

Introduction

When many US and European spectators first encounter mainstream Mexican films and *telenovelas*, their reaction is frequently one of bewilderment. Often these spectators cannot help but ask something to the effect of “Why is everyone so White?”¹ What they mean, of course, is that the predominance of people with European epidermal schemas² in film and television produced in Mexico clashes forcefully with their own racialized understanding of Mexicanness and their (often unquestioned) acceptance that, with respect to themselves, Mexicanness is radical alterity.

Though the mediatic image of White preponderance has always contrasted starkly with the country’s demography, as Charles Ramírez Berg and Dolores Tierney have observed, Whites have still enthroned themselves as the universal image of Mexican society in film and media, in part because of their political and economic dominance.³ Local media

1. In this book I capitalize the words “White,” “Whiteness,” “Black,” and “Blackness” to differentiate racial categories from the colors white and black. I capitalize the words “Indian,” “Indigenous,” and “Indigeneity” to indicate that I am referring to First Peoples as opposed to the more general definition of the word indigenous, which can refer to people who are native to any place. When quoting other scholars who use these terms, I reproduce the words as they appear in those sources.

2. Following Frantz Fanon and Hugo Cerón-Anaya, the term “epidermal schema” in this book designates “how the most obvious external features humans possess (skin color, hair texture, nose shape, lip size, and body fat) are used to determine racial categories and social belonging.” Hugo Cerón-Anaya, *Privilege at Play: Class, Race, Gender, and Golf in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 94, note 5; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89–119.

3. Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 137; Dolores Tierney, *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 86; Richard Dyer, “Introduction,” in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

producers established racialized norms of representation by which heroes and protagonists have been largely represented by actors whose phenotypes conform to the physical requirements of Whiteness in Mexico, while those with epidermal schemas that do not fall within the parameters of Mexican Whiteness are often relegated to the roles of villainous or comedic characters.⁴ In recent years, Mexican actor Tenoch Huerta has publicly identified these norms as racist practices within the national film industry, which, in his own words, limit Mexican men of color like himself to the roles of “jodido, sufridor y . . . ratero” (the fucked, the suffering and . . . the thief).⁵

When this norm is not adhered to, racist backlash ensues. The case of Alfonso Cuarón’s 2018 film *Roma*, which featured an actress of Mixtec origin, Yalitza Aparicio, is illustrative. Aparicio’s centrality in the film produced racist indignation in the form of insults and calls to disqualify her from the Ariel Awards (the annual awards held by the Mexican Academy of Film),⁶ a sentiment ostensibly exacerbated by the international acclaim the film garnered, including an Oscar nomination for Aparicio’s performance. Throughout 2018 and 2019, the fact that this “*india*”⁷ was representing Mexico on the world stage through the prestigious medium of auteur cinema at international festivals and award shows was, according to many Mexicans, a problem.⁸

4. Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, 57; see also Tierney, *Emilio Fernández*, 85–87; Ignacio Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema, 1988–2012* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 204. On similar racialized casting norms in Hollywood, see Richard Dyer, “Coloured White, Not Coloured,” in *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 59.

5. E. Camhaji, S. Corona, and G. Serrano, “El racismo que México no quiere ver,” *El País*, November 27, 2019, https://elpais.com/sociedad/2019/11/27/actualidad/1574891024_828971.html. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this book are mine.

6. Sergio de la Mora, “Roma: Repatriation Versus Exploitation,” *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (summer 2019): 46–53.

7. In present-day Mexico, the terms *india* and *indio* are a pejorative way to refer to people who identify as Indigenous or have Indigenous ancestry; however, historically, the term has not always been deployed as a slur. See Antonio Zirión Pérez, “Hacia una descolonización de la mirada: la representación del indígena en la historia del cine etnográfico en México (1896–2016),” in *Repensar la antropología mexicana del siglo XXI*, ed. María Ana Portal Ariosa (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2019), 366.

8. I thank Patricia Arroyo Calderón for first pointing out to me the relevance of the racist attacks on Aparicio for this volume.

The position of Whiteness as the norm⁹ in Mexican film and media is particularly perverse in light of the country's majority mestizo demography. The degree of mediatic distortion carried out by this norm and the virulence with which it is defended confers on Mexican film and media's privileging of Whiteness a unique ideological force that this book uncovers. That ideological force is the coloniality of power. Through this term, sociologist and political theorist Aníbal Quijano has suggested that the experience of Spanish colonialism established asymmetrical power relations according to the racialized distribution of labor defined during that period.¹⁰ His concept also refers to how political, economic, and social inequalities have persisted along racial lines in the centuries since Latin American republics' independence from Spain.¹¹ Furthermore, as elaborated by Walter Mignolo,¹² the term *coloniality* exceeds what Stuart Hall has called the economic approach to racism and refers *also* to the ever evolving cultural and ideological structures of "dominance" that have accompanied racism's original "economic nucleus."¹³ In this sense, the coloniality of power has much in common with what Homi Bhabha has referred to as "colonial discourse as an apparatus of power."¹⁴

In Mexico, one of the clearest manifestations of the coloniality of power is the continued social and aesthetic valuing of Whiteness that has persisted long after colonial rule. As in all societies forged in colonialism and coloniality,¹⁵ Whiteness in Mexico confers social, economic, and

9. Richard Dyer, "Whiteness: The Power of Invisibility," in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005).

10. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 553–80.

11. Mabel Moraña, Enrique D. Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, "Introduction," in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique D. Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2, 17.

12. Walter D. Mignolo, "The Conceptual Triad: Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality," in Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 139–40.

13. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Essential Essays/Stuart Hall Vol. 1*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 172–213.

14. Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 100–1.

15. "Colonialism in its most literal form refers to particular political relations; coloniality refers rather to relations of power and to conceptions of being and knowing that

aesthetic privilege to those who are perceived to possess it. This reality permeates all aspects of social existence and is prominently manifested in the country's (audio)visual cultural production. Mexican cinema has been a key instrument serving to reinforce a local ideal of Whiteness through the exaltation of White Mexican bodies on-screen and the steering of spectatorial desire toward those bodies.

This book addresses a specific display of the ubiquity of Whiteness in Mexico's audiovisual landscape and one that speaks to the intensity with which the showcasing of Whiteness is inextricably tied to colonized notions of beauty and desire: its historical pervasiveness even in fiction films that explicitly claim to represent Indigeneity. This volume builds on the excellent existing scholarship pointing to the racial politics in Mexican cinema during the Golden Age (roughly from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s)¹⁶—a period of film production frequently credited with having a profound impact on Mexican culture and society. Expanding on the valuable work of Joanna Hershfield, Charles Ramírez Berg, Andrea Noble, and Dolores Tierney, among others,¹⁷ this volume examines the

produce a world divided between legitimate human subjects, on the one hand, and others considered not only exploitable but dependent, but fundamentally dispensable, possessing no value, and denoting only negative or exotic meaning in the various orders of social life, on the other." Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Decolonial Turn," trans. Robert Cavooris, in *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power*, ed. Juan Poblete (New York: Routledge, 2018), 119.

16. One can take as a start date for the Golden Age 1936, the year in which Fernando de Fuentes's film, *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, achieved notable commercial success within Mexico and abroad. See García Riera, "The Impact of *Rancho Grande*," in *Mexican Cinema*, ed. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, trans. Ana M. López (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 128–32; Rosario Vidal Bonifaz, *Surgimiento de la industria cinematográfica y el papel del estado en México, 1895–1940* (Mexico City: Miguel Angel Porrúa, 2010). A plausible end date for the period is 1957 because of the financial difficulties of the national industry at that time and the death of its most emblematic male star, Pedro Infante. On this, see Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro, "The Decline of the Golden Age and the Making of the Crisis," in *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, ed. Joanne Hershfield and David Maciel (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 165–91; Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 99; Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 70, 77.

17. Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940–1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Joanne Hershfield, "Race and Ethnicity in the Classical Cinema," in *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, ed. Joanne Hershfield and David Maciel (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 81–100; Ramírez Berg,

duration of a local, idiosyncratic form of racial masquerade¹⁸ that I term whiteness-as-indigeneity.¹⁹ From a decolonial perspective²⁰ grounded in the history of race relations in Mexico, this volume elucidates how, throughout the Golden Age, the White Indians of Mexican cinema manifest the unresolved tension between two ideological formations. On the one hand was the government's twentieth-century postrevolutionary discourse that symbolically celebrated Indigeneity, and, on the other, was the persistent, long-standing valorization of a local construct of Whiteness that began with colonialism and was transformed through subsequent discourses of modernity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A result of this

Cinema of Solitude; Andrea Noble, *Mexican National Cinema* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006); Tierney, *Emilio Fernández*; David S. Dalton, *Mestizo Modernity: Race, Technology, and the Body in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018); Jacqueline Avila, *Cinesonidos: Film Music and National Identity During Mexico's Epoca de Oro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 164–65; Natasha Varner, *La Raza Cosmética: Beauty, Identity, and Settler Colonialism in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020).

18. My use of the term “racial masquerade” is inspired by the work of Michael Rogin, who has used the term to elucidate the function of blackface in the United States. For Rogin, the use of blackface by Irish and Jewish immigrants was a means through which they cast off the stigma of immigration and positioned themselves as US Americans. See Michael Rogin, “Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures,” *Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (December 1992): 1050–77; and *Blackface, White Noise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

19. As is the case with “blackface,” I do not capitalize “whiteness-as-indigeneity” throughout the book because this hyphenated term refers to a trope in visual representation and not to group identities.

20. If, as José Rabasa asserts, “[t]o reflect on the postcolonial, no longer as a moment posterior to the formal independence, implies becoming conscious that colonial continuities entail inevitable linguistic, cultural, and political legacies” (José Rabasa, “Postcolonialism,” in *Dictionary of Latin American Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert McKee Irwin and Mónica Szurmuk [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012], 254), this volume can be understood as a postcolonial one in a general sense. However, while postcolonial studies, as developed in Anglophone academies, has tended to center the subaltern's possibilities of articulation, the Latinamericanist decolonial perspective tends to center “how coloniality of power was formed, transformed, and managed in its history of more than 500 years” (Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 10). Because this volume is fundamentally interested in how cinema operates as an agent of such dominance and in elucidating obfuscated mechanisms of that dominance, the term “decolonial” most accurately names the perspective taken here.

tension, whiteness-as-indigeneity is the limit case of the racist norms that have structured audiovisual production in Mexico. Like its hemispheric cousin, blackface, whiteness-as-indigeneity is characterized by a “tententiously flawed mimesis.”²¹ However, instead of seeking to ridicule the racialized subject, the Mexican trope—not unlike the Whitening of Roma people in Spanish cinema as analyzed by Eva Woods Peiró²²—works in the opposite direction, infusing the racialized subject with the dignity and desirability that coloniality confers upon Whiteness.

To understand how the reelaborated vestiges of colonial racial hierarchies reemerge in visual mediums such as twentieth-century cinema, it is necessary to approach the subject of Whiteness in the Mexican context by considering the evolution of racial categories and their role in shaping projects of national identity.

The Persistent Privilege of Whiteness in Mexico

The constructs of the Indian and of Indigeneity are European inventions that homogenized the original inhabitants of what came to be known as the Americas²³ and cast them as Other vis-à-vis the colonizer. The precise meaning of the term and who is considered an Indian has evolved over time under what Mexican anthropologist Paula López Caballero has termed “national regimes of alterity,”²⁴ which have each brought with them new terms to designate the constructed Otherness of the native inhabitants and their progeny, including terms such as *autóctonos*, *indios*, *pueblos originarios* (the autochthonous, Indians, original inhabitants, etc.) as well as the “constant slippage and strategic ambiguity” of the terms Indian, mestizo, and *campesino*.²⁵ Whiteness, which in the local Mexican racial

21. Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation,” *Screen* 24, no. 2 (March 1983): 6.

22. Eva Woods Peiró, *White Gypsies: Race and Stardom in Spanish Musicals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

23. Edmundo O’Gorman, *La invención de América: el universalismo de la cultura de Occidente* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958).

24. Paula López Caballero, *Indígenas de la nación: etnografía histórica de la alteridad en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2017), 45.

25. Rick López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

formation functions as the polar opposite of Indigeneity,²⁶ is an equally fabricated and ever-evolving social identity. Throughout the book, my use of the terms “White,” “Whiteness,” “Indian,” “Indigenous,” and “Indigeneity” are not meant to reify the notion that such hermetic racial groups exist as verifiable scientific realities. Rather, I use the terms to refer to the constructed nature of these ethnoracial categories in Mexico specifically, and to the very real social, economic, and emotional effects that the perception of one’s belonging to these categories has in lived experience.

Furthermore, my treatment of Whiteness in Mexico refers to a person’s ability to locate themselves on the “right” side of what Mignolo has termed modernity/coloniality—the “set of diverse but coherent narratives” produced by “the Western Christian version of humanity, complemented by secular de-Goding narratives of science, economic progress, political democracy, and lately globalization . . .”²⁷ In the Mexican context, modernity/coloniality has constructed Indigeneity as the bane of these discourses, fixating on the following as points of supposed inferiority in various stages: Indigenous paganism, alternative ways of knowing, models of economic subsistence, communal organization, apathy toward the nation-state and its “democracy,” protections for local economies, and so forth. In Homi Bhabha’s terms, this is the process by which the subjects of the (post)colonial discourse of power execute the “containment” of the colonized and produce “that limited form of otherness . . . called the stereotype.”²⁸ Because of the ambivalence of (post) colonial discourse, not only is the pejorative position of the colonized within it ever shifting as the discourse evolves through time, but the placement of the colonized is also unstable *within* a given phase of the discourse.²⁹

Moreover, as Satya P. Mohanty has argued, the process of racialization not only “creates stereotypes of the colonized as ‘other’ and as inferior . . .

26. Federico Navarrete Linares, *México racista: Una denuncia* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2016), 153. The formation of this racial discourse must be understood in the context of the erasure of Afro-Mexican populations in official discourse and cultural production throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Hernández Cuevas.

27. Mignolo, “Conceptual Triad,” 139–40.

28. Bhabha, “The Other Question,” 111.

29. Bhabha, “The Other Question,” 117–18. To add an example of “ambivalence” from the Mexican experience to those provided by Bhabha, the Mexican in the United States is both an irremediably lazy individual *and* one who is taking away jobs from Euro-Americans. See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 199.

the colonizer too develops a cultural identity that survives well past the formal context of colonial rule.”³⁰ In other words, the ongoing process of pejoratively racializing the colonized necessarily also yields the fabrication of a shifting but always privileged category of Whiteness defined by its correlation to the current regime of modernity. To name this aspect of Whiteness, I borrow and expand a term elaborated by Latin American philosopher Bolívar Echeverría, *blanquitud*. For him, *blanquitud* refers to an individual’s internalization of a specific discourse of modernity—the “ethos puritano capitalista” (puritanical capitalist ethos) that values above all else a high degree of productivity and the external, material wealth that such productivity yields.³¹ For my purposes in this book, *blanquitud* refers not only to this “puritanical capitalist ethos”—the current regime of modernity that Echeverría has brilliantly theorized—but also to the previous discourses of Western modernity that have taken root in Mexico beginning with the Spanish conquest and continue to exist in residual forms. In this sense, the discursive and performative dimension of Whiteness that I refer to as *blanquitud* is an aggregate of the discourses of Western modernity in Mexico.

At the same time, however, Whiteness and Indigeneity are not merely discursive or performative positionalities, but ones with a very real embodied component that imposes limits to performativity for those with racialized epidermal schemas.³² To refer to the quality of having genealogical ties to Europe and an epidermal schema that is read as European, this book uses the term *blancura*.

In what follows, I provide a brief outline of the ways in which the definitions of Whiteness in Mexico have been functions of the colonial matrix of power,³³ evolving from the sixteenth century to the twentieth

30. Satya P. Mohanty, “Drawing the Color Line: Kipling and the Culture of Colonial Rule,” in *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 314.

31. Bolívar Echeverría, *Modernidad y blanquitud* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2019), 59–62.

32. As Bhabha reminds us, “The difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural—colour as the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural ‘identity.’” “The Other Question,” 114. See also Richard Dyer’s concept of “white people’s right to be various” in Dyer, “Coloured White, Not Coloured,” in *White*, 49.

33. Mignolo, “Conceptual Triad.”

to reflect the prevailing discourse of modernity of a given period while, simultaneously, the justification of Indigenous inferiority reflected Indigenous people's supposed incompatibility with each of those discourses. Throughout the past five centuries, the ability to embody Mexican Whiteness—in its various discursive and corporal definitions—has been a persistent source of privilege.

Spanish colonialism is the underlying historical reality that has structured the asymmetrical positing of different ethnoracial identities in Mexico, though these have since continued to evolve in complex ways. The fact of colonial dominance meant that access to political power, land, and wealth were greater depending on one's proximity to Spanishness. Of course, not all Spaniards or genealogical claims of Spanish origin were equal. In the fifteenth century, the concept of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) evolved in Spain to distinguish Jews and Muslims who had recently converted to Christianity (respectively known as *conversos* and *moriscos*) from people whose families had been Christian for more than two generations.³⁴ The 1449 *limpieza de sangre* statutes prevented these new Christians from holding public office in Spain, and the establishment of the Inquisition in 1478 heightened their persecution.³⁵ The principles of *limpieza de sangre* were applied in New Spain, with Indigenous people becoming "pure of blood" upon conversion to Christianity, while Africans and their descendants did not have a clear path to attaining this status because of the perception of their ties with Islam, which became the justification for their enslavement.³⁶ The *casta* painting genre in New Spain—more a reflection of the elite's hope that neat boundaries among racial groups could be named and maintained than a historical document of how the colonial order operated—corroborated the idea that Indigeneity could smoothly fold into Spanishness.³⁷ While these images show that the descendant of an Indigenous person could be considered Spanish over just a few generations, these same images suggest that an Afro-descendant's

34. María E. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza De Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Peter Wade, *Race and Sex in Latin America* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 67–68.

35. Wade, *Race and Sex*, 67.

36. Wade, *Race and Sex*, 68.

37. Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 59; Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Blackness could unexpectedly resurface even after several generations of mixing with Spaniards.³⁸ The name given to an Afro-descendant whose phenotype prominently manifested Black ancestry after several generations of genealogical Whitening in these paintings, *torna atrás*, literally suggests regression, thus underscoring Whitening as the ideal direction of one's lineage in the colonial context.

Despite the relative privilege of Indigenous people according to these representations, they were in effect deemed a childlike variant of humanity.³⁹ In practice, having *converso*, Indigenous, or African heritage in New Spain “could create suspicion and possibly exclude a person from public office, university entrance or ordination in the Church”⁴⁰—which constituted nearly all of the avenues to political power and/or wealth. Furthermore, the stigma of illegitimacy, which had already been an obstacle to political and economic ascent in Spain, kept many mestizos from being able to acquire purity of blood status.⁴¹ In sum, in New Spain, the more one could approximate Whiteness in the form of a legitimate Spanish lineage untainted by *converso*, Indigenous, or African heritage, the greater one's educational, economic, and political opportunities. In this context, Whitening did not necessarily refer to ensuring one's offspring had a chromatically lighter appearance; rather, it meant securing a specific legal status that some Spaniards and criollos (the progeny of Spaniards born in the Americas) enjoyed because of their genealogies.⁴²

After Mexican independence from Spain, the 1821 Plan of Iguala established the legal equality of all of the republic's inhabitants, and the following year Congress ordered the omission of racial classifications in all legal documents.⁴³ This shift brought Mexico closer, at least discursively, to the European model of modern nationhood, which required a substantial degree of homogeneity among fellow co-nationals. However, despite the

38. Katzew, *Casta Painting*.

39. Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 57–108.

40. Wade, *Race and Sex*, 69.

41. Mörner, *Race Mixture*; Wade, *Race and Sex*, 69.

42. Rachell Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican Eugenics?: Racism and the Reproduction of the Nation” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, Queens College, 2019), 62.

43. Moisés González Navarro, “El mestizaje mexicano en el período nacional,” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 30, no. 1 (1968): 35–52.

elimination of the term “Indian” as a legal category,⁴⁴ governing elites were aware of the need to negotiate the internal ethnic and racial heterogeneity of the population for the purposes of producing national cohesion.⁴⁵ Within this negotiation of internal difference, the construct of Indigeneity and the identification of its proper place and function within the new nation became an ongoing concern. These anxieties about Indigeneity did not emerge in a vacuum; rather they built on and evolved previous ideas. As Rachell Sánchez-Rivera has argued, in the nineteenth century “preconceived notions of honorability, respectability and purity of blood were subsumed within new scientific ideas to manage and control reproduction, framed within the terms of an ‘ideal’ mixing of people consequently determining the ideal Mexican citizen after the Independence in 1821.”⁴⁶

Fundamentally, Indigenous people were a source of frustration for governing elites in the nineteenth century because of the former’s perceived incompatibility with elite designs of “progress”—a Eurocentric ideological orientation shaped by the Enlightenment, social Darwinism, and positivism.⁴⁷ From the elite perspective, part of the problem was that Indigenous people did not perceive themselves as national subjects. As Mexican historian Beatriz Urías Horcasitas observes, prominent public and academic figures of the period such as Francisco Pimentel and Rafael de Zayas Enriquez complained that Indigenous people lacked any sense of belonging to the Mexican nation-state.⁴⁸ Still, the greatest impediment that Indigenous people posed for national development according to elites was their supposedly unproductive use of the land according to modern,

44. González Navarro, “El mestizaje mexicano,” 35, Alicia Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación: discursos racistas en el México decimonónico,” in *Los caminos del racismo en México*, ed. José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, S.A., 2005), 91–92; Rodolfo Stavenhagen, “El Indigenismo mexicano: Gestación y ocaso de un proyecto nacional,” in *Raza y política en Hispanoamérica*, ed. Tomás Pérez Vejo and Pablo Yankelevich (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2018), 219.

45. Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits from the Labyrinth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 263–80; José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, “Racismo y nacionalismo en el discurso de las élites mexicanas,” in Gómez Izquierdo, ed., *Los caminos del racismo*, 121.

46. Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 64–65.

47. E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 18.

48. Beatriz Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas del racismo en México (1920–1950)* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores México, 2007), 43–48.

nineteenth-century standards.⁴⁹ Within a vision of economic development based on the exporting of raw materials on a massive scale, Indigenous people's landownership and their alternative use of that land for subsistence purposes was cast as a serious economic liability for the nation.⁵⁰ The new nineteenth-century legal framework in which all Mexicans were, at least nominally, equal under the law led to the erosion of Indigenous people's previous condition of semiautonomy, rights to communal lands, and other protections.⁵¹

The so-called "guerras de castas"—Indigenous uprisings that took place in various regions of the country aiming to regain appropriated lands—greatly heightened the urgency of "el problema del indio" (the Indian question) for elites.⁵² In the north, José María Leyva Cajeme led the uprising of the Yaquis in Sonora, governing a Yaqui state from 1875 to 1886 until the government sold the Yaquis to henequen plantation owners in Yucatan.⁵³ The Tzotzil Mayans in Chiapas rose up under the leadership of Pedro Días Cuscat from 1867 to 1870, while Manuel Lozada led Indian resistance to hacendado encroachment in Jalisco and present-day Nayarit from the 1850s until 1873.⁵⁴ The Indigenous uprising of greatest magnitude by multiple measures was the Caste War of Yucatan in which Mayans fought against Whites and mestizos on the peninsula from 1847 into the twentieth century, achieving self-governance for a period of time.⁵⁵ The zeal with which elites held the exploitation of private lands to be crucial to national "progress" is clear in the calls to annihilate those Indigenous groups who rebelled against the expropriation of their lands.⁵⁶ These conflicts and the debates surrounding them laid bare the endurance of a racialized perspective in governance and the persistence of heterogeneous

49. Castellanos Guerrero, "Para hacer nación," 100.

50. Burns, *Poverty of Progress*, 76, 78, 134.

51. Regina Martínez Casas, Emiko Saldívar, René D. Flores, and Christina A. Sue, "The Different Faces of Mestizaje: Ethnicity and Race in Mexico," in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 40.

52. Castellanos Guerrero, "Para hacer nación," 110.

53. Burns, *Poverty of Progress*, 110–11.

54. Burns, *Poverty of Progress*, 111–12.

55. Burns, *Poverty of Progress*, 112.

56. Castellanos Guerrero, "Para hacer nación," 107.

ethnoracial identities in Mexico despite the erasure of racial language in official documentation. Indigeneity was now an undesirable categorization because it acquired the connotation of being antithetical to “progress” and national economic interests.⁵⁷

Another dimension of elite anxieties about Indigeneity was linked to the emergence of positivism in the nineteenth century and the implications of Lamarckian understandings of heredity, which had a unique endurance in Mexico.⁵⁸ Believing that the propensity toward alcoholism, destitution, illness, crime, and prostitution were inheritable characteristics, scientists in emerging disciplines such as social hygiene, anthropology, sociology, psychiatry, and legal medicine saw “in society’s poorest sectors a latent and imminent threat of national degeneration.”⁵⁹ In this context, Indigenous people in the second half of the nineteenth century became one of the many social groups categorized as degenerate, in multiple senses of the word.⁶⁰ For instance, anthropologists Francisco Martínez Baca and Manuel Vergara’s 1892 study of crime associated Indigeneity with lawlessness and “social deviation.”⁶¹ For sociologist Rafael de Zayas Enríquez, the biological heredity of Indigenous people was intrinsically degenerative, meaning that they were destined to disappear because each successive generation was increasingly afflicted with disease and vice.⁶² In this context of scientism, anthropometrics often functioned as “proof” of Indigenous people’s supposed biological and genetic inferiority.⁶³ As Oliva López Sánchez observes, during the Porfiriato (the period between 1876 and 1911 during which Porfirio Díaz served as president for seven terms), some scientists concluded that Mexican women’s bodies were not well suited for childbirth because of their pelvic measurements, which were smaller than those of

57. Martínez Casas et al., “Different Faces,” 41.

58. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 108, 114; Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 91–114.

59. Fernanda Núñez Becerra, “La degeneración de la raza a finales del siglo XIX. Un fantasma ‘científico’ recorre el mundo,” in Gómez Izquierdo, ed., *Los caminos del racismo*, 67–88. See also Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas* and Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican.”

60. Núñez Becerra, “Degeneración.”

61. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 47.

62. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 48.

63. Beatriz Urías Horcasitas, “Medir y civilizar,” *Ciencias*, no. 60 (October–March 2001): 28–36.

European women.⁶⁴ The implication of their studies is that racial mixture produced female bodies that were inadequate for reproduction⁶⁵ and, more specifically, that the biological contribution of Indigeneity was to blame for this deficiency. In these ways, nineteenth-century scientific paradigms and practices reinforced previous racial hierarchies, casting Indigenous people among society's most wretched and rationalizing under scientific auspices the superiority of upper-class subjects who exhibited hygienic, moral, racial, educational, and cultural ideals.⁶⁶

To address the threat that, according to elites, Indigeneity posed to the progress and development of the nation, liberals proposed various forms of assimilationism.⁶⁷ This strategy for nation-building found expression in the writings of politicians and intellectuals such as Vicente Riva Palacio and Justo Sierra in the late nineteenth century⁶⁸ and later in Andrés Molina Enriquez's *Los grandes problemas nacionales* completed in 1910—all of which pointed to *mestizaje* as the avenue for achieving national cohesion and progress in Mexico.⁶⁹ The proposal that a thorough mixing of the country's Indigenous and European elements would bring about national cohesion and vitality flew in the face of contemporary European pronouncements on racial mixture, such as those by Arthur de Gobineau,⁷⁰ which saw in miscegenation “the epitome of human degeneration.”⁷¹ Still, because the liberal discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century cast Indigeneity as an undesirable location of biological and cultural origin from which one needed to evolve, it constitutes what Alicia Castellanos Guerrero understands as the renewed Mexican racism of the nineteenth

64. Olivia López Sánchez, “La mirada médica y la mujer indígena en el siglo XIX,” *Ciencias*, no. 60 (October–March 2001): 44–49.

65. Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 66.

66. Núñez Becerra, “Degeneración,” 74–75.

67. Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación,” 89–115.

68. Martínez Casas et al., “Different Faces,” 42.

69. Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1996), 217.

70. Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación,” 100.

71. Alexandra Stern, “Mestizofilia, biotipología y eugenesia en el México posrevolucionario: Hacia una historia de la ciencia y el Estado, 1920–1960,” *Relaciones* 21, no. 81 (2000): 53–91.

century, distinct but informed by the previous racial hierarchies.⁷² While Spanishness still featured as part of the White ideal—evident in the centrality that speaking the Spanish language and sharing the Catholic faith had as markers of assimilation⁷³—the understanding of Whiteness as it evolved in the nineteenth century also incorporated the nations of the North Atlantic, whose technological advancements and capitalist projects Mexican elites aspired to imitate.⁷⁴ In this way, nineteenth-century assimilationism continued to privilege Whiteness and introduced mestizaje as a desirable ethnoracial identity.

For governing elites in the second half of the nineteenth century, one of the strategies for creating a mestizaje that would result in national progress involved promoting the immigration of Whites from North America and Europe.⁷⁵ This plan was the topic of impassioned debates in the national congress, and it was supported by various political figures, including the prominent intellectual Justo Sierra.⁷⁶ The arrival of large quantities of White immigrants, liberals hoped, would “improve the race” and mitigate cultural and technological backwardness in Mexico.⁷⁷ At the same time, naturalization laws were put in place to block migrants deemed undesirable for Mexican mestizaje, including Jewish, Japanese, Afro-Caribbean, and Chinese people.⁷⁸

In addition to promoting biological mestizaje, politicians and intellectuals such as Manuel Orozco y Berra and Francisco Pimentel also saw education as a vehicle to assimilate Indigenous Mexicans into a hegemonic criollo/mestizo culture.⁷⁹ The idea that Indigenous people could become intellectually equal to Whites through a Western education departed from

72. Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación”; Núñez Becerra, “Degeneración.”

73. Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación,” 93.

74. Burns, *Poverty of Progress*, 7.

75. Burns, *Poverty of Progress*, 31; Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación,” 89–115; Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 50; Erika Pani, *Para pertenecer a la gran familia mexicana: procesos de naturalización en el siglo XIX* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2015); Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 67.

76. Castellanos Guerrero, Gómez Izquierdo, and Pineda, “Racist Discourse,” 218, 229; Gómez Izquierdo, “Racismo y nacionalismo,” 107, 148.

77. Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación,” 106–7.

78. Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 67

79. Castellanos Guerrero, “Para hacer nación,” 103–7; Gómez Izquierdo, “Racismo y nacionalismo,” 120.

the biological racism of the day according to which Indigenous people were irremediably inferior to Europeans and their descendants. However, the premise of assimilationism through education was, nonetheless, that Indigenous people's culture kept them in a state of backwardness and that they therefore needed to be improved through Eurocentric culture. That some of the most illustrious men of the century had either partial or full Indigenous ancestry—José María Morelos, Benito Juárez, Ignacio Altamirano, and Porfirio Díaz—seemed to confirm liberals' hopes for the role of education. The Sociedad Indianista Mexicana, founded at the end of the Porfiriato, embodied the belief in Indigenous regeneration through both foreign migration and schooling.⁸⁰ In sum, by both exposing Indigenous people to Western education and increasing the presence of Europeans and Euro-Americans in the national gene pool, nineteenth-century Mexican intellectuals and politicians invested in nation building hoped to create a more homogenous and Whiter citizenry.

In contrast to the colonial period in which genealogical Whiteness possessed a greater weight,⁸¹ the nineteenth century illustrates an important transformation of racial understandings in Mexico. Because, as we have seen, by then Indigeneity connoted both material poverty and backwardness, degrees of social Whitening were indeed possible through a combination of economic success and acculturation.⁸² Cultural and material transformations now allowed for a greater fluidity of racial and ethnic identities than had previously been possible. However, the sociopolitical landscape remained a racist one, preserving its "link between essentialist representations of race and social structures of domination," the criteria that according to sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant define any racist social project.⁸³

80. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "Andrés Molina Enriquez y la Sociedad Indianista Mexicana: El indigenismo en vísperas de la Revolución," *Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* 47, tome XVIII (1965): 217–32; Urias Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 50.

81. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*.

82. Alan Knight, "Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910–1940," *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 71–113; Navarrete Linares, *México racista*.

83. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formation," in *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*, ed. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 136.

After the Mexican Revolution and under a corporatist model, the new government reaffirmed commitments to progress and modernity, which now meant achieving comparable levels of technological sophistication, health, and economic growth with the United States and Western Europe.⁸⁴ This endeavor involved extending resources to Indigenous and *campesino* populations as well as incorporating them into the nation-state. These interrelated projects of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje*⁸⁵ also inaugurated a new national discourse that made Indigenous people and mestizos its protagonists in an effort to visibly exalt the new national subjects. However, Whiteness (*blancura* and *blanquitud*) continued to hold value in Mexico, which is reflected in the official postrevolutionary ideology that incorporates aspects of Indigeneity symbolically, but exalts its Whitenized counterpart, *mestizaje*,⁸⁶ as the nation's common "fictive ethnicity."⁸⁷ As social scientists Regina Martínez Casas, Emiko Saldívar, René D. Flores, Christina A. Sue, and colleagues have noted, "Indigenista policy . . . played a central role in constructing and defining mestizos as being *nonindigenous* individuals."⁸⁸ On the one hand, Indigeneity now functioned as a symbol of Mexican particularity; on the other, it played a fundamental role in the cult of *mestizaje* as a marker of the distance that the mestizo had traveled into modernity and into Mexican national subjectivity.⁸⁹

84. Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits*, 278; Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 18–19; Paul Schroeder Rodríguez, *Latin American Cinema: A Comparative History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 13.

85. Knight, "Racism, Revolution," 86.

86. Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits*, 278–79.

87. Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*, ed. Philomena Essed Goldberg and David Theo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 223–24; Joshua Lund, *The Mestizo State: Reading Race in Modern Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). See also Gómez Izquierdo's use of the term "la fábula del mestizaje," Navarrete Linares's concept of "la leyenda del mestizaje" in *México racista*, and Palou's description of *mestizaje* as "social fiction" in *El fracaso del mestizo*.

88. Martínez Casas et al., "Different Faces of Mestizaje," 44 (emphasis in original).

89. Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood, *Remaking the Nation: Place, Identity and Politics in Latin America* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996.) As Radcliffe and Westwood point out, the dynamic of defining the self through the discourse of the Other has been explored by postcolonial scholars of the Anglophone world Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha.

To realize their project for a modern mestizo Mexico, postrevolutionary Mexican politicians and intellectuals adapted nineteenth-century perspectives toward Indigenous people but essentially pursued the same assimilationist approach rooted in racism.⁹⁰ Within the inherited positivist and evolutionist framework in which Mexican intellectuals and politicians continued to operate after the Revolution, Indigenous people were not racially inferior in a biological sense, but they could not contribute substantially to Mexican modernity beyond providing the archaeological and historical markers that endowed the nation with symbolic specificity.⁹¹ For José Vasconcelos, the secretary of public education from 1921 to 1924 who put forth a utopic vision of racial amalgamation in Latin America, Indigenous people's contribution to mestizaje consisted of their "countless number of properly spiritual capacities."⁹² Echoing their nineteenth-century counterparts' faith in education as a force of national amalgamation, some of the most emblematic postrevolutionary efforts to "improve" Mexican citizenry include the Cultural Missions designed by Vasconcelos, which from 1921 to 1924 traveled to rural areas for the purpose of priming young Mexicans for instruction in modern public schools.⁹³ Also, from 1926 to 1932 the Casa del Estudiante Indígena in Mexico City housed and educated rural Indigenous male youths with the goal that they would return to their communities to spread a civic sensibility and modernization.⁹⁴ In subsequent decades, influential anthropologists such as Alfonso Caso and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán would continue supporting *indigenista* policies that prioritized integration and acculturation, albeit with their own nuances.⁹⁵

90. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 16–61, 122; Gómez Izquierdo, "Racismo y nacionalismo," 167, 169, 179; Sánchez-Rivera, "What Happened to Mexican," 24–27, 31, 75.

91. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 80–81.

92. José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 32.

93. David G. Tovey, "The Role of the Music Educator in Mexico's Cultural Missions," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 139 (winter 1999): 1–11.

94. Alexander S. Dawson, "'Wild Indians,' 'Mexican Gentlemen,' and the Lessons Learned in the Casa del Estudiante Indígena, 1926–1932," *The Americas* 57, no. 3 (January 2001): 329–61; Stern, "Mestizofilia," 85; Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 52.

95. Guillermo de la Peña, "The End of Revolutionary Anthropology?: Notes on Indigenismo," *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968*, ed. Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 284–85. See also Avila, *Cinesonidos*, 116.

Those preoccupied with engineering an ideal Mexican citizenry shared with their Porfirian counterparts the desire to minimize the presence of elements deemed “degenerative” in the national gene pool.⁹⁶ Though the concerns of Mexican eugenicists exceeded the Indigenous question—targeting alcoholism, prostitution, and socioeconomic marginality as well—twentieth-century eugenicist doctors frequently established links between Indigenous people and tendencies toward delinquency and mental illness.⁹⁷ In addition, Mexican eugenicists of the period considered vagrancy and alcoholism to be Indigenous traits.⁹⁸

The academics, doctors, intellectuals, and politicians who belonged to the Sociedad Eugénica Mexicana para el Mejoramiento de la Raza (Mexican Society of Eugenics for the Improvement of the Race), founded in 1931, perceived a need for “social prophylaxis”—measures intended to safeguard the health, vitality, and ideal of mestizaje among the Mexican citizenry.⁹⁹ Members of the group, including the “father” of Mexican anthropology, Manuel Gamio, at times voiced recommendations very similar to those suggested throughout the previous century and its political regimes. For instance, group members played a role in drafting the migration law of 1926, which distinguished potential immigrants as either “assimilable” or “unassimilable,” resulting in the denial of naturalization to many Jewish and Chinese applicants and the favoring of immigrants from Spain.¹⁰⁰ In addition, Gilberto Loyo, a demographer close to President Plutarco Elías Calles; and Alfredo Saavedra, a surgeon, professor, and the Society’s first president, supported the immigration of White foreigners to Mexico.¹⁰¹ The Society’s members eschewed traditional racial determinism, especially during and after the Nazi regime.¹⁰² However, as Sánchez-Rivera observes, the group merely replaced biological racism with cultural racism—which, according

96. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 108; Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 29–88.

97. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 117; Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 114.

98. Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 72–73.

99. Stern, “Mestizofilia”; Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 113; Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 76–118.

100. Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 73, 81.

101. Urías Horcasitas, *Historias secretas*, 120; Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 77–78.

102. Stern, “Mestizofilia,” 80–81; Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 84–88.

to Etienne Balibar, uses the concept of culture to reproduce hierarchies of people who are supposedly incompatible with one another.¹⁰³ In sum, newly armed with twentieth-century pseudoscience, Mexican intellectuals and politicians understood Whiteness (*blancura* and *blanquitud*) as the key ingredient that would ensure an ideal blending of the Mexican citizenry into a healthy and modern mestizo people, producing “solutions” whose justifications may have been new, but whose substance certainly was not.

Twentieth-century *indigenismo-mestizaje* (this hyphenation reflecting that they were two sides of the same coin)¹⁰⁴ was predicated on the inferiority of Indigeneity and therefore was a racist national construct. As Gómez Izquierdo explains, “Indigenist ideology is based on a racist view of the Indian to define its policies of assimilation or integration into national culture . . . Being mestizo is better than being an Indian, it represents progress towards Mexico’s dreamed-of europeanization.”¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, as numerous scholars have concluded, *indigenismo-mestizaje* is a particularly pernicious racist ideology precisely because it pretends to be raceless.¹⁰⁶ This social history results in a complex reality in Mexico in which “Indian ancestry has been proudly acknowledged . . . [but] society . . . clearly values whiteness as both a status symbol and as an aesthetic.”¹⁰⁷

In recent years, social scientists have noted the contradiction between the raceless discourse of Mexican *mestizaje* and the privileging of Whiteness that exists in everyday society.¹⁰⁸ Specifically, Mónica Moreno Figueroa observes that “passing towards ‘whiteness’—in its peculiar Mexican ver-

103. Sánchez-Rivera, “What Happened to Mexican,” 84–88; Etienne Balibar, “Is there a “Neo-Racism?,” in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 25.

104. Knight, “Racism, Revolution,” 86.

105. Gómez Izquierdo, “Racismo y nacionalismo,” 181.

106. Castellanos Guerrero, Gómez Izquierdo, and Pineda, “Racist Discourse,” 221; Gómez Izquierdo, “Racismo y nacionalismo,” 117–81; René Flores and Edward Telles, “Social Stratification in Mexico: Disentangling Color, Ethnicity, and Class,” *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 3 (2012): 486–94; Mónica Moreno Figueroa, “Distributed Intensities: ‘Whiteness,’ Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism,” *Ethnicities* 10, no. 3 (2010): 387–401; Martínez Casas et al., “Different Faces.”

107. Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits*, 280.

108. Andrés Villarreal, “Stratification by Skin Color in Contemporary Mexico,” *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 5 (2010): 652–78; Moreno Figueroa, “Distributed Intensities,” 391; Martínez Casas et al., “Different Faces”; Cerón-Anaya, *Privilege at Play*.