

Introduction

(Re)Constructing the Racialized Body through Technology

Constructs of race in Mexico—as in most parts of the world—are nuanced and at times contradictory. Two almost antithetical events that I witnessed while living in northern Mexico illustrate this fact. In Monclova, Coahuila, I saw a man pick up his clothes from a laundromat; upon finding that a worker had broken the plastic clip on his laundry bag's drawstring, he shouted, "Stupid Indian!" ["¡India bruta!"].¹ A few months afterward, some friends in Matehuala, San Luis Potosí, invited me to dinner, where a woman said, "Everyone in Mexico belongs to the same race, so there is no racism like what you have in the United States." ["Todos somos de una sola raza aquí. No hay racismo como en Estados Unidos."] Her statement caught me off guard because it seemed antithetical to the scene I had witnessed in nearby Coahuila. This led me to question how Mexican racial attitudes could disapprove of discrimination on the one hand even as they marginalized indigenous peoples and cultures on the other. These—and many other—experiences sparked my intellectual interest in how state officials and the community at large approach the problematic distinction between indigeneity and *mestizaje*. After a great deal of thought, I have realized that these two episodes highlight the fact that, beyond focusing on physical features, Mexican society associates a person's racial identity with his or her ties to modernity. Throughout this study I look at an array of literary and cultural production that shows that Mexican people become racially and culturally coded as *mestizo* as they assimilate to the modernity-driven state through the use of technology.

Both of my aforementioned experiences reverberate with the ideological constructs of the "mestizo state," which Joshua Lund describes as a modernity-driven political entity that enunciates itself through the problematic conflation

of mixed-race identity with Western-style modernity (*Mestizo xv*).² Although she probably would not recognize this, the woman who proclaimed a homogenous race invoked an imaginary in which her country's Amerindians had become mestizo through modernization. The existence of sleek tollways, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and internet cafés attested to the nation's racially hybrid essence. Everyone was mestizo due not to interracial ancestry but to the fact that the state had overcome indigenous "primitivity." The angry laundry customer, however, interpreted a worker's inability to use a relatively simple technology as proof that she was a ("backward") "india." Far from representing irreconcilable worldviews, these two episodes show the ease with which individuals can move between racial categories depending on a given context.³

As it is tied to technology, mestizaje moves beyond an inherited, genetic construction and becomes a racialized articulation of Carlos Alonso's "myth of modernity" (19–37). The fact that individuals can attain different racial statuses by moving proficiently through society underscores Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation.⁴ These thinkers emphasize the lack of any "essential racial characteristics" as proof that race is a political construct tied to a specific sociohistorical context rather than any genetic reality (4). Certainly, people from different countries and geographical spaces have long had distinctive genetic and phenotypical traits, but race did not emerge as a political category until governments started using phenotype to assign people their economic roles in society (Prashad 1–36). Omi and Winant limit their research to the United States, so the majority of their work exists outside the scope of this book. Nevertheless, their recognition of race as a social formation remains useful when discussing racial identity in any Western country. One key to race formation within postrevolutionary Mexico was the tie between miscegenation and modernity, a fact that both buoys and challenges the observation of John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff that one of the principal (albeit flawed) tenets of Western, twentieth-century thought was that ethnicity—and by extension race—would "wither away with the rise of modernity" (1). On the one hand, mestizaje represented the elimination of ethnicity because it resulted from interracial fusion. On the other hand, it became a distinct racial identity that stood in opposition to the indigenous. State officials believed that a prerequisite to modernization was the transformation of Amerindian individuals into mestizos, and they aimed to achieve this end through a process of race formation that used technology to modernize the indigenous body and transform it into a mestizo entity.

Similar to virtually all constructs of race in the Western world, official *mestizaje* dictated people's economic and societal privileges based on conditions of the body. Two recent studies, Rebecca Janzen's *The National Body in Mexican Literature: Collective Challenges to Biopolitical Control* (2015) and Sara Anne Potter's "Disturbing Muses: Gender, Technology and Resistance in Mexican Avant-Garde Cultures" (2013), emphasize the body's centrality in the postrevolutionary imaginary in very different ways. Potter—whom I discuss at length later on—analyzes how postrevolutionary artists and writers negotiated the body's relationship to a rapidly modernizing nation by depicting (female) bodies fused with technology. For her part, Janzen alludes to the body's central role in constructing a postrevolutionary nation when she argues that Mexican literature often imagines ways in which state power is reflected on the bodies of marginalized (largely indigenous) Mexicans. Both authors focus on literary and cultural production by people who were critical of the state; as such, they do not engage with state-sponsored work that imagined technology as a means for modernizing and assimilating the masses. Janzen, for example, argues that ill, disabled, and injured individuals "reflect the effects of various branches of the state, and allow us to imagine an alternative nonhegemonic collective body that might challenge this state" (4). Janzen's arguments resonate exceptionally well within the parameters of her study of literature that criticized postrevolutionary reforms. Nevertheless, the signification of sick and disabled bodies necessarily changes when these appear in officialist cultural production because these works supported—rather than undermined—postrevolutionary attempts to construct a cohesive nation-state. In officialist art, illness and disability are overcome as individuals (particularly Amerindians and women) cede to the state and allow it to make them whole. Representations of disability become especially prominent in official discourses if we follow the thinking of Susan Antebi (165), who argues that officialist thinkers viewed indigeneity as a form of disability in and of itself. This became especially clear as postrevolutionary thinkers conflated vices like alcoholism, decadence, and immorality with indigenous identities (Antebi 165). Of course, the most "disabling" aspect of indigenous identity was its supposed ties to "primitivity." State officials thus attempted to overcome so-called Amerindian backwardness by modernizing indigenous bodies through eugenics and technology.

It is important to note that postrevolutionary ideals of official *mestizaje* built on policies that dated back to independence and the Republican period. Guarantees for indigenous rights actually decreased after Mexico gained indepen-

dence because elites strove to form a national consciousness by eliminating the Amerindian cultures that the Spanish Crown had supported (Lomnitz, *Exits from the Labyrinth* 276). Mestizaje (both cultural and genetic) represented a means through which Amerindians could assimilate to the state, but it also became a tool for erasing indigenous societies. The key functional role of racial hybridity became especially clear in Mexico by the late nineteenth century, when the *científicos*—a group of positivist bureaucrats in the Porfirian administration—began to invoke paradigms of eugenics. Because most people in the country (including elites) were mestizos to some degree, Mexican eugenics rejected the northern European belief that racial miscegenation was necessarily dysgenic. The intellectual and political currents of the Porfiriato predate my study, but the very existence of these debates shows that discourses of race, science, and the body were already mutually constructing each other in an attempt to define the Mexican nation long before the Revolution. One major difference between Porfirian and postrevolutionary constructs of mestizaje was how they conceived technology's role in promoting mixed-race identity. As Rubén Gallo notes, the intellectuals and artists of the Porfiriato viewed the spread of technology as “telltale symptoms of a decadent society” (*Mexican Modernity* 4), while those of the postrevolutionary period began to embrace the effects that it had on society. Thus intellectuals and cultural producers began to imagine ways that they could modernize not only the nation's arts and letters but also the national body and culture. Their belief that indigenous Mexicans would one day come to form a great proletariat led them to aggressively champion strategies for technologizing the Amerindian body.

Postrevolutionary intellectuals may have believed that their country's indigenes had a bright future, but they also claimed that indigenous Mexico could not fulfill its industrial destiny in its present state. Any greatness for Mexican Amerindians and their posterity could come about only through aggressive projects of official mestizaje. It was in large part for this reason that, according to Pedro Ángel Palou, the mestizo became “the subject of the interpellation of every political discourse, in the *person* of the political project of the imminent Revolution” [“habría de convertirse en el sujeto de la interpelación de todos los discursos políticos, en la *persona* del proyecto político de la entonces inminente revolución”] (14). Statist articulations of mestizaje, which were steeped in theories of modernization, required indigenous people to embrace modern culture by fusing their bodies with technology, a process that they could achieve through various means. Some of the state's preferred technologies for

modernizing indigenous bodies included industrial agriculture, medical immunization, factory work in urban centers, and education. A person's ability to function in a modern economy served as a prerequisite to mestizo subjectivity. Palou argues that the mestizo myth became a "social fiction," or a narrative that the state promoted in its attempts of domination and political power (20). The state's ultimate goal in proclaiming (official) mestizaje was to foment greater national unity by convincing (and even coercing) its population at large—particularly those individuals who lived in indigenous communities—to identify with and promote mestizo interests and identity.

As postrevolutionary administrations focused on assimilating Amerindians to the state through mestizaje, they implicitly championed the "brown" mestizo (rather than the *criollo*/white mestizo of the nineteenth century) as the principal protagonist of the postrevolutionary order (López-Beltrán and García Deister).⁵ In many cases, the state charged recently assimilated Amerindians with exporting the benefits of mestizo culture to the communities from which they came.⁶ As Palou argues, "by transforming them [Amerindians] into *mestizos* it [the state] would erase their indigenous nature; by making them inhabitants of the modern city it would redeem them from backwardness" ["Al convertirlo en *mestizo* se le borraría lo indio; al hacerlo habitante de la ciudad moderna se le sacaría del atraso."] (14, emphasis in original). Amerindians would become explicitly mixed-race as they fused their bodies with technology and modernity; as a result, mestizaje functioned in practice as a project of what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla calls "deindianization" (*Mestizo* 41–42). Because mestizaje was a tool for modernizing indigenous individuals and assimilating them to the state, the eradication of indigenous subjectivity that both Palou and Bonfil Batalla discuss did not require physical violence. Rather, indigenous individuals would give up their native identity of their own free will as they integrated their newly modernized bodies into mestizo society. The exact articulation of official mestizaje evolved over the years; nevertheless, the concept remains in the background of Mexican thought to this day.

My focus on how technology interfaced with the postrevolutionary body refines—and at times even reimagine—contemporary theories of hybridity in Latin America. Néstor García Canclini first used the term "hybridity" to explain how Latin America existed in, out of, and alongside modernity in the 1980s and 1990s, but the term proves useful when discussing Mexico's problematic ties to modernity in previous decades as well. For García Canclini, hybridity is a phenomenon that entails the juxtaposition of the "modern" with the folkloric

(2–11). Given the paradoxical relationship between past and present, he views hybridity as largely deconstructivist, especially as it relates to understandings of Latin American modernity. Despite his work's popularity, numerous critics have challenged his theory as a binary articulated from the center to define the rural (Ileana Rodríguez, "Hegemonía y dominio"; Moraña 652). Beyond these observations, we should also note García Canclini's curious decision to ignore *mestizaje* despite this racial construct's clear evocation of hybridity. The theorist justifies his preference for hybridity because "it includes diverse intercultural mixtures—not only the racial ones to which *mestizaje* tends to be limited" (111n1). Nevertheless, as our present discussion has shown, *mestizaje*, while clearly a construct of race, was ultimately a strategy for "intercultural mixtures" and even modernity.

The state's practice of transforming indigenous people into mestizos through processes of corporeal hybridity sheds greater light on the problematic relationship between García Canclini's twin notions of modernism and modernization. The theorist defines modernism as "the means by which the elites take charge of the intersection of different historical temporalities and try to elaborate a global project with them" (46).⁷ This definition explains statist articulations and representations of postrevolutionary official *mestizaje* exceptionally well; indeed, García Canclini highlights both the writings of José Vasconcelos and the art of the muralist movement as examples par excellence of this type of modernism (52–54). García Canclini defines modernization as a largely socioeconomic ideal that entails both industrialization and the education of the population at large so that it can participate in modern society. While the critic emphasizes modernism's many failures in bringing about modernization (41–65), we should note that proponents of official *mestizaje* employed elitist discourses and projects in an attempt to modernize "primitive" indigenes through various forms of hybridity. State actors employed at least three different "hybridities" in their quest to transform indigenous people into "modern" mestizos: technological,⁸ racial,⁹ and cultural.¹⁰ Upon undergoing any of these forms of hybridization, indigenous people could become coded as racially hybrid and mestizo in a cultural, economic, and even genetic sense. Rather than bring about García Canclini's famous notion of "modernism without modernization" (41), then, postrevolutionary thinkers strove to bring about modernization *through* modernism.

A form of circular logic began to emerge where the state coded hybridized bodies as mestizo, and a mestizo body was by definition hybrid—technologi-

cally, racially, culturally, or some combination thereof. Differing forms of hybridity soon became conflated. As Amerindian peoples and bodies underwent technological hybridity, they became marked with modernity and thus racially and culturally hybrid. As such, official discourses held that these people now belonged to the mestizo “majority.” In many cases, authors and cultural producers used technologically hybrid subjects to construct, amplify, and impose preferred racial and gender identities from the center to the periphery. Post-revolutionary representations of the racially, technologically, and culturally hybrid body almost always appeared as future-oriented ideals toward which the nation should aspire. Corporeal hybridity and modernity became the founding elements of a distinctly Mexican society that was technologically advanced, racially and culturally mixed, and clearly gendered. Mestizaje thus represented the discursive tool that could overcome perceived indigenous shortcomings and initiate Mexico into the modern world. I distance my theorizations of hybridity from those of a body of scholars who believe “that hybrids make it possible to break free from modernity, condemned for being too Western and one-dimensional” (Gruzinski 18). Postrevolutionary discussions of official mestizaje used differing forms of hybridity to impose a modernity-driven, homogenizing mestizo identity on the masses.

Beyond allowing the nation to reconcile its indigenous past with its goals of industrialization along a European model, official mestizaje also provided a means for the state to resist U.S. and European assertions of cultural and genetic superiority. According to Ana María Alonso, mestizaje became a paradoxical construct for “creat[ing] homogeneity out of heterogeneity, unity out of fragmentation, a strong nation that could withstand the internal menace of its own failures to overcome the injustices of its colonial past and the external menace of US imperialism” (462). Mexican leaders rejected discourses of white supremacy that abounded throughout northern Europe and the United States. By affirming Mexico’s mixed-race identity, they instead asserted their own country’s economic and genetic potential (Stepan 8). In this way, mestizaje was a resistant construct that recognized an indigenous potential that other Western nations denied. That said, official mestizaje also entailed projects of “internal colonialism” that depended on a pro-mestizo eugenics that scientifically justified racialized distinctions between rich and poor (Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico* 140).¹¹ Postrevolutionary mestizophilia may have prescribed a means through which Amerindians could assimilate to the modernity-driven state, but the country’s mixed-race essence undermined its prestige on the interna-

tional stage (Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico* 140). Many Western nations—but most particularly the United States—had historically emphasized Mexico’s ties to indigeneity in order to justify their incursions into the country. Each chapter in this book discusses different strategies for resisting foreign imperialism alongside problematic cases of internal colonialism. Each artist that I analyze balances this equation differently, but when they are viewed in their entirety, it becomes clear that officialist thinkers believed that state-sanctioned anti-imperialism necessitated the domestication of indigenous Mexico. State officials saw no moral contradiction between their resistance to foreign imperialism and their own projects of internal empire. Indeed, most viewed both endeavors as necessary components of their modernity-driven, mestizo nationalism.

This fact challenges the assumptions of many midcentury Latin American thinkers who asserted that an enlightened Latin America would not turn toward imperialism (Fernández Retamar 46–55). Rather, notions of empire sat at the heart of Mexican (and Latin American) modernity. By the twentieth century, Mexico’s colonial experience had produced a Hegelian master/slave relationship where the country’s means of self-representation was patterned after those of its imperial oppressor(s) (Hegel 186–95), a fact that was particularly visible with regard to how it engaged both Spain and the United States. As Mexican elites followed this imperial model, they necessarily established internal empires that mirrored those of their own historical colonizers. Silvano Santiago states that, in (particularly Brazilian) *mestizaje*, “cultural imperialism desires a response of silence, or, once again, that of the emphatic echo serving to strengthen the conqueror’s power” (8). Mestizo normativity found itself at an awkward juncture; while hegemonic in its own national space, global powers treated mestizo identity as a distant “echo” of European whiteness. As mixed-race peoples attempted to validate themselves within these Eurocentric constructs of power, they devalued the indigenous components of their racial and cultural heritage. Statist articulations of postrevolutionary mestizo modernity were highly alienating because they revolved around a desire to emulate a historical conqueror who still refused to recognize the worth of mixed-race subjectivities. As postrevolutionary actors sponsored official articulations of *mestizaje*, they further validated and institutionalized the racial and gender divisions that had existed since the earliest days of the Conquest. By basing modernity on a historical construct that subjugated both Amerindians and women, the new regime explicitly favored Europe over the indigenous and the masculine over the feminine.