

# LA RAZA COSMÉTICA



## I N T R O D U C T I O N

IN THE OPENING SEQUENCE OF the 2010 Miss Universe competition, eighty-three bombshells wearing cartoonish renditions of their national symbols shimmied and strutted across television screens. There was a leather-clad Italian gladiator, a leggy Peruvian scissor dancer, and a sultry Costa Rican peacock. In this parade of hypersexualized nationalism, Miss Mexico appeared a world apart. Ximena Navarette, who hails from Guadalajara, walked stiffly onto the stage, straining to balance an enormous sequined headdress topped by an undulating crown of feathers. Navarette's costume, according to its designers, was fashioned to invoke Yum Kaax, a Mayan god associated with wilderness, forests, and agriculture.<sup>1</sup> At stage center she paused to display her costume and stiffly turn her head from side to side, lips pursed into a tight smile.

This awkward embodiment of a Mayan deity might have left uncritical viewers thinking it was simply a sign of Mexico's pride in its Indigenous heritage. Perhaps the beauty queen's embrace of Indigenous iconography tugged at the patrimonial heartstrings of Mexican viewers, but the costume also pointed to a paradox with deep historical roots. Beneath the golden aura of sequins laid a tangled web of appropriation, representation, erasure, and dispossession that has characterized the position of Indigenous peoples in Mexican national identity narratives since the nation's inception.

While Miss Mexico's 2010 costume may have feigned to celebrate Mayan religion, Mayan women themselves were all but explicitly barred from entry in the pageant. The qualifying competition for Miss Universe, *Nuestra Belleza de México*, limits participation to contestants who are five feet, five inches or taller and requires competitors to cover their own travel and costuming costs.<sup>2</sup> As a result, only a certain class and type of woman can participate. And a survey of recent winners makes clear that only lighter-skinned mestizas even have a shot at winning.

Twenty-one-year-old Ximena Navarette went on to win the Miss Universe crown in 2010. It was a happy coincidence for Mexico since the country was in the midst of a nationalist reverie celebrating the centennial of the start of the revolution and the bicentennial of Independence. The newly crowned beauty queen returned home to adoring fans and dignitaries. President Felipe Calderón hosted her in the presidential palace and praised her, saying "This will serve Mexico and our image as a country."<sup>3</sup> Navarette appeared as a guest of honor at the centennial and bicentennial celebrations later that fall.<sup>4</sup> She was the woman of the moment, but the melding of appropriated Indigenous symbolism, European beauty standards, and *Mexicanidad* that carried her to victory was nothing new.

This book turns to an era that was critical to the contemporary creation of Mexican national identity. It examines the Cultural Revolution (1920–1946) as a project of settler colonialism that continues to reverberate today.<sup>5</sup> Through a focus on popular beauty culture—from beauty pageants, cinema, and tourism propaganda to photography and murals—I show how *Mestizaje* and popular understandings of Indigeneity were fundamentally structured by legacies of colonialism as well as shifting ideas about race, place, and gender. In a complex interplay of appropriation and erasure, Indigenous peoples were, as María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo puts it, "at once summoned to appear everywhere as the foundation of Mexican character and instructed to disappear into the more perfect union of *Mestizaje*."<sup>6</sup> And although Indigenous women were rarely granted opportunities for self-representation, I center their voices whenever possible in order to show that they weren't merely passive recipients of an imposed identity. On the contrary, reading against the archival grain reveals the many meaningful ways Indigenous women strategically engaged with and resisted the currents of postrevolutionary nationalism.

## FROM “INDIAN PROBLEM” TO AZTEC NATIONALISM

Over the course of a decade of revolutionary warfare that began in 1910, as many as two million men, women, and children lost their lives. As the violence waned, Mexican leaders turned to the urgent task of rebuilding their nation. In order to stabilize their country, they needed to integrate a diverse populace, quell ongoing battles, and restore their economy and international reputation. A unifying narrative of national identity could help by constructing a foundation on which postrevolutionary society could be built. Mexico had crafted an origin story before—following Independence and again during the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1910). Leaders of the fledgling postrevolutionary state had material to work with, but what good is a revolution if it doesn’t change everything? Leaders turned to invented traditions and formulas that had been successful in the past but polished them with a modern, populist veneer.<sup>7</sup>

Parallel to the concerns of restoring peace and crafting a unified identity was an issue framed in the racist rhetoric of the time as the “Indian Problem.” This “problem” posited that poor and often rural-dwelling Indigenous peoples whose ancestors had survived centuries of colonization were innately backward and an impediment to national progress. Efforts to control and contain this population began with the conquest and were later absorbed into the foundations of Mexican nationhood. The 1857 constitution attempted to simply write the Indigenous population out of existence by eliminating the term *Indian* and by making organizations based on race or ethnicity illegal.<sup>8</sup> Later, Porfirio Díaz and his cronies took extreme measures in order to displace, dispossess, and eliminate Indigenous peoples.

The violent tactics of the Porfiriato existed in tandem with celebrations of select aspects of Indigenous cultures. In the Porfirian universe, this symbolic inclusion privileged stone relics of past peoples, an impulse that particularly favored the Aztecs.<sup>9</sup> This selective glorification rested upon a racist hierarchy that ranked Indigenous groups according to European models of progress—since the Aztec system of governance and rule was in some ways relatable to European empires, they were presumed to be more civilized than other Indigenous groups. While Díaz helped popularize the celebration of Aztec heroes, the thinking that informed his actions long predated his rule. During the French occupation, Emperor Maximiliano (1864–1867) deemed Aztec artifacts worthy of display in the Louvre and identified Cuauhtémoc as a hero.<sup>10</sup>

This campaign resonated enough that in a speech delivered shortly after Maximiliano's execution, President Benito Juárez, himself a Zapotec, identified Mexicans as the heirs to "the Indigenous nationality of the Aztecs."<sup>11</sup> The publication of the massive historical tome *México a través de los siglos* (1887–1889) further established the Aztec empire as a precursor to the modern nation in the Mexican imaginary.<sup>12</sup>

The ideology that wed Aztec identity with Mexican nationalism may have had deep roots, but Díaz expanded the trope. Over the course of his thirty-five-year regime, he recognized that adopting the discourse introduced by Maximiliano and aligning himself with the progenitors of the nation would strengthen the legitimacy of his dictatorship and potentially improve his nation's standing in the world.<sup>13</sup> Implementing this vision, Díaz's government funded major archaeological digs, hosted public festivities on the occasion of notable discoveries, and created monuments and museums that helped link his regime to a noble past. Mexico's pavilion at the 1889 Paris World's Fair brought the modern reinvention of the Aztecs to a global stage and left a legacy of relics and statuary that to this day stand as enduring reminders of the Porfirian reimagining of the nation's most revered heritage.<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in the 1920s, the postrevolutionary elite "revised but did not abandon Porfirian national memory" in their quest to unify the nation.<sup>15</sup> They saw that violence, property seizures, and forced removals of Indigenous peoples ultimately stoked unrest. While Mexico didn't retire these tactics, those in power began employing more subtle means of enacting submission and erasure. Aware that certain aspects of Indigenous material culture could be of value in the process of retooling Mexican national identity, those leading the efforts expanded from pre-Hispanic stone relics to include elements of contemporary cultures. A new paradigm based on appropriation and assimilation gained popularity among those most concerned with rebuilding the nation and fixing the "Indian Problem." Like Porfirian formulations, postrevolutionary nationalism often favored Aztec heritage. In many early postrevolutionary endeavors especially, Nahuatl-speaking peoples were favored over other Indigenous groups because they were seen as being the closest living heirs to the Aztec empire.

Thanks to developments in the social sciences, timeworn national identity concerns and efforts to control Indigenous populations could be incorporated into the "modern" pursuit of knowledge. By the early 1920s, the field of anthropology had expanded beyond its grave-robbing origins to encompass the study

of living peoples and their languages, bodies, and material cultures. Mexico's high priest of anthropology, Manuel Gamio, interpreted the revolution as a "popular mandate for the fusion of the races" and positioned his field as being the discipline most fit to help the postrevolutionary government become "unified, healthy, and progressive."<sup>16</sup> Gamio's work was critical to the development of postrevolutionary nationalism and Indigenismo,<sup>17</sup> a complex network of policies and practices that valorized select components of Indigenous heritage while also imposing misguided reforms intended to better Indigenous lives.

Gamio advanced ideas that shaped Indigenismo for decades to come, arguing that Indigenous peoples were not inferior and that their cultures needed to be documented, salvaged, celebrated, and incorporated into broader society.<sup>18</sup> He and the anthropologists that followed in his footsteps helped define popular understandings of Indigenous authenticity, codified cultural ideals and hierarchies, and disseminated those ideas to the masses through widely translated publications, pageants and other public events, photography, and film. Western intellectualism was thought to be objective and modern, so the field of anthropology was cast as a potential panacea for all social ills. And much in the same way that Orientalism was a manner of restructuring and exerting power over Asia and the Asian diaspora,<sup>19</sup> so, too, did Indigenismo utilize Western theory and praxis to fabricate new understandings of Indigeneity. This, in turn, was used to establish the superiority of Western systems and helped extend the state's reach in governing Indigenous peoples, all with the aim of more thoroughly incorporating them into the nation.

Scholars have tended to view Indigenistas sympathetically, acknowledging their shortcomings but crediting them with at least seeing Indigenous peoples as human. For example, given that Alexander Dawson's work on institutional Indigenismo acknowledges that their assimilationist aims were ethnocidal, his willingness to credit Indigenistas for their good intentions is too generous.<sup>20</sup> Judging the impact of their actions rather than the intent of their words—and doing so within the framework of hemispheric settler colonialism—makes such a benevolent interpretation less viable.

Complementing the integrationist desires of Indigenismo, an ethos of Mestizaje became more finely tuned to fit the needs of the postrevolutionary state. In her book *Indian Given*, Saldaña-Portillo masterfully illustrates how the logics of Mestizaje had been at work for centuries encoded into colonial land-grant laws that favored Spanish-born *peninsulares* who married their Indigenous concubines as a means of remapping the land under Spanish rule

and later as an answer to the rigid Spanish caste system.<sup>21</sup> Mestizaje morphed over time, but some version of it remained a constant in Mexican political philosophy. During the Porfiriato, the Científico thinker Justo Sierra posited that cultural and biological mixing were essential to the betterment of the “Mexican race.” He argued that miscegenation could serve to temper the less desirable Spanish tendencies and, as Kelly McDonough writes, “in a strange sort of alchemy, remove Catholic dogma, greed, and the perpetuation of social stratification and discrimination, while leaving intact other desirable attributes.”<sup>22</sup>

After the revolution, José Vasconcelos further refined and popularized ideas about Mestizaje. In 1925, between stints as the secretary of education and a run for president, Vasconcelos published his manifesto *La raza cósmica*. The book spun a utopian racial fantasy that imagined a new “cosmic race” that blended all of the world’s existing races into a “happy synthesis” superior to all others. While this might initially seem progressive in comparison to the antimiscegenation laws in place in the United States at the time, Vasconcelos’s plan for social progress ultimately just reproduced white supremacist racial hierarchies. Vasconcelos’s imagined *raza cósmica* would be a white race made even greater by appropriating select Indigenous, Black, and Asian traits while simultaneously eradicating the qualities thought to be aberrant in each of those populations.<sup>23</sup> And, as Rick López notes, Vasconcelos was primarily interested in appropriating the “spiritual” qualities of Indigenous peoples.<sup>24</sup> “The Indian,” Vasconcelos wrote, “will have no other choice but to diffuse and perfect himself in each of the superior varieties of the species.”<sup>25</sup> This new brand of Mestizaje was the ultimate answer to the age-old “Indian problem” in that it promised to erase—or at least dilute—Indigenous populations under the guise of integration and progress.

In addition to Gamio and Vasconcelos, other—mostly male—members of the social elite also had the power to shape and implement the ideals of Indigenismo and Mestizaje. José Puig Causaranc, for example, served the identity project in various capacities: as the author of editorials, as a beauty pageant judge, as the founder of the Casa del Estudiante Indígena experimental school, and as the first mayor of Mexico City once it was incorporated in 1929. By the 1930s, these paradigms had become increasingly institutionalized. President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) departed from Indigenista thinking in some ways but nevertheless embraced assimilationist arguments that Indigenous peoples were simply “backward proletarians” in need of better government intervention in order to make them fully modern members of the citizenry.<sup>26</sup>

As these identity ideals took shape, leaders and intellectuals grappled with how best to implement them. As a result of competing interests and shifting scientific and social paradigms, there was initially little consensus about how best to move forward with creating a suitably mixed national polity. In fact, there was little agreement about what *Indigenous* even meant. Even though Indigenistas often claimed it was an identity pinned not to race but rather to culture, class, location, and language, they often turned to biological factors and racializing logic in the implementation of their ideas.<sup>27</sup> Well into the 1940s, individuals with divergent visions for social progress grappled with these ideas, and it was not uncommon for them to contradict even their own thinking as slippery definitions of race and ethnicity shifted and evolved. But while the ideas and methods of implementation behind *Mestizaje* and *Indigenismo* were in constant flux, they were always after the same thing: the disappearance of Indigenous peoples into a perfectly blended, “modern” society.

Mestizo men were the primary evangelists of *Indigenismo* and *Mestizaje*, but the burden for achieving biological and cultural mixing was largely placed on Indigenous women.<sup>28</sup> In the project of “improving the race,” Indigenous women’s bodies were seen as the necessary channels through which the country would be whitened, modernized, and integrated. In his 1916 book, *Forjando patria*, Gamio described several types of women and selected one—the “feminine type”—as being the ideal progenitor of the new nation. This influential work deemed certain types of Indigenous femininity as being “worthy not just of emulation but of incorporation.”<sup>29</sup> Since the dawn of colonial conquest, women had long been imagined as the ones responsible for, quite literally, birthing a new nation. Gamio’s assertions gave voice and the authority of scientific objectivity to their role in Mexican nation building. In keeping, healthy motherhood was also of utmost importance in the Indigenista agenda.<sup>30</sup>

The formula for this model of racial progression was encoded in centuries-old colonial logic, at least as old as the story of Hernán Cortes and Malintzín, whose union purportedly resulted in the birth of the first mestizo in 1523. Social taboos prevented Indigenous men from pursuing white or mestiza women, but for European men the act of transgressing racial boundaries to exploit Indigenous women sexually was taken as a right of their colonial inheritance.<sup>31</sup> By the late 1800s, the idea that mestizos were born of unions between white men and Indigenous women had even made its way into American travel writing.<sup>32</sup> Applied to postrevolutionary identity projects, these tendencies grounded



abstract discussions of race and ethnicity in individual bodies as the nation searched for solutions to its “Indian Problem.”

Under sway of the early twentieth century vogue for all things Aztec, Nahua women were often seen as being most fit for producing the new nation.<sup>33</sup> Social scientists, artists, and intellectuals confirmed this indigenist hierarchy, placing a premium on the racial purity and ethnic authenticity of these “descendants of Moctezuma” as the ideal subjects for incorporating into the national polity.<sup>34</sup> Women from the Isthmus of Tehauntepec, with their famed beauty and iconic starched white headdresses, were also popular symbols of Indigeneity, but they were more often seen as “exotic” than as viable elements of modern society.<sup>35</sup> Where Tehuanas were marked as “fearless” members of a supposedly matriarchal society, Nahua women were consistently presented as being meek and docile. By the 1930s, as the challenges of assimilation became more apparent, bureaucrats and intellectuals turned to more concerted studies of Indigenous diversity in order to better manage the “Indian problem.” But even as regional ethnographic studies began to influence policy and official rhetoric, all things Aztec reigned supreme in popular culture emanating out from the nation’s capital.

As much as the projects of Indigenismo and Mestizaje purported to be about social improvement, the focal points of these discussions careened around biology, ethnicity, class, superficial mannerisms, and ethnic traits. A specific set of codes and characteristics marked what came to be considered the “authentic” Indigenous woman. This invariably included elements of *traje* (Indigenous dress) such as embroidered huipils (woven blouses), sarapes (shawls), woven belts, long skirts, and sandals as well as braided hair and demure mannerisms. The reliance on these highly gendered ethnic markers underscores the fact that Mestizaje and Indigenismo were not just about race or ethnicity. Instead, ethnic identity, locality, class, and gender mutually constituted these idealized identities. For postrevolutionary nation builders, the solution to the “Indian problem” and an alluring formula for national identity seemed to lie somewhere at the intersection of those overlapping spheres.<sup>36</sup>

## CULTURAL REVOLUTION AT THE DAWN OF MASS MEDIA

As postrevolutionary nationalism evolved, the image world of the average Mexican was also being revolutionized. In the early 1920s, a boom in technology introduced a sudden proliferation of images on the streets and in homes:

there were more photographs in newspapers, cinemas cropped up across the country, and printing houses mass-produced calendar art and postcards. Even the murals commissioned by José Vasconcelos for the interior walls of the secretary of public education building were photographed and circulated widely beyond the government offices that housed them.<sup>37</sup> Cameras were lighter, flashes were better, prints cost less to reproduce. The rotogravure replaced the printing press, allowing for images in much finer detail and with more dramatic emphasis of light and shadow.<sup>38</sup> By the 1930s, 35 mm cameras from Europe were in wide use. Filmmaking materials became more affordable, and the government funded a national film industry to produce more domestic films. Sound technology entered the Mexican film scene in 1931, making movies intelligible even to the many illiterate viewers unable to read title cards. By the dawn of the 1940s, novice cameramen and tourists with home movie cameras abounded, and the film industry had entered its golden age.

The postrevolutionary elite saw this tectonic shift in the world of image making as an opportunity. They used the emerging technologies as the scaffolding upon which to construct a complex visual economy of national identity, gender, and racial ideologies.<sup>39</sup> Because illiteracy was so rampant, this popular visual culture was necessary to reach the masses. Following the work of Rick López, this book treats the realm of visual culture as a critical site for exploring the postrevolutionary production of nationalism and identity.<sup>40</sup> The cultural elite used everything from calendar art and postcards to film, photography, and fine art to flood the nation with images and ideals that epitomized their new brand of national identity. Pageants, performances, and festivals, which could now be promoted widely through newspaper photographs and articles, also became critical sites for educating and engaging the populace.

It was not just the proliferation of images that mattered; it was also the means by which those images were generated. The plethora of new gadgets that facilitated mass reproduction appealed to those interested in modernizing the nation. To many, technological advancement signaled objectivity and authenticity. Photography and moving images, in particular, were seen as neutral media that could truthfully represent their subjects. In reality, the producers of these images developed techniques that allowed them to manipulate the affect of their work. Photographer Hugo Brehme, for example, smeared glycerin on his camera lens to blur the image when he wanted to create a dreamy, romantic feel in a photograph.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, filmmakers used camera angles, lighting, and shot construction to manipulate meaning and message. Film and photography

were anything but neutral. Even so, these emerging forms of media maintained their reputations for accurately and objectively reproducing reality.<sup>42</sup>

As the nascent postrevolutionary government was occupied with broader pacification endeavors, businessmen who mastered new media technologies were among the crop of leaders who rose to answer the call of unifying the nation in the public sphere. They, too, recognized that integrating the Indigenous populations was key to national stability as well as to the success of their own investments.<sup>43</sup> *El Universal* newspaper publisher Félix Palavicini was one such leader. Palavicini, a self-appointed ambassador of revolutionary doctrine, had cut his teeth as minister of education under the brief administration of Venustiano Carranza, was a signatory of the 1917 constitution, and later ran an unsuccessful campaign for political office.

Palavicini founded *El Universal* in 1916 to be the voice of revolutionary thought and used the paper to host a number of civic contests, congresses, and gatherings throughout the early years of reconstruction.<sup>44</sup> These efforts were aimed at addressing what he saw as some of the nation's most onerous problems, including the incorporation of Indigenous peoples into the national polity. By amplifying his publication's role in nation building, Palavicini enjoyed the added benefit of increasing his newspaper's standing and sales. As such, Palavicini was one of the first civic leaders to successfully marry revolutionary values with capitalist pursuits.<sup>45</sup> And with the constant changes in national leadership throughout the revolution and its early aftermath, Palavicini and his newspaper served as more consistent voices of authority than any state actors. *El Universal's* national reach meant the paper had the potential to create a sense of unity and cohesion among a disparate populace. The ideologies promoted in the pages of the paper, then, must be weighed in accordance with the pseudostate function it performed.<sup>46</sup>

## INVENTING THE *INDIA BONITA*

In keeping with the broader identity projects of the era, women took center stage in visual culture. Flappers, vixens, and *chicas modernas* became increasingly popular icons despite the tremors of moral panic and violence triggered by their bare legs and "unladylike" short locks.<sup>47</sup> *Chinas poblanas* and *Tehuana*s graced screens, stages, and society events. The *india bonita* emerged as another major archetype of the postrevolutionary era. These "pretty Indians" were not

real women but rather figments of a nationalist longing for docile Indigenous women who could be neatly folded into the Mexican social order. *Indias bonitas* had existed in the colonial imaginary for centuries, but details of the trope ossified in the aftermath of the revolution. As Adriana Zavala and others have shown, *indias bonitas* were often presented as being passive, meek, and docile; sometimes hypersexualized, sometimes childlike, and often helpless.<sup>48</sup> And because the cultural markers signaling idealized Indigenous femininity had been so clearly defined, anyone could copy and perform them.

*India bonita* images that proliferated in Mexican calendar art, films, murals, postcards, and advertisements wed select symbols of Indigenous culture with the biological ideals of Mestizaje. When projected onto mestiza bodies, the dress and mannerisms that marginalized and “othered” Indigenous women were rewritten as quaint and desirable. The *india bonita* trope was at times strategically performed by Indigenous women, but increasing numbers of white-coded mestiza women donned these costumes to “play Indian,” borrowing Philip Deloria’s turn of phrase. *Indias bonitas* signaled the desired racial progression from Indigenous to mestiza with the dual function of romanticizing the Indigenous past that Mexicans hoped to overcome and projecting the mestizo future they could look forward to.

Although the *india bonita* trope was meant to invoke Indigenous women, it was more a project of erasure than one of fair representation. Indigenous cultures were distilled, appropriated, narrowed, and incorporated into postrevolutionary identity on the assumption that Indigenous peoples needed to be integrated to the point of disappearance. This logic allowed for actual Indigenous peoples to be effectively written out of the narrative of national progress. And supplanting Indigenous women with mestiza women in popular culture was yet another means by which Indigeneity was visually erased from the construction of *lo Mexicano*.

Scrutiny of postrevolutionary beauty and identity ideals exposes the reductive and racist logics that undergirded them. By imposing a framework of authenticity to determine who and what counted as legitimately Indigenous, the postrevolutionary elite established a set of constrictive boundaries and binaries that governed what Indigenous female comportment and cultural practices were to look like. The standards of biological and cultural purity against which living Indigenous women were measured inherently bound them to the past. This ideal privileged a conquered empire and dead Indians over the multifaceted realities of living Indigenous peoples, and it dictated that

Indigenous peoples were no longer truly Indigenous once they donned Western dress, engaged in “modern” activities, or moved away from rural spaces.

As Jean O’Brien and Shannon Speed argue, these narrowing parameters of “authentic” Indigeneity operated as a sort of inverse of the “one-drop rule” in the United States.<sup>49</sup> In the U.S. context, the rule dictated that anyone with even a single traceable drop of Black blood would always be Black. This effectively grew the class of people who could be denied property and civil rights in America’s legally encoded systems of racial violence.<sup>50</sup> In Mexico, the slightest entanglement with the “modern,” be it urbanity or *Mestizaje*, could—discursively, at least—negate one’s Indigenous identity.

While much of this identity project circulated in the boundless realm of intellectual exchanges, easily reproducible images, imitable performances, and social codes, it was also firmly rooted in place. Analyzing projects of *Indigenismo* and *Mestizaje* as they existed in Mexico City reveals the material impact these ideologies had on everyday people. This book takes a regional view of Mexico City, seeing it less as a monolithic urban space and more as a compilation of distinct regions, some of which were deliberately cultivated for their association with “Mexico Viejo.” I show how the cultural elite manufactured an identity that was both shaped by and, in turn, shaped the city itself. Local Indigenous traditions were appropriated, reimagined, and revalued in a way that wed urban growth and enterprise with nationalist objectives. Regions and cultural practices affiliated with Tenochtitlan and the Aztec empire became founts of popular culture and invented tradition. In turn, certain parts of the city were classed and preserved as what Ageeth Sluis calls *camposcapes* while others were destined for urbanization.<sup>51</sup> “Modern” folk could transgress these boundaries, but Indigenous peoples were only considered authentically “Indian” when they occupied rural spaces and markets, wore *traje*, and engaged in specific behaviors. Examining this ethnic double standard as it played out in Mexico City provides even greater evidence that postrevolutionary unification was ultimately a project of Indigenous erasure.

Indigenous peoples were not passive recipients of these projects. As Ardis Cameron writes, “looking is always a constructive practice” that allows an active viewer to impose narrative, meaning, and desire on whomever they are viewing.<sup>52</sup> But that does not mean that those being viewed are entirely powerless. Rather than silently accepting imposed narratives, Indigenous peoples strategically engaged with, resisted, shaped, reinforced, and detracted from the currents of *Mestizaje* and *Indigenismo*. Despite persistent attempts to disappear

and disenfranchise Indigenous peoples, they persistently adapted to and covertly shaped postrevolutionary identity discourses. In several cases included in the chapters that follow, they reappropriated the *india bonita* construct for their own benefit. Even so, Indigenous agency within broader systems of settler colonialism must not be confused with liberation. Rather, this book includes a range of Indigenous interventions into broader national identity projects in order to disrupt top-down understandings of identity construction and to “people” this history with voices that have all too often been entirely ignored.

## SETTLER COLONIAL NATIONALISM

I trace postrevolutionary constructions of beauty, race, and identity as extensions of settler colonialism because that framework is necessary in order to fully grapple with the complexity and longevity of the questions engaged here. Systematic attempts to reproduce Mestizaje, to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the national polity, and to normalize Native appropriation and erasure were all manifestations of settler attempts to orchestrate Indigenous disappearance while also affirming their own belonging. As historian Patrick Wolfe puts it, “settler colonialism is a structure not an event.”<sup>53</sup> In the Mexican context, vestiges of colonialism continue to shape social systems even though the days of Spanish conquest and the shifting regimes of violence, domination, extraction, and exploitation employed throughout the colonial era have come to an end. The aims of conquest—taking lands, resources, and autonomy from Indigenous peoples while normalizing settler ownership—were engrained first in New Spain’s and later in Mexico’s social order, economy, and politics. In other words, acts of colonialism did not just happen during conquest—they were embedded into the very foundations of New Spain and Mexico.

This book shows how ostensible celebrations of Indigenous heritage in postrevolutionary nation-building projects often worked to narrow the boundaries of what counted as “true” Indianness. These “logics of elimination” at once advanced Indigenous erasure and affirmed the settler right to inherit all that which was once Indigenous.<sup>54</sup> In adopting an origin story that centered noble Aztecs and their descendants, nation builders aligned themselves with a national mythology that normalized their own belonging to place while also obscuring the enduring violences of occupation. They attempted to define and delineate Indigenous authenticity in order to discursively shrink the existing

Native population while pop culture simulacra featuring white-coded women as sultry *indias bonitas* further normalized the idea that mestizos were the new Natives.

This book also looks to a growing body of Indigenous and Latinx scholarship that critically examines both Indigeneity and settler colonialism in the context of Latin America and its diaspora.<sup>55</sup> Wolfe's framing largely obscures the theory's applicability to Latin America by arguing that settler colonialism rests on the act of first dispossessing Native populations of their land and then importing foreign slaves to work that land.<sup>56</sup> In much of Latin America, however, Native peoples were first dispossessed of their land and then made to work it alongside foreign slaves and itinerant immigrant labor forces. But as Shannon Speed argues, that doesn't mean that what happened in Latin America wasn't a function of settler colonialism. It simply means that settler colonialism is more varied and expansive than Wolfe would have us believe.<sup>57</sup>

As Speed claims, the ways in which systems of elimination have played out north and south of what we now recognize as the U.S.-Mexico border have more in common than not.<sup>58</sup> Though policies north of the border leaned in the direction of isolation and those south of the border tended toward integration, Speed argues that "the way Indigenous people were racialized across the Americas bears a striking resemblance: savage, unfit for modern life, and destined to fade into extinction."<sup>59</sup> To delimit critiques according to the arbitrary, shifting boundaries of nations undermines our ability to grapple with the full hemispheric scope of the violences that systems of racism and colonization have enacted.

Although the settler-colonized binary in Mexico is not always clear because of centuries of cultural and racial mixing,<sup>60</sup> Mestizos in postrevolutionary society—especially those privileged by wealth and whiteness—were more likely to be complicit in systems that disenfranchised, erased, and exploited Indigenous peoples.<sup>61</sup> I follow the work of Shona Jackson, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, M. Bianet Castellanos, Richard Gott, Shannon Speed, and Gabriela Spears-Rico, who examine how both Creoles and mestizos became complicit in settler colonial systems.<sup>62</sup> Hierarchies of class, color, gender, race, and ethnicity were all by-products of settler colonialism that ultimately worked to reinforce and reproduce settler power at the expense of Indigenous lives, rights, and sovereignty. Viewing the deliberate production of these social categories as extensions of settler colonialism's long reach helps make sense of some of the perplexing contradictions of the era. It also sheds light on the



subtle and not subtle ways in which power and belonging to place were produced for some Mexicans while being systematically denied to others.<sup>63</sup>

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui argues that Wolfe's "structure not an event" formulation can't be fully understood unless it is put in conversation with the social construct of Indigeneity.<sup>64</sup> In doing so, my work is situated within a body of scholarship that examines how settler colonialism lingers and reproduces itself throughout the Americas while at the same time recognizing the inherent fluidity and complexity of Indigenous identities. As Maylei Blackwell, Floridalma Boj Lopez, and Luis Urrieta Jr. put it in their introduction to *Critical Latinx Indigenities*, "indigeneity is defined and constructed across multiple countries and, at times, across overlapping colonialities."<sup>65</sup> In her contribution to the volume, Saldaña-Portillo advocates for a hemispheric view of settler colonialism that reads immigration, mass incarceration, and other systems that disprivilege some while elevating the power and privilege of others as manifestations of the same colonizing structure. The present volume traces the logics still at play in these systems back to a critical point in their contemporary development in order to better understand the ways they continue to shape the lives of Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas today.

This framework allows postrevolutionary identity projects to be seen as part of a longer trajectory of Mexican history. Spanish conquest and the relentless waves of death and disease it enacted; epidemics of violence against women; attempts to define racial identities through *casta* (caste) paintings; Indigenous dispossession and forced labor through *encomienda*, *repartimiento*, and *hacienda* (Spanish systems of regulating labor and land); the appropriation and erasure visible in the 2010 Miss Universe pageant; and contemporary anti-Indigenous attitudes—all of these are part of a system meant to displace and disappear Indigenous peoples in order to make way for settlers and their heirs. Viewing these disparate things as manifestations of a single system underscores the enduring, embedded nature of colonial violence. And, as Speed argues, recognizing the ongoing nature of settler colonialism is a necessary first step toward decolonization.<sup>66</sup>

Beyond the scholars already cited, this book's theoretical framework draws from the field of Indigenous studies. Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* and *Indians in Unexpected Places*, as well as Jean M. O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* have been particularly influential.<sup>67</sup> These works deal primarily with U.S. history, but the frameworks they deploy are applicable in the Mexican context because the postrevolutionary elite often



turned to the United States in looking for solutions to the “Indian Problem.” Additionally, many intellectuals and artists of the era received education and training in the United States. And ideas about Mexico’s Indigenous peoples were shaped, in part, by the imperialist, enterprising gaze of Americans writing about and promoting tourism to Mexico since the Porfiriato.<sup>68</sup> This book is conceived as a transnational study, then, because the flow of ideas—if not always people—paid little heed to national borders. And although this is primarily a cultural history grounded in Indigenous studies, I employ film theory and cultural studies critique as tools for deeper readings of historical images and popular ephemera.

Following Deloria’s lead, I treat the *india bonita* trope as an ideology rather than a stereotype. As he explains, ideologies reflect power, domination, and acquiescence; and they socially construct expectations about how certain groups are going to act. This, he argues, is an important rhetorical distinction from stereotypes, which speak to replication but not to the complexity of construction that shapes their impact on the material world.<sup>69</sup> This interpretation complements another framework I employ: Deborah Poole’s conceptualization of “visual economies” in which images are interpreted within a network of “social relationships, inequality, and power.”<sup>70</sup> In visual economies, images circulate across national, cultural, and class boundaries with implications for the material and social realities of both the viewers and the subjects of their view. Though I use the word *representation* at times, it should be taken as shorthand for the more apt but cumbersome “visual economy.”

In my critique of postrevolutionary images and discourse, I hope to illuminate false binaries while at the same time avoiding the reification of the problematic boundaries they worked to reinforce. Commonly used derogatory terms like the “Indian problem,” *raza de bronce* (bronze race), and “backward Indians” reflected racist and paternalistic attitudes toward Indigenous peoples. They are referenced with caution throughout this work and only when necessary in order to illustrate how settler colonial ideology was manifested throughout postrevolutionary thinking.

Similarly, I identify how and by whom popular understandings of “tradition” and “authenticity” were determined and the way those labels were employed in the quest to produce postrevolutionary identity. I reference the term *traditional* to demonstrate how the cultural elite conceived of it: as a signifier of the past that either needed to be eradicated or incorporated into the cultural celebrations. “Authenticity” was not so much a static or objective concept but

rather used as a measure of individual and community engagement with a specific set of Indigenous cultural practices. As a construct of postrevolutionary identity discourse, authenticity became a tool of erasure dictating that “real” Indigenous peoples lived, behaved, talked, and appeared differently than the mestizo population.

Modernity, too, was a postrevolutionary construct still under the influence of the Porfirian penchant for efficiency and progress. Being “modern” meant adopting Western knowledge systems, development, and technological innovation. It allowed upwardly mobile mestizos to distance themselves further from Indigenous peoples because modernity was constructed as being antithetical to Indigeneity. At the same time, the concept left enough room for Indigenous people to “become” modern and mestizo if, according to Indigenista logic, they were healthy, urban, and adequately integrated into the nation.

Historical analysis of racial construction through visual culture presents the temptation to assess race based on physical features, but to do so would replicate the logic of racial determination that this book critiques. That said, certain characteristics were routinely assigned symbolic value as being European or mestizo and others that were routinely used to symbolize Indigeneity. Light skin, high cheekbones, and narrow noses, for example, were adopted from Old World statuary and global visual discourse to signal classic European beauty. Meanwhile, rounder faces, dark hair and skin, braids, and shorter statures were typically associated with Indigeneity. In reality, of course, race and ethnicity are extremely fluid, and these characteristics are not so neatly assigned. I do not subscribe to the narrowing ways in which racial identity was fixed but instead identify the physiological characteristics and symbols that came to be associated with groups along ethnic and racial lines in order to better critique the confines and limitations of that logic.

Place is paramount to this study, and my focus on Mexico City is not meant to elide the importance of cultural production in other parts of the country nor to reject a growing body of scholarship that shows how “microcosms of power” on the periphery of the capital shaped Mexico too.<sup>71</sup> Jennifer Jolly’s and Gabriela Spears Rico’s recent works on Pátzcuaro and Deborah Poole’s work on Oaxaca, for example, show how *patrias chicas* contributed to and resisted the nation-building process.<sup>72</sup> Like Spears Rico, I hope to make an intervention that illustrates the necessity of engaging settler colonial theory and Indigenous contributions to understanding postrevolutionary identity projects. As Mexico City remained an epicenter for mass production of visual culture, it is a logical

place to start, but I hope that this work contributes to the growing foundation of scholarship examining how similar projects played out across the nation and throughout Latin America.

Finally, I acknowledge that as an Irish American settler scholar from the southwestern United States, there are limitations to the critical intervention I am able to make to this field of study. I strive to treat the topics I address here with sensitivity and to be accountable to the people, both past and present, who were and still are directly affected by these identity constructs. And I hope that by turning my attention to untangling the (il)logics of the broader settler colonial systems my own ancestors were complicit in building, I have written a book that might contribute to ongoing Indigenous and Latinx-led conversations about decolonization.

## ORGANIZATION

This book traces how settler colonial ideology moved through postrevolutionary society, and the organization of the book is intended to reflect that trajectory. The early chapters focus on the emergence and evolution of an ideology, while later chapters follow how it was widely deployed and replicated. In the final chapters, I examine how settler colonial tropes were manifested and resisted in deeply embodied and place-based ways.

Chapter 1 follows the India Bonita contest, a serialized pageant that appeared in the pages of the *El Universal* newspaper over much of 1921. I examine how Manuel Gamio and his fellow judges used race science and anthropology to inform their selection of a pageant winner and, in doing so, used their positions of authority to brand a narrow view of “authentic” Indigeneity. While romanticized ideals of Indigenous women had been circulating for centuries, I argue that the 1921 pageant created the prototype for the *india bonita* trope as it would be reproduced throughout the era of postrevolutionary reconstruction. While the trope was necessarily mutable, the conversation and the people authorized to have that conversation were firmly fixed by the pageant. This chapter also mines the archive of contestants in order to present counternarratives to the pageant by attesting to the complexity and diversity of Indigenous women’s lives at a moment of major social change.<sup>73</sup>

Chapter 2 traces the creation of the Flor más Bella del Ejido pageant, an annual India Bonita-like contest in which young Indigenous women donned

specific *traje* and competed in front of a panel of judges. The event, which is still produced today, is rooted in pre-Hispanic tradition but was co-opted by postrevolutionary elites in the early 1920s and molded to become a major component of Mexico City's indigenist celebrations. This reinvention, which evolved over the subsequent decades, sheds light on the in situ production of *Mexicanidad*. As the city swelled in size and became more urban, bureaucrats and Indigenous peoples alike strove to carve out select spaces to mark Aztec origins and to maintain contemporary Indigenous cultural practices. Testimonies from pageant winners illustrate some of the ways in which Indigenous women strategically—and, at times, cynically—engaged with these projects. However, media coverage of the pageant reified beliefs that Indigenous authenticity could be determined by a narrow set of gender, racial, and geographic factors.

In the decades following the revolution, cinema became an increasingly attractive means with which to disseminate nationalist ideals to the masses. Chapter 3 follows the development of *cine folclórico* films and the *india bonita* trope that helped characterize the genre. I decode on-screen representations and performances along with casting decisions, film techniques, and media coverage within four different types of *cine folclórico* films in order to highlight the complex ways in which the medium helped to normalize emerging discourses on Mestizaje and Indigenismo. Like beauty pageants, film trained viewers to focus on specific, superficial sources of visual pleasure while a complex set of race, gender, and identity ideals were being asserted just beneath the surface. The chapter includes analysis of rare and little-known films, including a series of documentaries by Manuel Gamio; a *comedia ranchera* rendition of the India Bonita pageant; and a Mexican-produced pornographic film from the silent era. I also mine the vast media coverage of the 1930–1931 production of Sergei Eisenstein's *Que viva México!* to show how the film influenced Mexican movie making decades before its eventual release in 1979.

Over the course of revolutionary reconstruction, Xochimilco was cultivated as a tourist destination and also served as a critical source of potable water for a rapidly growing Mexico City. Chapter 4 shows how postrevolutionary identity projects in Xochimilco paralleled and reinforced regional development interests. Mutually constitutive representations of the place, water, and women of Xochimilco all tended to center on the concept of purity. I evaluate these overlapping discourses in films ranging from home movie footage to the classic *María Candelaria* as well as tourism campaigns and urban environmental

history. I argue that in Xochimilco, the *india bonita* trope was central to efforts to bridge the “modern” (potable water, sanitation, transportation, filmmaking) and the “traditional” (Indigenous authenticity, living memory of the Aztec empire). At the same time, I show how the trope and the stereotypes it generated were strategically employed by residents of Xochimilco to gain a modicum of autonomy and empowerment within systems that otherwise worked to disenfranchise and disappear them.

Chapter 5 turns to the legacy of Doña Luz Jiménez, a Nahuatl woman who modeled for Diego Rivera, Fernando Leal, Jean Charlot, Jose Clemente Orozco, and many other members of the postrevolutionary artistic vanguard. To them, Jiménez was the epitome of Indigenous female beauty, and depictions of her face and body still grace countless murals and works of art across Mexico City. She was also a gifted teacher, weaver, intellectual, and storyteller. Her words linger in children’s books, anthropology texts, and in the scores of letters she sent to Jean Charlot. But despite this hypervisibility, her name is largely absent from the bodies of work she helped to define. In this chapter I take a critical view of how Jiménez was represented by artists, and I mine her personal letters, family archives, and artist recollections to depict a more intimate side of settler colonialism. While interrogating Jiménez’s erasure from the historical record, this chapter also engages her own words and images to show the extent to which she deliberately engaged with postrevolutionary identity projects and to examine how she represented herself.



This book illuminates a world in which elite and upwardly mobile members of society created and viewed images that allowed them to unify the nation while measuring mestizo modernity against the Indigenous other. These images and the ideologies that undergirded them attempted to fix identities that had been in flux for centuries, all in the service of normalizing settler colonial belonging and writing Indigenous peoples out of existence. Between these convoluted layers of appropriation and erasure, Indigenous people enacted myriad counternarratives and strategically engaged with these projects.

The traditions and tropes written into existence in the decades of revolutionary reconstruction still loom large in Mexico’s cultural imaginary. Even today, a nostalgic romanticism dictates that “real” Indigenous peoples engage in

specific activities, live in certain spaces, speak Indigenous languages, and wear *traje*. Calendar art and more contemporary media ranging from *telenovelas* to YouTube videos continue to center sexualized white-coded mestiza women in Indigenous dress. Beneath what might at first appear to be small celebrations of Indigenous heritage or benign impersonations are centuries-old legacies of violence, erasure, and dispossession. In peering into this past, I hope to contribute to conversations that ultimately undo these ongoing systems of settler colonialism.