Western civilization. The struggles between the liberals and the conservatives reflect different conceptions of how to achieve that goal, but those struggles never question it. The new nation was conceived as culturally homogeneous, following the dominant European conviction that a state is the expression of a people with a common culture and the same language and is produced by having a common history. Thus, consolidating the nation was the goal of all groups contending for power. They understood consolidation as the slow incorporation of the great majority to the cultural model that had been adopted as the national plan.

The ruling groups of the country, who make or impose the most important decisions affecting all of Mexican society, have never admitted that to advance might imply liberating and encouraging the cultural capacities that really exist in the majority of the population. . . . In this way of thinking about things, the majority of Mexicans have a future only on the condition that they stop being themselves. That change is conceived as a definite break, a transformation into someone else. It is never conceived as bringing up to date through internal transformation, as liberating cultures that have been subject to multiple pressures during five centuries of colonial domination.

The constitutional history of Mexico is an example that illustrates this schizophrenic posture in a striking way. In all cases it has led to the juridical construction of a fictitious state from whose norms and practices the majority of the population is excluded. . . . We must admit [that it is] a great dominating fiction. Otherwise, how do we explain a system of democratic elections based on the recognition of political parties as the only legitimate vehicles for electoral participation in a country in which an absolute majority of the

population does not belong to any party or exercise its right to vote? One would look in vain for a single example demonstrating an intention to understand and recognize the real systems that various groups use to obtain and legitimize authority. One would look in vain for an attempt to structure a national system in which local political forms would have a place and in which, at the same time, they might encounter the stimulus and the possibilities for progressive development. There are no such examples. The country must be modern right now, made so by virtue of law, and if reality follows other paths, it is an incorrect and illegal reality.

This schizophrenic fiction, manifest in all aspects of the country's life and culture, has grave consequences, which do not seem to worry the proponents of the imaginary Mexico. In the first place, the fiction produces the marginalization of the majority, a marginalization that is real and not imaginary. . . . This is not . . . a marginalization that is expressed only in reduced access to goods and services, but, rather, a total marginalization, an exclusion from one's own way of living. Many Mexicans thus have a choice: they can live on the margin of national life, related to it only by the minimal, inevitable relations between their real world and the other, which appears as different and external; or they can live a double life, also schizophrenic, changing between worlds and cultures according to circumstances and necessities; or, finally, they can renounce their identity from birth and try to be fully accepted in the imaginary Mexico of the minority.

The notion of democracy was established two centuries ago as one of the central aspirations of Western civilization. However, upon being mechanically transplanted into a postulate of the imaginary Mexico, it converted itself into a series of mechanisms of exclusion, whose effect was to deny the existence of the population. It is a curious democracy that does not recognize the existence of the people themselves, but, rather, sets itself the task of creating them. Afterward, it would, of course, put itself at their service. It is a surprising democracy of the minority, a national program that begins by leaving out the majority groups of the country. It is a project that ends by making illegitimate the thoughts and actions of the majority of Mexicans; the people themselves wind up being the obstacle to democracy.

A second consequence is also inevitable. By making reality a blank page, one chooses not to make use of the greater part of the cultural capital of Mexican society. It becomes an absolute impossibility to recognize, appreciate, and stimulate the development of the extensive and varied cultural patrimony that history has placed in Mexican hands. The old colonial blindness remains, the notion that here there is nothing with which a future can be built. If the people have to be created to substitute for the nonpeople who exist, it follows that

a culture also has to be created to substitute for the existing nonculture. The elements that ought to constitute the core of the new culture are not here, and they are important: ideas, knowledge, aspirations, technology, what to do and how to do it. Once more we find the dishonest task of substituting for reality instead of transforming it.

Does It Mean Anything to Be Mexican?

Roger Bartra

The classic writings on “lo mexicano” have been heavily criticized in recent years for their tendency to generalize about what is unarguably a vast number of people. Relatively few of those people, we might surmise, conform to the image of the eternal adolescent or the wounded, angry macho described by the likes of Octavio Paz. Nor may it be helpful, beyond a certain point, to generalize, in rather dichotomous fashion, as Bonfil Batalla does, about the existence of two Mexicos inhabited by circumscribed dominant and subordinate groups. Some have suggested that these pensadores (grand thinkers), whatever their motives, have only created and perpetuated stereotypes of the Mexican that have been manipulated for political ends. Anthropologist-sociologist Roger Bartra takes the argument a step further, suggesting that the stereotype of the pelado, as featured in Mexican popular culture, serves the interests of the Mexican state. Bartra finds this popular stereotype exemplified by Mario Moreno, better known as Cantinflas (1911–1993), the beloved comedic everyman of the Mexican cinema.

Roger Bartra received his doctorate in Sociology from the University of Paris and is currently an investigator with the Institute of Social Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). For many years he was the editor of La Jornada Semanal, one of the nation’s most prominent literary magazines. Bartra has been a pioneer in the field of Mexican cultural studies and is the author of many influential writings on the intersection of culture and power in both rural and urban Mexico.

My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms. —Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

The deplorable conditions in which the working classes are born and raised have for a long time inspired a feeling of horror and revulsion in the bourgeoisie, who are afraid to recognize the proletariat as creatures they themselves have created. Although no one can deny that they are a necessary and inevitable result of industrialization, they continue to be seen by the dominant class as “a malignant chancre on the flanks of modern society,” according to Albert Dandoy in a noteworthy book on the French working class published

just after the Second World War. The book is dreadful, but it does pick up the old bourgeois tradition of horror at a proletariat whose mentality is tinged with resentment, distrust, immorality, mimicry, and complexes of inferiority and dispossession. These, we notice, are the same features attributed to the Mexican by Samuel Ramos and his school. The new urban landscape fills these observers of the Mexican spirit with terror. For them the Mexican is a figure without meaning, who denies everything for no reason, who lacks principles, distrusts everyone, and disdains ideas. Ramos asks anxiously: "But then, why does the Mexican live?" He can live because he leads a nonreflective existence, without a future, so that Mexican society is no more than "a chaos in which individuals gravitate at random like scattered atoms." This metaphor applies perfectly to the typical functioning of modern capitalist society.

From 1844, Friedrich Engels tried to understand and describe the terrible "culture of poverty," as it is called today. In his classic study of the situation of the working class, he showed that the typically proletarian tendencies to impulsiveness, improvidence and, of course, to the abuse of alcohol and sex are a necessary counterweight to ease the privations, instability, and degradation characteristic of their everyday lives. Today, the strange proletarian subculture of the nineteenth century has almost ceased to exist in the most-developed capitalist countries; but it has surfaced on the backward periphery, where the pains of a deferred industrial revolution are made more acute by the consequences of colonial and imperial oppression. It is not surprising that cultural stereotypes arise which are to a certain degree similar to those used by the European bourgeoisie to illustrate their idea of the proletariat.

What is odd about the Mexican situation is that there is a curious departure from the proletarian prototype, with the object of fomenting the development of a national identity. After the Revolution, the Mexican nationalists, orphans of native bourgeois traditions, had only the peasants and the proletariat as sources of inspiration. An ideological dissection had to be performed in order to extract some features of popular culture for elevation to the category of national ideology; other aspects, considered irrelevant, were to be disposed of. It was not simply a Manichaean operation to get rid of those elements considered harmful, as was undertaken by the positivists of the *porfiriato*.¹ Rather, it meant the emergence of a complex, contradictory image of the Mexican, in great measure forged as a reflection of the condition of the urban proletariat. I have already mentioned the prototype of the Mexican as sentimental and violent, passionate and aggressive, a resentful and rancorous figure. Another essential element must now be recognized: the Mexican also appears as a man in flight, seeking refuge from the sad reality around him. This evasion has been described and assessed from many different perspectives—from the

idleness and lack of willpower that lead him to shun work to the creation of complex mechanisms of elusion and dissimulation. For many it is a senseless flight, contributing to the chaos of industrial society. One result of this evasion is the creation of an image having a long history in picaresque literature. The Mexican *pelado*, however, is not just a variant of the social type created by the Spanish picaresque tradition. Thus Augustín Yáñez has claimed that the *pelado* lacks the roguish acuity of the *pícaro*, a cleverness that is essentially language-based and "acquired through adventure, example, and practical observation." The *pelado*, jettisoned by modern urban industrialization, is . . . one for whom language is not a means of communication but, rather, a barrier of elusion designed for self-defense and concealment. Thus, one of the best descendants of the old *pícaro* is a hero of the silent movies rather than of the novel: Charlie Chaplin, who with his helpless simplicity and gentle guile manages to awaken waves of sympathy for those living in the misery of the twentieth century. The elusive language of gestures, with every kind of movement of the eyebrows and moustache, is the best barrier against the aggressiveness of reality.

The Mexican equivalent of Chaplin is Cantinflas, one of whose most important characteristics is precisely the elusive language that allows him to slip out of any predicament. One observer of the Mexican character, César Garizurieta, claims that Cantinflas is the most representative example of the Mexican psychological type. Unlike Chaplin, whose formal dress reveals a Utopian desire for change, Cantinflas has no aspirations to better himself and "does not want a better world even as a dream; he is happy with life as it is." The Mexican of the modern age has remained at the level of a caricature of man. The energy, aggressiveness, and life force, so fervently exalted by various illustrators of the Mexican Revolution as characteristic of the new man, fade away before the prototype of Cantinflas. This frustrated Mexican Prometheus fails to bring with him not only the secret of fire, but also the gift of the word. According to Garizurieta,

Cantinflas expresses himself in self-defense through an artificial, subtle language, resulting from aspects of his incompetence. Faced with his exaggerated feeling of inferiority, he knows that he is equally compromised whether he affirms or denies. Therefore, he neither affirms nor denies: he oscillates between affirmation and denial. Without intending it, he elicits laughter or tears when he speaks, since there are no frontiers delimiting the tragic from the comic.

Without a doubt the great popularity of Cantinflas stems from the fact that, in his mockery, he is also criticizing social injustice. For example, when



Cantinflas (*left*) became a major movie star during the 1940s, often playing the role of a *pelado*. La Cineteca Nacional

he is asked if work is a good thing, he answers: “If it were any good, the rich would have cornered the market in it.” But he is a conformist critic who proposes escape rather than struggle, slipping away rather than fighting. The Mexican becomes a teacher of feints and puns. He becomes a twisted, subtle, evasive, and indirect character, dominated by “the goal of circumlocution” thanks to a language having such a prodigious store of evasions, elusions, wastefulness, and deviousness that it appears made to order for the art of punning, “pointing to one extreme only to turn up at the other, and later reversing the direction.”² It is highly unlikely that the Cantinflas stereotype can be applied to many Mexicans; however, it is obvious that it could be useful in defining the political style of Mexico’s government bureaucrats. It is also an excellent metaphor for describing that peculiar mediating structure which legitimizes one-party dictatorship and government despotism. That structure is a labyrinth of contradictions, puns, and feints which allow the most radical popular demands to be accepted—before, inevitably, they are lost in the maze of corridors, anterooms, and offices, and their original meaning vanishes. In

this aspect, above all others, it can be easily appreciated that the definition of the national character obeys political motives more than anything and can be understood better if we seek its roots not in the people, but in the hegemonic classes. Consider the following definition:

It is imminence that is the determining characteristic of the Mexican, the provisional man, and everyday events that are not suspended on the edge of it leave him unconcerned: to lose his job or his love; to have money or not to have it; to fulfill a promise or not, for him everything *importa madre* [doesn't really matter].³

This is an outline of *importamadrismo*, whose antecedents as a metaphor one must seek as far back as in the book *El no importa de España* (1668), by the Spanish writer of novels of customs and manners, Francisco Santos. There Santos referred to the Spanish indolence that justified everything which turned out wrong with a dry *no importa* (it doesn't matter). Menéndez Pidal tells of the German count who, around 1599, was exasperated by Phillip II's unperturbable ministers (nicknamed the "ministers of eternity") and who greatly suffered with the "come back tomorrow" attitude so well described by Mariano José de Larra in 1833.

We are confronted with a complicated phenomenon: in some moments in history, the ruling classes appropriate what they think is popular culture and develop a curious mimicry of it. In this way the national culture drinks at the wells of popular culture. But it is not a linear process; the popular components of the national culture are mere fragments (frequently very distorted ones) of what is in reality the everyday life of the social class whence they are taken. We can recognize the proletarian (even lumpenproletarian) origin of the feints, elusions, puns, and laziness that are said to contribute to the formation of the Mexican character; we can even observe behavior worthy of Cantinflas in many politicians. But it must be emphasized that there is a wide gap between the real life of a *pelado* in the inner-city community of Tepito and the model that cinema, television, literature, or philosophy proposes to society as a point of reference. The situation grows in complexity owing to the fact that the mass media recycle the popular stereotypes fabricated by the hegemonic culture so that, in their turn, they exercise an influence on the lower classes' way of life. If this last stage did not occur, then the national culture would have no part in the legitimation of the dominant system. This legitimizing function endows power with a species of dynamism, so that we are constantly encountering the birth of new forms of culture. The same stereotype that can, at first, have a markedly antihegemonic character is transformed until it acquires almost unrecognizable facets: thus, the workers in the revolutionary

murals become existentialist hieroglyphs representing anguish, and the comedy of the humbler classes' outdoor theaters is continued in the stammerings of Cantinflas. At last, for the hegemonic classes, the potentially dangerous and revolutionary *pelados* and proletarians end up as a bunch of grotesque characters who know only to jabber and who, in most cases, express their emotions in song.

The dialects that arise in the working-class barrios are originally forms of defense. Not only are they language that allow the members of a social group to identify with their own way of life, but they also act as barriers that impede others from understanding their conversations. Understandably, the popular dialects are highly influenced by the speech of the underworld and the prisons, where cryptic forms of communication are developed to hinder understanding. These are languages *with no meaning* for those who do not belong to the social group which creates them, and that is precisely why they are developed: they make sense only *here* (in the streets), rather than *out there* (in refined, bourgeois society). From this need to identify and differentiate oneself came the so-called *arte-acá* (art-here) of Tepito, a poor Mexico City barrio in which popular forms for the defense of the local culture have arisen. But the moment the popular slang is removed from its natural environment it loses its sense, and the phenomenon I have noted occurs: what is *meaningless* becomes the *new meaning* of popular speech. The slang's new function is to confuse meanings and reveal only the defensive, evasive aspects of the popular language. So the speech of Cantinflas drains the language of meaning and converts it into a method for avoiding predicaments; in contrast, the popular slang that Cantinflas takes as his point of departure is a deeply committed form (i.e., it is coherent to him and the world around him). In this way the Mexican stereotype adopts elements that have a popular origin, but when the scene shifts—as when barrio slang emerges from the mouth of Cantinflas—they acquire another meaning.

The myth of the *pelado* in its Cantinflas version is particularly interesting because it clearly reveals the relationship that the political culture establishes between government and people. Cantinflas is not only the stereotype of the poor Mexican from the city; he is also a harmful simulacrum of the strong structural link that necessarily exists between state despotism and popular corruption. Cantinflas's message is transparent: misery is a permanent state of mindless primitivism that must be vindicated through laughter. This is expressed principally in his corruption of speech, through a veritable implosion of meanings; it is the delirium of a metamorphosis in which everything changes without any apparent meaning. It is understood that there is a correspondence between the corruption of the people and the corruption of the

government: the people get the government they deserve. Or, put the other way round, the authoritarian, corrupt government has the people that suit it: namely, those whom the nationalism of Cantinflas offers as objects of domination.

A frequent theme in the Cantinflas movies is the confusion of roles: the bullfighter is a petty thief (*Ni sangre ni arena*); the policeman is a *pelado* (*El gendarme desconocido*); and the judge and lawyers end up talking like Cantinflas (*Ahí está en detalle*). The intrinsic corruption of the *pelado* is found throughout the political system; given that the regime of the Revolution is of the people, it must behave in accord with the Mexican character (with “national idiosyncrasy,” as politicians like to refer to this corruption of character). The cheap morals and vulgarity with which the exploits of Cantinflas are usually presented cannot obscure the fundamental fact that they are a simulacrum of the *pelado* converted into a policeman, the people transformed into government, and nonsense enthroned as political discourse.

The verbal confusion of Cantinflas, rather than serving to criticize the demagoguery of the politicians, actually legitimizes it. With gestures and mime (running parallel to the nonsense of the verbal effluence) it is insinuated that there is another interpretation, something hidden; that other reality, invoked by the nodding of the head and the movement of the eyebrows and hips, is a world of illegal profits, sexuality without eroticism, power without representation, wealth without work. There is in the punning and the feints a subtle invitation to bribery: the rules of the game are founded in a common venality that allows the Mexican to evade the police, swindle the feeble-minded, escape from homosexuality, obtain intercourse easily with other women while avoiding being made a cuckold by one’s own. The *pelado* lives in a world that, in order to function, needs to be oiled regularly: thus, a shifting society is built in which, at any moment, everything can lose meaning, and civility becomes slick and lubricious. When things freeze up, it is necessary to smear them with what in Europe is called the “Mexican ointment”: a bribe. When a problem or obstacle arises, it is necessary to rub into the appropriate hands the ointment that will keep the permanent delirious metamorphosis of the senses under way.

The stereotype of the *pelado* living immersed in the corrupt world must, nevertheless, move us and touch our heartstrings. We cannot avoid glimpsing in the *pelado* the presence of a spirit pierced by emotions, impulses, afflictions, and excitements. So, when the spirit is questioned about the meaning of being Mexican, the answer is obvious: the Mexican has no sense . . . but he does have sentiments.

Notes

1. *Porfiriato*: the dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911).
2. Salvador Reyes Nevares, *El amor y la amistad en el mexicano* (Mexico City: Porrúa y Obregón, 1952), 2–3, 28.
3. Jorge Carrión, *Mito y magia del mexicano* (Mexico City: Editorial Nuestro Tiempo, 1970), 55.

Mexico City 1992

Alma Guillermoprieto

Journalist Alma Guillermoprieto, one of the most insightful chroniclers of contemporary Latin America, contributed the following “letter” to The New Yorker at a time when the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari—a Harvard-educated technocrat who packed his government with individuals of similar backgrounds and outlooks to his own—was feverishly promoting the North American Free Trade Agreement. The relentless pursuit of North American-style modernity, however, was a double-edged sword: many Mexicans not only doubted that NAFTA would bring the many blessings it promised, but they also feared it would impoverish Mexico’s rich and unique culture. In the following excerpt from Guillermoprieto’s letter, the centerpiece is one of the touchstones of Mexico’s popular culture, the ranchera song.

Mexicans know that a party has been outstandingly successful if at the end of it there are at least a couple of clusters of longtime or first-time acquaintances leaning on each other against a wall, sobbing helplessly. The activities one normally associates with a party—flirting and conversation, and even the kind of dancing that leads to an amnesiac dawn in a strange bed—are considered here mere preludes to or distractions from the ultimate goal, which is weeping and the free, luxurious expression of pain. A true celebrant of the Mexican fiesta will typically progress along a path that leads from compulsive joke-telling to stubborn argumentativeness to thick-tongued foolery, all in pursuit of a final, unchecked, absolving wash of tears, and a casual observer of this voluptuous ritual might conclude that the essential Mexican *fin de fiesta* cannot happen without alcohol. Not so. It cannot happen without *ranchera* music. People may cry admirably with little help from booze, but a drunk who begins to whimper without the benefit of song produces only mediocre tears. He cries out of self-pity. The man or woman who, with a few tequilas packed away, bursts into tears to the strains of a *ranchera* hymn—“Let My Bed Be Made of Stone,” for example—weeps for the tragedy of the world, for a mother, for a father, for our doomed quests for happiness and love, for

life. Sorrow on such a magnificent scale is in itself redeeming, and—an added benefit—its glory leaves little room for embarrassment the morning after.

Now that Mexico is carpeted with Kentucky Fried Chicken, Denny's, and McDonald's outlets, and Coca-Cola is the national drink; now that even low-paid office workers are indentured to their credit cards and auto loans; now that the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has approved a North American Free Trade Agreement, which promises to make Mexico commercially one with its neighbors to the north, there is little scope for magnificent sorrow in the average citizen's life. In the smog-darkened center of Mexico City, or in its monstrous, ticky-tacky suburban spokes, the average citizen on an average day is more concerned with beating the traffic, making the mortgage payment, punching the clock. Progress has hit Mexico in the form of devastation, some of it ecological, much of it aesthetic. Life is rushed, the water may be poisoned, and the new industrial tortillas taste terrible. Favorite ornaments for the home include porcelain dogs and plastic roses, and for the two-thirds of the population which is confined to the cities recreation usually takes the form of a couple of hours with the latest imported sitcom or the local *telenovelas*. Hardly anyone knows anymore what it is to live on a ranch or to die of passion, and yet, when it comes to the defining moments of *mexicanidad*, *ranchera* music, with its odes to love, idyllic landscapes, and death for the sake of honor, continues to reign supreme.

It is a hybrid music. Sung most often to the accompaniment of a mariachi ensemble, *rancheras* generate tension by setting the classic formality of the trumpets and violins against the howling quality of the vocals. The lyrics of many of the best-known songs—"Cielito Lindo," say—include verses that were inherited in colonial days from Spain. Many of the rhetorical flourishes—"lips like rose petals," "eyes like stars"—are Spanish also. But when *rancheras* turn, as they do obsessively, to the topics of death and destruction, alcohol and defeat, and the singer holds up his dying heart for all to see, or calls for the stones in the field to shout at him, he is bleeding from a wound that is uniquely Mexican.

The spiritual home of *ranchera* music is in the heart of Mexico City—in a raucous plaza surrounded by ratty night clubs and forbidding ancient churches. The plaza, which is not far from where I grew up, is named after Giuseppe Garibaldi, the nineteenth-century Italian revolutionary, but the central statue is of José Alfredo Jiménez (1926–1973), who wrote more songs about weeping, alcohol, and women than any other *ranchera* composer. José Alfredo's statue is wearing mariachi costume, because that is what he wore when he sang, and because the plaza is home to dozens, if not hundreds, of men who are themselves mariachis, and who stroll the plaza at all hours of the day



Man with a Violin. (Photo by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Reprinted by permission of Magnum Photos, Inc.)

and night, singing José Alfredo's songs and those of other *ranchera* composers to anyone who pays to listen.

On three of the plaza's irregular sides are vast cantinas and a food market, where vats of highly seasoned soup are sold throughout the night to ward off or cure hangovers. At the plaza's dissonant center is a constantly moving swarm of blurry-eyed revellers and costumed mariachis. The people in mufti stroll, wail at the moon, stagger into each other's arms, or gather around a group of musicians and sing along with them, striking defiant poses as they belt out the words. The mariachis tag after potential customers and negotiate prices, play checkers with bottle tops, shiver in the midnight cold, and, thirty or forty times an evening, play their hearts out for the revellers. Here and there, an electric-shock vender wanders through the crowd, offering a brightly painted box of programmable current to those who, for the equivalent of a couple of dollars, want to take hold of a pair of wires and test their endurance of electricity. A gaggle of tall, goofy-looking foreigners applauds and smiles at the mariachis who have just finished playing for them, and the mariachis smile, too, because tourists pay well. The people from Stand P-84, a wholesale outlet for guavas and mangoes in the city's gigantic central produce market, think the tourists are pretty funny.

Chuy Soto and his guava-selling colleagues arrived here around eight-o'clock on this particular drizzly evening, and now, five hours later, they have

reached the euphoric, sputtering stage at which the spirit invariably moves a Mexican to reach for extravagant metaphors and sing the glories of his country. There is a little pile of plastic glasses and empty bottles to mark the site where Chuy's group has been standing all this time, and the singer for the mariachi ensemble that has been accompanying them has just about lost his voice, but Chuy and his friends are full of vigor. "We come here to sing, and after a while emotions come out of us, and Mexicanness," Chuy says, blinking and pursing his lips as he struggles to focus. An adolescent tugs at my elbow, teary-eyed and anxious to share his own thoughts, but he can't get out a single coherent phrase, and he vanishes. One of Chuy's warehouse partners is trying to dance with a plump young woman whose acquaintance he has just made, but he's holding on too tight, and she pushes him away. The woman's friend is singing along with the mariachi (the name refers both to the group and to its individual members), for perhaps the fifth time, a song called "Dos Almas" (Two souls), but by now she can't get anyone to listen to her and she weaves off in a huff. The amiable Chuy is still explaining Mexicanness to my companion, who is Peruvian. "A Mexican's heart is always open and full of music," he stammers, but a buddy of his, who spouts profanity and has in general a sharper-edged vision of things, butts in. "A Mexican knows that life is worthless," he declares.

The mariachi singer Ismael Gutiérrez and his group charge twenty-five thousand pesos, or about eight dollars, per song, but they offered Chuy and his friends the wholesale rate after serenading them with thirty *rancheras*. This meant that for a lucky evening of solid work each of the members of the Mariachi Real del Potosí, as the group Gutiérrez belongs to is called, got about thirty dollars. The group is small, and not first-rate. There's only one of each of the essential components of a mariachi: a violin; a guitar; a trumpet; a *guitarrrón*, or fat bass guitar; a *vihuela*, or small plinking guitar; and the singer—Gutiérrez. Like many of his fellow-musicians who have land or a family trade in the provinces, Gutiérrez comes to Mexico City every fortnight or so from his home state—San Luis Potosí, in his case—and puts up at one of the scarred buildings around the plaza, where, he says, the old-fashioned, high-ceilinged rooms are crowded with bunk beds stacked as many as five high. There, he makes sure he gets at least eight hours' sleep a day, to keep his voice going. That is also where he stores his costume, which is as essential to his occupation as any instrument.

In the old days, before the movies, mariachis used to dress like what they were: peasant musicians. But when the Mexican movie industry began producing musicals, back in the thirties, mariachis in Indian dress—big white shirts and trousers, and straw hats—came to seem too ordinary, and someone

decided to outfit them in the elegant *mestizo* dress of the *charro*, or horseman. Its basic elements are a broad-brimmed felt hat, a short, fitted black jacket, and tight black trousers with double seams running down the outside of the leg. For show, *charros* decorated the seams with brass or silver fittings and with fancy embroidery. Mexico's Hollywood kept the ornaments and the embroidery and added color. The majority of Garibaldi's mariachis wear silver-trimmed black, but now they do this to signify that they are free-lancers, which means that if a customer approaches a *guitarrón* player, say, requesting a song, the musician has to pull an ensemble together from the other black-clad free-lancers standing around. Ismael Gutiérrez is a significant step up in the hierarchy: he belongs to a formally constituted group, and all the members of his Mariachi Real wear sober Prussian blue. Gutiérrez — stout, cheerful, courtly, and equipped with a remarkable handlebar mustache — looks reassuring in his outfit, like a character out of an old-time movie.

Because Gutiérrez belongs to an established mariachi, he has been able to weather a disaster that has affected Garibaldi since the beginning of the year: construction of a new subway line began then, shutting off the main access road to the plaza and cutting down the number of potential customers so drastically that on any given Friday night the ratio of mariachis to revellers appears to be almost one to one. Gutiérrez and his mates have discovered the advantages of business cards, and by handing them out (printed with a more prosperous relative's phone number) around local office buildings and to friendly customers, they have been able to make up for the loss of walk-by trade. Not so the free-lancer Jesús Rosas. Although he plays what his colleagues describe as "a very pretty trumpet," all he can do now is dream of joining a group or landing a permanent job with the mariachis who play inside one of the huge cantinas, such as the famous Tenampa, that face on the plaza. Rosas is only twenty-five, but he has been playing Garibaldi since he left home, more than a decade ago. He used to be in demand, because he plays well, knows a lot of songs, and has a particular affability, at once alert and courteous, friendly and firmly reserved, that is much prized by Mexicans. Now times are bad, but he is stubborn. While dozens of lesser mariachis are coping with the subway crisis by heading for the Reforma, a few blocks away, to flag down cars and hustle for customers, Rosas, who finds such a procedure completely undignified, remains in Garibaldi. "The plaza is here," he says, but that means that by noon on most days he is already cruising it, his trumpet protectively cradled in a beat-up vinyl carrying case, trying to make up in long hours for the clients he has lost.

Mexico's subway is a tremendous achievement: it is now one of the longest urban railroads in the world; it allows millions of people to crisscross the

sprawling city to get to work on time every day; it did not collapse, or even buckle, during the earthquake that shattered much of the city seven years ago; it is clean; it runs smoothly. Its expansion has forced dozens of shop owners along the path of its construction into bankruptcy and brought the Garibaldi mariachis to the brink of despair, but if everything goes according to the official plan, once the station opens in 1993 Garibaldi will be overrun by *ranchera* devotees, and mariachi income will soar. Gutiérrez doesn't think this will happen, because people who can afford mariachis travel by car. Nevertheless, this is the kind of promise that Mexico's rulers are constantly making to their subjects these days: severe sacrifices are being asked, and times are hard, but the country is being modernized, and when modernity arrives it will bring great rewards.

"MODERNITY" IS THE buzzword, and, although hardly anyone knows how to define it, even the people in Garibaldi can recognize its presence in their lives. Modernity is what makes the mariachi Guadalupe González—a man who boasts that he beats his woman regularly, out of a traditional sense of duty ("She misses it if I don't," he explains)—welcome the subway that Jesús Rosas dislikes. "*Hay que modernizarse*," he admonishes Rosas, citing the contemporary imperative. Modernity is what makes Rosas look uncomfortable at the mention of wife-beating by his elders, and it is also what makes his young fellow-mariachis finish their *ranchera* practice and immediately tune in a rock station on the radio, to Rosas's distress. Modernity is the guiding impulse behind the latest gambit by the travel agencies, which consists of bringing tourists to Garibaldi by the busload to be serenaded by musicians permanently under agency contract, instead of letting the tourists wander about in time-honored fashion until they find a mariachi who strikes them as *simpático*. It used to be, Guadalupe González says, that first-rate mariachis like him could deliver the traditional *ranchera* serenade outside the window of a house where a party was going on, and then prove their versatility by playing boleros, polkas, and even cha-cha-chas for the partygoers to dance to. Now, thanks to modernity, mariachis deliver their serenade and are waved away, and the party continues to the sound of a rock band, a *cumbia* group, or, worst of all, one of those tootling electronic organs with programmable rhythms and sound effects. Modernity, as it is understood here, means speed and high productivity and the kind of cost analysis that leads to one electronic organ rather than half a dozen friendly but expensively thirsty mariachis. Now that a finished text of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement has been initialled by the trade ministers of Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the arrival of full-scale modernity is assumed to be imminent. The

terms of the treaty state that fifteen years after its final approval all tariffs and barriers to trade between the three countries will disappear. In effect, this means that the continent will become a single, gigantic market, and the government officials are already trumpeting the estimated benefits: great tonic shots of foreign investment that will make the economy roar. Less powerful people worry that they, like the mariachis, will lose their jobs to electronic substitutes. But a more common undercurrent of worry and doubt, in the endless private jokes, offhand conversational references, editorial cartoons, and television chat-show allusions to the free-trade treaty, is more abstract, and strikes deeper. What people want to know about the coming onslaught of modernity is: How Mexican is it to be modern? Or, rather, since everything modern comes from a large, powerful country to the north, how Mexican is it to be like the United States?

There is nothing new about such fears of cultural takeover, of course: Mexico has been under invasion from the United States in one form or another since the war in 1847 that cost the country half its territory, and since then the arrival of each new fad or technological improvement has been used by pessimists to herald the death of Mexican tradition. Rosas's worry that the *ranchera* is a dying form is hardly original, but it is not paranoid. Rock-music stations *are* increasingly numerous. Mariachi serenades *are* far less frequent. This doesn't mean that Rosas's rock-humming contemporaries are less Mexican than he is; it simply means that their culture is more fragmented. The remarkable psychic sturdiness shared by the inhabitants of a city that often looks like the morning after the apocalypse may or may not owe something to cultural coherence, but, as every Latino teen-ager in Los Angeles knows, the combination of cultural fragmentation and social disadvantage can be poisonous. To the whiz kids from Harvard and the Sorbonne who are currently running the Mexican government, though, the diversification of Mexican culture is also rich with promise. Nationalism and tradition are *retardatarios*, cosmopolitanism is creative, and what used to be called cultural imperialism is now known as "the inevitable future." . . .

Whether economic *apertura* will lead to a final drowning of Mexican culture in United States sauce is not an entirely idle question—at least, not when one is sitting in a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet and eating some of the first fast-food tacos that Taco Bell is hoping to find a mass market for in Mexico City. . . .

I WENT TO SEE the postmodern *ranchera* singer Astrid Hadad's show . . . , and as she worked her way to a tiny stage through the crowded bar where she was performing she peddled tacos from a basket. "What kind would you

like?” she asked her customers. “Now that we have the free-trade treaty, I can offer you hamburger tacos, hot-dog tacos, chili-con-carne tacos. . . .” For her presentations, Hadad likes to wear red lipstick with carnival glitter in it—on her eyelids—and a Jean Paul Gaultier-like cone-shaped bra, which she later rips off and replaces with a big, anatomically accurate foam-rubber heart. Her show, which has been attracting ever more loyal audiences over the last few years, relies heavily on the nostalgia value of *ranchera* music and on its inherent campiness, but it would not be so energetically appealing if her powerful voice were not a perfect vehicle for *rancheras* or if her understanding of a *ranchera* prototype—the brassy, hard-drinking, love-wounded dame—were not intuitive. Hadad belted out, “As if I were a sock, you step on me all day,” and her audience howled with laughter and the acid pleasure of recognition. When, in a frenzy of Mexican passion, she asked what would become of her heart—“this bleeding, burning, conquered, crunched, roasted, ground, blended, anguished heart”—a couple of people in the audience rose to give her a standing ovation. Hadad had come onstage with peasant-style braids and wearing a typical *china poblana* embroidered skirt. Now she loosened the braids, tore off the skirt to reveal a slinky black dress underneath, removed the heart from the dress’s strapless bodice, added long gloves, checked her image in an empty mirror frame, and retold the well-known myth of Quetzalcoatl, the god-king of Tula, and his rival Tezcatlipoca, or Smoking Mirror. “Tezcatlipoca is jealous because Quetzalcoatl is blond, so he gives him some pulque. Quetzalcoatl gets drunk, screws his own sister, wakes up with a terrible hangover, and sees his image in Tezcatlipoca’s mirror. He heads for the beach and sets sail, and as he leaves he promises to return. So he does, the blond, blue-eyed god, and that’s how we discovered the joys of”—here Hadad licked her lips lasciviously—“cultural penetration.”

Offstage, Hadad turned out to be a tiny woman with a sharp Lebanese profile (it is a curious fact of cultural life here that many of the most devoted *mexicanistas* are themselves—like Hadad and like Frida Kahlo—first- or second-generation Mexicans) and an intellectual manner. Not surprisingly, she declared that what first attracted her to *rancheras* was that they are so essentially Mexican. “I think it has to do with the attitude toward suffering that we inherited from the Aztecs,” she said. “It’s not that we have an extraordinary capacity for suffering—everyone does. It’s the way we *relish* it. I think only Russians compare with us in that. And then there’s the element of machismo. Again, it’s not that men here beat their wives more, because I’m sure that Germans do it just as much; it’s that here they boast about it. Obviously, I’m very critical of that, but what keeps me coming back to the music is the passion. Now that we’re all becoming so rational and sensible, it’s getting

harder and harder to find passion in our lives; I think that's what we all seek in the *ranchera*."

I asked Hadad why she cracked so many jokes about the Free Trade Agreement in her show, and why she thought her audience was so responsive to them, and she said it was because of the enormous apprehension that people are feeling about it. She pointed out that even the great Mexican movie goddess María Félix had taken the unusual step of speaking out publicly against the treaty, warning that it might cause Mexican values—not to mention factories—to collapse. Like nearly everyone else who is fearful of the treaty, Hadad confessed that she had no idea what was in it. "But it seems obvious to me that the little guys—us—are not going to be the ones calling the shots," she said. "The government gets all excited describing the wonderful things that will result from the treaty, but I say 'What wonders?' As far as I can make out, all it means is that in the future we're going to be more like South Korea and less like us."

THIS IS, IN FACT, precisely what one of Salinas de Gortari's bright young intellectuals described to me some time ago as his best hope: that if Mexico's debt situation remains stable, if its workers can be persuaded to let wage increases remain just below the rate of inflation, if monetary policy and inflation itself continue under tight government control, enough foreign investment will land here "to turn this country into South Korea or maybe Taiwan." . . .

I FLEW FROM Mexico City to Tijuana, a scorching-hot border town that can be seen either as the hideous, seedy product of more than a century of cultural penetration or as the defiant, lively result of a hundred years of cultural resistance. Just a few miles south of San Diego, Tijuana reigns as the world capital of Spanglish, shantytowns, and revolting souvenirs, yet, despite it all, remains completely Mexican. The United States may be just an imaginary line away, but on this side of the line driving becomes more creative, street life improves, bribes are taken, and hairdos are more astonishing. I thought Tijuana would be a good place to catch a show by Juan Gabriel, a singer and prolific composer who is the most unlikely heir to the mantle of *ranchera* greatness that could ever be imagined.

Juan Gabriel likes to perform at *palenques*, or cockfight arenas, which are a traditional element of state fairs. When I arrived at the Tijuana *palenque*, around midnight, several hundred people were watching the last fight, perched on chairs in a coliseumlike arrangement of concrete tiers surrounding a small circular arena. Those in the know say that hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of bets are placed in the course of a fight, but all I saw was

half a dozen men with little notebooks standing in the arena, catching mysterious silent signals from the audience and scribbling down figures, while the two fighting cocks were displayed by their handlers. After a few minutes, the men with notebooks left, and the cocks, outfitted with razorlike spurs, were set on the ground. The cocks flew at each other, spurs first, while the audience watched in tense, breathless silence. In a matter of minutes, one of the animals lay trembling on the ground, its guts spilling out, and the other was proclaimed the victor, to a brief, dull cheer. Instantly, Juan Gabriel's roadies moved in.

The instruments they set up—electric organ and piano, two sets of drums—are not the ones normally associated with *ranchera* music, but then Juan Gabriel is not what one would think of as a typical mariachi singer. For starters, he is from the border himself—from Ciudad Juárez, where he was born, and where he was raised in an orphanage. When he burst on the pop-music scene, in the early seventies, radio audiences often mistook his high-pitched voice for a woman's. His fey mannerisms became the subject of crude jokes. He has been press-shy ever since a scurrilous book by a purported confidant fed hungry speculations about his sexual preferences. Yet, in this nation of self-proclaimed machos, Juan Gabriel has been able to perform before a standing-room-only crowd in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico's Carnegie Hall. He lives in Los Angeles, uses electronic backups and percussion, and writes songs that never mention drunkenness or two- or three-timing women, but when men in Garibaldi drink and fall into the confessional mode these days their musical inspiration invariably includes songs composed by Juan Gabriel.

As the first, wailing *ranchera* chords tore through the din and Juan Gabriel emerged from the bullpen, there was a roar from the *palenque*, and in the roar there was a call for blood. The composition of the audience had changed: a majority of women, mostly middle-aged and in girls'-night-out groups, had filled the stands, along with a large minority of romantic couples and a dense sprinkling of men in groups. A lot of the men were wearing big *norteño* hats, and in the front row a group of couples and male buddies in big hats and heavy gold chains had set up beer cans and bottles of tequila along the concrete ledge that defined the arena space. The women in the audience were shouting their love for Juan Gabriel hysterically, but a couple of men behind me were shouting something quite different, and so were a lot of the men in big hats. "Marica!" and "Jotón!" they yelled, meaning "Fag!" or "Queer!" They yelled this over and over, and, because the cherub-faced Juan Gabriel in his graying middle age has put on something of a paunch, someone improvised an insult that was quickly copied: "You're pregnant, you faggot! Go

home!" The men had paid between forty and sixty dollars a head to indulge in this pleasure, and Juan Gabriel, circling the arena slowly to acknowledge the majority's applause, also acknowledged this generosity with a small, graceful curtsy before he began to sing.

His music is proof of the fact that the *ranchera* has changed as much as Mexico has, and that in doing so it has survived. His backup singers at the *palenque* were two skinny, curvy black women in tight dresses: they chimed in on the chorus as required, but with distinctly gringo accents. Standing between them and his electronic band, Juan Gabriel sang and twirled to music from his pop repertoire, punctuating some of the jazzier songs with belly rolls and shimmies that drove the women and the machos wild in opposite ways. There was rather a lot of this cheerful music, and then he slowed down and began to sing a real *ranchera*, a song of bad love, loss, and pain, in which the composer makes abject offers to his departed love. In case the fugitive should ever decide to return, Juan Gabriel sang, "You'll find me here, in my usual spot, in the same city, with the same crowd, so you can find everything just as you left it." By the second verse, there was no need for him to sing at all, because the members of the audience were chanting the words for themselves with the rapt reverence accorded an anthem. "I just forgot again," the audience sang, "that you never loved me." I glanced at a couple of the big guys sitting in the front row, armed with their bottles of tequila, who had earlier folded their arms protectively across their chests and smirked whenever Juan Gabriel wiggled in their direction. Now they were singing.

A dozen fawn-colored *charro* hats wobbled at the entrance to the bullpen, and the audience, seeing the mariachis arrive, roared itself hoarse with welcome. Gold decorations along the musicians' trousers caught the light. The men lined up facing Juan Gabriel's band, adjusted their hats, took up their instruments, and filled the *palenque* with the ripe, aching, heart-torn sound of the mariachi. Juan Gabriel, singing this time about how hard it is to forget, was now not queening at all. The big guys sitting across from me leaned into each other, swaying companionably to the music, like everyone else in the audience. Behind me, the last heckler had finally shut up. Juan Gabriel sang a lilting *huapango* and a couple of *sones*, without pausing once for chatter. He segued from one song to the next or went through long medleys, the doo-wop girls bursting in occasionally with a trill or two. Then the girls left the stage, and so did the band. Juan Gabriel, alone with the mariachis, slowed down for the introductory chords of a song that begins, "Podría volver," and, recognizing these, the audience squealed in ecstatic pain. "I could return, but out of sheer pridefulness I won't," the lyrics say, in what is perhaps the most perfect

of a hundred *ranchera* hymns to the unbending pride of the loser. “If you want me to come back you should have thought of that before you left me.” Here and there, his listeners yelped as if some very tasty salt had just been rubbed into their national wound. Life hurts. I hurt. The hell with you: I’ll survive, Juan Gabriel sang. In the front row, the two big guys looked immensely happy, and just about ready to weep.

Two Ranchera Songs

José Alfredo Jiménez and Cuco Sánchez

As Alma Guillermoprieto so eloquently points out, the lyrics of ranchera songs are most often concerned with heartbreak, loss, betrayal, revenge, and self-pity—and all this to the accompaniment of soaring horns and violins. While cautioning readers to bear in mind that there is tremendous variety within the genre, we here include a small sample of the ranchera: very popular songs by two of the most renowned ranchera composers, José Alfredo Jiménez (1926–1973) and Cuco Sánchez (1921–2000).

THE HORSEMAN, *by José Alfredo Jiménez*

In the far-off mountains rides a horseman,
Wandering alone in the world and wishing for death.
In his breast he carries a wound, his soul is destroyed.
He wants to lose his life and be reunited with his beloved.
He loved her more than his own life,
And he lost her forever.
That's why he is wounded, that's why he seeks death.
He spends whole nights singing with his guitar,
Man and guitar weeping by the light of the stars.
Then he loses himself in the night, and although the night is very beautiful,
He asks God to bear him away to her,
The woman he loved more than his own life,
And lost forever.
That's why he is wounded, that's why he seeks death.

THE BED OF STONE, *by Cuco Sánchez*

Let my bed and headboard be made of stone.
The woman who loves me must love me truly.
Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

I went to the courtroom and asked the judge if it's a crime to love you.
He sentenced me to death.

Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

The day they kill me, may it be with five bullets,
And I will be very close to you, so as to die in your arms.

Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

For a casket, I want a *sarape*,

For a crucifix, my crossed ammunition belts.

And upon my tombstone, write my final farewell with a thousand bullets.

Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

II

Ancient Civilizations

If the analysts of “*lo mexicano*” agree on anything, it is that Mexico was home to magnificent civilizations and cultures prior to the coming of the Europeans, and that much of the country’s subsequent history has witnessed attempts to deny, suppress, and, more recently, politically incorporate the vestiges of those civilizations and cultures. During the independence period, some thinkers invoked the glories of ancient Mexico, but their sincerity is difficult to judge: they seem to have regarded those glories largely as a convenient rhetorical device to deny the legitimacy of the Spanish conquest and colonial rule, not to suggest that Mexico’s indigenous cultures be revived or even respected. The twentieth century, however, saw tremendous advances in understanding and appreciation of ancient Mexico, particularly after the Mexican revolution, through the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, in its Spanish acronym). Today, a visit to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City cannot help but overwhelm the visitor, and the ruins of the indigenous civilizations annually attract and impress countless thousands of tourists.

The earliest civilizations of Mesoamerica began to take shape around 2000 B.C.; by 1200 B.C. impressive cities had been built and a distinctive Mesoamerican religion had evolved. Around A.D. 300, the region entered its so-called “classical period,” a time when huge cities such as Teotihuacán in central Mexico, and the Zapotec city of Monte Albán, in the southern state of Oaxaca, dominated large territories. In the jungles and mountains to the southeast, the Maya erected splendid city-states, created elaborate ceramics, studied the stars and planets, and developed a system of writing. By around A.D. 800–900, the classical civilizations entered into a decline that has still not been adequately explained. Subsequent cultures tended to be more fragmented and bellicose than their predecessors, but they nevertheless achieved a high degree of sophistication. In central Mexico, the region of the largest populations and highest development, successive waves of *chichimecas*, or nomadic peoples, moved in from the north to enjoy the good life on the fertile central plateau.

The Aztecs—easily the best known of Mexico’s indigenous cultures—were one such group. After migrating into the lake region of central Mexico in the mid-1200s, they endured years of tribulation before establishing what would become their awe-inspiring capital city of Tenochtitlán. By the mid-1400s, in alliance with other city-states of the region, the Aztecs launched a campaign of imperial domination that would win them a precarious control of much of central and southern Mexico.

Mesoamerican cultures were complex and sophisticated, but they also earned a reputation for brutality. The following readings aim to provide readers with a brief introduction to the mythology, religious beliefs and practices, values, and enduring legacy of these cultures, which, while certainly subordinated, continue to resonate in modern Mexico.

The Origins of the Aztecs

Anonymous

Mesoamerican peoples believed that time moved cyclically. In contrast to the Western notion that time began at a certain moment and has developed in linear fashion ever since, for the Mesoamericans time was created and extinguished at regular intervals. The Aztecs believed themselves to be living in the epoch of the Fifth Sun, since four suns had existed and been extinguished prior to their appearance on earth. The belief that time could end gives insight into the seriousness with which Mesoamericans viewed their religious life: if either humans or gods failed to perform their functions faithfully and precisely, the light of day would be devoured and the world would cease to exist.

The following excerpt is a brief account of the legend of the five suns. It was translated by anthropologist Thelma D. Sullivan from the Anales de Cuauhtitlán, part of the Codex Chimalpopoca. This account was written by Aztec authors some forty to fifty years after the Spanish conquest, but was based on certain older texts and traditions. It gives a clear sense of the fatalism and pervasive pessimism that tended to characterize the Mesoamerican worldview.

... They had been wandering about shooting their arrows;
they had no houses, they had no land,
they had no woven capes as clothing;
only hides, only Spanish moss did they use to cover themselves.
And their children grew up in mesh bags,
in cagelike crates used for carrying things.

They ate the prickly pear, the barrel cactus,
the *tetzíhoactli*, and the bitter prickly pear.
They suffered great hardships for 364 years
until they arrived in the city, Quauhtitlan.
In that year it began, it originated
the rule of the Chichimeca,
the people of Quauhtitlan.

It must told, it must be understood. . .
that while on their way they gave themselves a king.

During these years, of the Chichimeca's wandering.
It is said, it is recounted
that it was still the time of darkness.
They say that it was still the time of darkness
because as yet no fame, no glory was theirs;
there was no joyousness.
They wandered from place to place. . . .

In the first age,
according to accounts, according to the recollections
of the ancients for they knew it . . .
the earth, the world,
came into existence, was established. . . .

It is recounted, it is said
that four kinds of life were created. . . .

The old men knew that in 1-Rabbit,
in that year the earth and heaven were established,
and they also knew that
when the earth and heaven were established
there were four kinds of beings,
four kinds of life were created.
They knew that each one was a Sun.
And they said that he created,
he fashioned their gods from ashes;
they attributed this to Quetzalcoatl. . . .

In the beginning was the first Sun,
4-Water was its sign;
it was called the Sun of Water.
In this Sun all was carried off by water,
the people were transformed
into dragonfly larvae and into fish.

The second Sun was established.
4-Jaguar was its sign;
it was called the Jaguar Sun.
In this Sun it happened that the heavens collapsed,
that the Sun did not move on its course from its zenith.

It began to darken, when all was dark,
then the people were devoured.

And Giants lived in this Sun.
The elders say that their greeting to each other was
“May you not fall,”
because everyone who fell,
fell forevermore.

The third Sun was established.
4-Rain was its sign;
it was called the Sun of Rain.
In this Sun it occurred that it rained fire
and the people were consumed by fire. . . .
It rained stones.
They now say that this was when the stones we now see fell,
and the lava rock boiled up.
And also, it was when the great rocks formed into masses,
and became red.

The fourth Sun:
4-Wind was its sign;
it was called the Sun of Wind.
In this Sun all was carried off by the wind,
the people turned into monkeys.
And afterward the monkey men
that lived there dispersed about the forests.

The fifth Sun:
its symbol is 4-Motion.
It was called the Sun of Motion
because it moves, it follows a course.
And say the ancients:
that in this Sun it shall come to pass
that the earth shall move,
that there shall be famine,
and that we all shall perish. . . .

In the year 13-Reed,
they say that the Sun that now exists was created.
At that time the Sun of Movement
arose at dawn, gave its light. . . .

In this fifth Sun the earth shall move,
there shall be famine,
then we shall perish.

The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society

Inga Clendinnen

Without a doubt, the most famous aspect of Aztec culture is its propensity for violent ritual, most notably human sacrifice on a grand scale. This fact has presented historians with a dilemma, for it seems that too much emphasis on such gory practices promotes sensationalism and only serves to distract readers from more noble and seemingly aspects of Aztec society, as well as from the everyday life and culture of the people. Although the point is well-taken, it must also be recognized that to gloss over or ignore Aztec ritual is to overlook the very thing that the Aztecs themselves viewed as their most important function on earth. For the Aztecs, particularly the ruling elites, warfare and ritual were functions of their religion — a religion which, like any other, was at heart a complex expression of humanity's place in nature and the cosmos.

The best historians, of course, seek not to sensationalize but to explain. Few in recent years can rival cultural historian Inga Clendinnen, professor at La Trobe University in Australia. In the following article, she examines the remarkably complex rituals of warfare and sacrifice in order to achieve some understanding of what these rituals actually meant to the Aztecs.

Proud of itself
is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán.
Here no one fears to die in war.
This is our glory. . . .

Who could conquer Tenochtitlán?
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?

Today we are tempted to read this fragment of an Aztec song-poem as a familiar piece of bombast: the aggressive military empire which insists on its invincibility, its warriors strangers to fear. In what follows I want to indicate how the business of war was understood in the great city of Tenochtitlán, and then . . . to enquire into how warrior action was sustained and explained, in the hope of drawing closer to an Aztec reading of this small text.

THAT TENOCHTITLÁN WAS the creation of war and the courage and stamina of its young fighting men was indisputable. The splendid city which Cortés and his men saw shimmering above its lake waters in the autumn of 1519 had been founded as a miserable collection of mud huts less than two hundred years before. . . .

[By the mid-1400s, under Emperor] Moctezuma the Elder, the armies of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco and Tlacopan spilled beyond the valley to carve out the broad shape of their magnificent if unstable tribute empire. That expansion was paralleled by the increasing magnificence of Tenochtitlán. In 1519, the last year of its grandeur, it contained perhaps 200,000 to 250,000 people, with many more densely settled around the lake margin. (Seville, the port of departure for most of the conquistadores, numbered in the same year not more than 60,000 persons.) The city lived more by trade than tribute, but that trade had been stimulated and focused by war, just as its war-fed splendor attracted the most skilled artisans and most gifted singers to embellish its glory further. The one-class society of the early days of hardship had given way to an elaborately differentiated hierarchy. But that hierarchy had been created through the distribution of the spoils of war, and success in combat remained its dynamic. Performance on the field of battle was as central for the confirmation of an elevated position as for escape from a lowly one, and concern regarding that performance gripped young males of all social ranks.

It also concerned those who directed the city. From the age of ten or eleven all commoner youths save those few dedicated to the priesthood came under the control of the "House of Youth," the warrior house in their own *calpulli* [lineage group]. These were not exclusively military schools: each lad was expected to master a range of masculine skills, most particularly the trade of his father. The great mass of Aztec warriors were essentially part-time, returning from campaigns to the mundane pursuits of farming, hunting or fishing, pulque brewing and selling, or the dozen other trades the city supported. Few commoners were so successful in battle as to emancipate themselves entirely from such labor. Nonetheless it was war and the prospect of war which fired imagination and ambition. At fifteen the lads began intensive training in weapon-handling, gathering every evening in the warrior house with the mature warriors—local heroes—to learn the chants and dances which celebrated warriors past and the eternal excitements of war. Assigned labors became a chance to test strength, as boys wrestled logs from the distant forest to feed the never-dying fires in their local temple or to meet their ward's obligations at the central temple precinct. But war provided the crucial and indeed the sole consequential test. Performance in that test was measured in a quite straightforward, arithmetical kind of way. Movement through the ranks of

the warrior grades depended on taking alive on the field of battle a specified number of captives of specified quality. Each promotion was marked by the award of designated insignia and by a distinctive cutting and arranging of the hair, although the "warrior lock," at the center and slightly to the back of the head, was always kept intact. (Some of the most elevated warriors, the "shaven-headed Otomí," kept only that lock, bound with bright cord close to the scalp so that it floated banner-like above the shaven pate.) It was possible for the commoner who distinguished himself over several campaigns to graduate into the lower ranks of the royal administration, or even to enjoy the perquisites of lordship, at least for his lifetime. . . .

The conditions of warrior training for the sons of the lords are less clear. . . . It was probably significantly more rigorous. For a noble in the later years of empire the cost of cowardice was high. Access to office and the perquisites of office—its tribute fields, its dependent laborers—depended on adequate performance in battle, and the higher the office the more spectacular the required performance. . . .

A dramatic toughening in the required warrior performance for the nobility had come in the middle years of the rule of Moctezuma the Elder, just before the Aztec expansion beyond the valley. Tlacaelel, a young general under Itzcoatl, adviser of Moctezuma and to three rulers after him, and chief architect and strategist of empire, made the new rules clear. The most coveted jewels, the richest cloaks and shields could no longer be bought in the marketplace. They could be purchased only with valorous deeds. Any male who failed to go to war, even if he were the king's son, would be deprived of all signs of rank and would live as a despised commoner, while great warriors would eat from the king's dish. This was a sufficiently crucial matter to breach the hardening divisions of class: should a legitimate son prove cowardly, and the son of a slave or servant excel him in battle, the bastard would replace the coward as legitimate heir. Furthermore Tlacaelel proclaimed the initiation of a particular kind of warfare against five precariously independent provinces across the mountains—provinces noted, as were the Aztecs, for the toughness of their fighting men. In these so-called "Flowery Wars" the sole end would be the mutual taking of warrior captives for ritual killing. At the same time Tlacaelel was preparing the great campaigns of subjugation which would bring hundreds, even thousands, of prisoners to Tenochtitlán. The building of the Great Temple was already in train. In the next years the Aztecs were to become notorious among their neighbors for the mass ceremonial killings, and for the extravagant theatricalism in which those killings were framed. . . . They were intended as the most efficacious of political acts; the most direct demonstration of the high legitimacy of Aztec supremacy. . . .

The declarations made in that theater of dominance were understood by the Aztecs' neighbors, although few found them permanently compelling, as Cortés was to discover to his advantage. But in the Aztec politics of spectacle the great ceremonies which consumed so great a part of the fruits of war constituted the final, necessary and consummatory act of war; they transformed human victory into sacred destiny.

AZTECS WERE NOT soldiers, at least not in the modern European sense. . . . They had no organized "army," nor officers either. But the Aztec warrior, like the European soldier, was a social product: it should be possible to discover how he was made. He faced, again and again, the threat of injury or death deliberately inflicted: it should be possible to discover something of how that threat appeared to him. And, a man trained to violence, he moved constantly in and out of civilian society: it should be possible to discover how he made that passage. The benefits of warrior action and warrior status were manifest, and not all material. What concerns me now is to count the costs of Aztec courage.

There was, of course, the obvious and familiar cost of war: the grief attending the death of a loved father, son, husband, brother, friend. . . . The kin had been well disciplined for the relinquishment. Childbed was conventionally designated a battlefield, where a woman could "take a captive" by capturing a baby. The midwife greeted the birth of a male child with war cries and a formal exhortation, addressed to the child, but directed, of course, to the panting, newly delivered mother, who was emphatically not given the baby to hold:

My precious son, my youngest one . . . heed, hearken: thy home is not here, for thou art an eagle, a jaguar . . . here is only the place of thy nest . . . out there thou has been consecrated . . . War is thy desert, thy task. Thou shalt give drink, nourishment, food to the sun, lord of the earth . . . perhaps thou wilt receive the gift, perhaps thou wilt merit death by the obsidian knife . . . The flowered death by the obsidian knife [that is, death on the killing stone].

A sufficiently explicit intervention by society in a zone we might consider private. It was the parents who then formally dedicated the infant to war, presenting him to the "Rulers of Youth" at the local warrior house, where he would live from puberty to marriage. . . .

If success had its negative aspects . . . failure could be a lifetime of bitterness. One strength of the Aztec system was that it was not necessary to succeed to survive: it was possible to live by one's own labor, saved from want by peri-

odic handouts from the tribute warehouse or from a successful neighbor or kinsman. But failure was public, publicly marked, at an age when such marks burn deep. From about ten each lad grew a long lock of hair at the nape of the neck, which remained uncut until he had participated in the taking of a captive on the field of war. If after two or three campaigns he still had not forced himself to enter the fray—and it was always possible to hang back—he was thrown out of the warrior house, his head shaven in a tonsure to dramatize the loss of the warrior lock and to prepare him for the carrying pad of humble labor: forever a peripheral man. . . .

Aztec combat was highly individualistic, and depended utterly on the courage of the individual. For his first venture into war the fledgling warrior went only as an observer, to “carry the shield” of an experienced warrior whose technique he was to study. On his second time out he was expected to participate in a group capture: up to six novices could combine to drag a warrior down. The body of the victim of the joint assault was later exquisitely portioned out: torso and right thigh to the major captor, left thigh to the second; right upper arm to the third; left upper arm to the fourth; right forearm to the fifth; and left forearm to the sixth. With that initial capture, cooperation was at an end: from that time on the youth was in direct competition with his peers, as he searched through the dust-haze and the mind-stunning shrieking and whistling to identify and engage with an enemy warrior of equal, or preferably just higher, status. The nice portioning out of the first captive suggests that even there in-group ranking was more important than any notion of team spirit.

The lads of each warrior house had lived and trained together, and we could expect some camaraderie to have developed. Discipline within the houses was maintained by a kind of extreme prefect system, with peers set to watch peers and to punish delinquents with savage beatings, or with the searing from the head of the treasured warrior lock. Would male bonding have survived all that—or, perhaps, thrived on it? Certainly sentiment toward one’s companions on the field of battle was firmly and officially discouraged. To go to the aid of a threatened comrade would probably provoke a charge of having tried to steal his captive, and not only the false claiming of a captive, but the giving of one’s captive to another, was punishable by death. . . .

It was on that field of battle that the Aztec aesthetic of war could be most perfectly displayed and most profoundly experienced; and here “aesthetic” must be understood to comprehend moral and emotional sensibilities. Glimpses in both the painted and written sources suggest that combat was initiated by a formal rhetoric of gesture, with a “presentation stance” of the club arm dropped and the body in a half-crouch. Since each warrior had an

interest in not damaging his opponent too severely, there being no honor to be won by killing in the field, and a maimed man being useless for the most engrossing rituals, it is likely there was an initial preference for using the flat side of the club to stun, resorting to the cutting edges only when faced with a singularly difficult antagonist.

The action, when it came, was very fast: the clubs, although heavy, were handy. Even against the quite unfamiliar bulk and speed of a Spanish horseman native warriors could calculate their blows for maximum effectiveness through a remarkable combination of speed, strength, balance, and timing. The aim was to stun or sufficiently disable one's opponent so that he could be grappled to the ground and subdued. . . .

The dramatic shape of the combat, its "style," was poised stillness exploding into violent action. Aztecs described the two creatures most closely associated with warriors in the following terms: "the eagle is fearless . . . it can gaze into, it can face the sun . . . it is brave, daring, a wingbeater, a screamer . . ." The lordly jaguar, "cautious, wise, proud . . . reserved," if troubled by a hunter first seats itself, casually deflecting the flying arrows, and then "stretches, stirs . . . and then it springs." And so dies the hunter. . . .

Explosions of anger, paralyzing eruptions of rage, transformations from the stillness of perfect control to furious violence—great Aztec warriors would seem to be uncomfortable people to be with. And lesser warriors had less control. Young men kept at a pitch for war and trained to a style of touchy arrogance were hard to maintain peaceably in a city. To an outsider there was a startling incidence of violence tolerated within Aztec society, much of it generated from the young men in the warrior houses. So-called "ritual combats" . . . raged through the streets. . . . On those occasions, ordinary people had to do their best to keep out of the way. On other occasions—playful occasions, but Aztecs had very rough notions of play—the townsfolk were themselves the victims, likely to be despoiled of their cloaks, or intimidated into offering "tribute" to a squad of young men. . . .

So, it would seem, society strove to contain and limit the undesired costs of courage by a determined effort to impose order on the unruly men of war. Penal codes were savage, with swift and violent retribution laid down for all socially disruptive acts, from drinking and adultery to theft and extortion, and the higher the rank the more strenuous the punishment. Public rhetoric insisted on the virtues of humility, modesty, frugality, and self-control. . . . These recommendations were made in a society which rewarded its warriors with the opportunity to bask in public adulation. . . . On the one hand we have high and gaudy rewards for aggression: on the other, formal denunciations of aggressive behaviour and of personal vanity. Is this simply a "contradiction," the