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ARTICLE: CLUSTER VII: RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY: The Construction of Mexican Identity*

* This paper is part of a work in progress entitled "Race and Ethnic Relations in Mexico" (Diego Vigil and Felipe H. Lopez). Felipe H. Lopez**

BIO:

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SUMMARY: ... Indigenous identity has been portrayed as being fixated in time and space, and has been created by or imposed within a historical power relation, where the mestizo intellectuals and politicians have many times represented and created stereotypical indigenous identities. ... In Mexico as well as in the United States, the mestizo image has been promoted as the main Mexican identity. Even though the mestizo image supposedly acknowledges the contributions of both indigenous and Spanish cultures, the contributions of indigenous people in Mexican history have been recognized in theory only, while present-day indigenous culture and people have not been accepted. ... This push to take on a new identity has persisted in the twentieth century as the Mexican government has tried to incorporate indigenous people into mainstream life through the educational system. ... The hispanista ideology persisted until the mid 1930's when the indigenistas started to gain popularity. ... The indigenous culture that existed in Mexico molded the Mexican society. So if they were going to search for a Mexican identity, this identity was to be found in indigenous culture and traditions. ... Vasconcelos formulates the idea of a mixed race which would combine the best of the indigenous people and the Spaniards to form a cosmic race. ... It is clear that even though Vasconcelos advocated the mestizo ideology, he saw no place for indigenous people in Mexican society. ...

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Indigenous identity has been portrayed as being fixated in time and space, and has been created by or imposed within a historical power relation, where the mestizo intellectuals and politicians have many times represented and created stereotypical indigenous identities. The Mexican identity has been a creation of those people who want to gain and maintain political power. Those who have used indigenous ideologies to create a

Mexican identity have manipulated or co-opted indigenous identities to empower themselves. I would like to discuss indigenous identity from an indigenous point of view and use this opportunity to advocate the need to open spaces for the different voices within the contemporary Mexican and Chicano society and rhetoric.

I believe that identities are always evolving; they are not static. The continuous Mexican migration to the United States not only enriches our society, but also brings us new challenges. The Mexican migration movement has become more diverse within the last 30 years. The participation of Mexican indigenous immigrants in this phenomenon is reshaping Mexican/Chicano identities in the United States, yet this new migration pattern has not been discussed in the mainstream Chicano and migration literature.

In the so-called postcolonial period in Mexico, indigenous people continue to struggle to be recognized as a group. Therefore, one has to question, post-colonial for whom? Clearly, it is not for the indigenous people whose existence, until 1994, was largely ignored. However, with the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, the world woke up to encounter real indigenous people who have endured hundreds of years of first, Spanish, then mestizo domination. We no longer were part of the past, but of the present. Now we want to be actors in defining our identities and histories. Historically, indigenous people's identities have been constructed by outsiders and there was, and continues to be, a lack of real discussion and participation in the process of lo mexicano or mexicaness (by an extension lo Chicano). This process has been out of our range, despite the rhetoric that indigenous people are the platform of the construction of lo mexicano. Indigenous people have been considered as something negative or a problem for Mexico.

In Mexico as well as in the United States, the mestizo image has been promoted as the main Mexican identity. Even though the mestizo image supposedly acknowledges the contributions of both indigenous and Spanish cultures, the contributions of indigenous people in Mexican history have been recognized in theory only, while present-day indigenous culture and people have not been accepted.

Throughout Mexico's history, disputes and debates have occurred as to what the Mexican image should be. Although Mexico has long been a heterogeneous

place, where many different indigenous groups have cohabitated, Mexican identity focuses mainly on the Aztecs' past, disregarding all other ethnic groups, thus suppressing the histories of other ethnic groups.

The debates on this issue go as far back as the colonial period. The glorification of the indigenous past is found as early as the 1690s by Sig^{<um u>enza y Gongora.} n2 Sig^{<um u>enza y Gongora} wrote an account of a riot that took place in Mexico at that time, and in his account he glorifies the indigenous past but portrays his contemporary indigenous people as barbarous. n3 The same idea is found in some of the writings of nineteenth and twentieth century Mexican elites. Jesuits defended the virtues of Mexican Indians against the Spaniards' prejudice, and Aztec symbols were used to legitimize this patriotism or indigenous Mexican identity. For example, in the eighteenth century Francisco Xavier Clavijero, a Jesuit, writes about the need for mestizaje. He defended the indigenous past by exalting Aztec culture. He imagined that Mexico would have been a better nation if only the Spaniards had not brought Spanish women to Mexico but instead had taken Indian women in marriage, descendants of the great Aztecs who founded Mexico. Pedro Jose Marquez, another Jesuit, lamented the destruction of Aztec society because of its great past. They were educated, had teachers, books, and a government. In sum, the Aztecs were the masters, just like the Greeks in Athens. n4 However, these writers wrote not about contemporary indigenous people, but rather elaborated on a romanticization of the past.

This search for the Mexican identity continued after Mexican independence. Henry C. Schmidt writes that in the nineteenth century in Mexico the debate about Mexican identity was an important issue. n5 [*991] He writes that a liberal journalist, Jose Maria Vigil "suggested that Mexico should base its education on 'Mexicanism.' His contention was that Mexico did not know its history and did not study what was close at hand. Mexico's pre-Hispanic culture should be preserved by the government" n6 However, not all liberals had the same attitude toward indigenous people. For example, Jose Luis Mora, a liberal and a positivist, "thought the Indian[s were] inferior to the white and suggested that European colonization might solve the Indian problem." n7 The conservatives, on the other hand, "sought to identify Mexico with its Spanish past and designated Cortes as the founder of Mexican nationalism." n8

The idea of miscegenation came under attack from European positivism, the ideology of the nineteenth century. The mestizo was despised in this European ideology because he was considered to be the worst of both worlds. Mexico defended miscegenation by

arguing that the union of these two races does not bring out the worst in them, but rather the best. n9 Some of the elite, such as Rivas Palacio and Francisco Pimentel saw this process as a way to "whiten" Mexico as well. It was not until after the Mexican Revolution that the mestizo ideal started to become popular among elites. The mestizo ideal became popular in mainstream society, especially in intellectual circles. Alan Knight writes that mestizo beliefs were part of this revolutionary ideology that had prevailed in the past in elite circles. n10 For instance, he points out that intellectuals such as Justo Sierra had "defined the mestizo as the dynamic element within the Mexican population." n11 It has been suggested that one example of the epitome of mestizo power was Porfirio Diaz. n12 Furthermore, during the Porfiriato "Mexico became known as the mother of foreigners and the stepmother of Mexicans; and Indian villages which had survived, suffered losses of lands." n13

The idea of mestizaje has prevailed throughout Mexican history. As Henri Favre explains, since the elite in Mexico could not exterminate [*992] the Indians, as was done in the U.S. and Argentina, they have tried to incorporate the indigenous population into the mainstream society. n14 One way of incorporating them was through miscegenation, in order to dilute their "indianness" and eventually have an authentic Mexican race. The Mexican elite saw this amalgamation as a way of bringing the indigenous population into mainstream Mexican life, and through this mixture, to create a national identity. Despite strong acculturative forces to be assimilated, many indigenous people have not weakened their determination to hold fast to their own identity. Today, there are at least ten million indigenous people living in Mexico, who make up more than fifty-six ethnic groups. These groups since 1994 have struggled to open spaces and incorporate their voices in the dominant mestizo Mexican society.

Many times, being indigenous has been exoticized by intimately being linked with specific ritual, religion, and myth. At other times when dealing with indigenous issues, intellectuals, researchers, and politicians, the issue has been one of tradition and modernity, where the non-indigenous represent modernity and the indigenous represent tradition. Yet one finds that there is an interplay and dialectic of tradition and modernity in indigenous communities. I would say that we have a hybrid culture, where speaking an indigenous language and Spanish and/or English does not contradict our identity because we are modern too. Many of us now live in or have migrated to urban centers such as Mexico City or Los Angeles.

Therefore, we need to talk about multiple Mexican identities rather than a single Mexican identity. Mexico is not made up of only mestizos as we have been led to believe. In other words, we need to recognize the different Mexican cultures that exist within Mexican culture and, to an extent, within the Mexican community in the United States. Hence, it means we need to pay attention to the various groups involved in any process of the construction of Mexicano/Chicano identities.

In recent times the ideology of mestizaje has served as a means to try to convert indigenous people into mestizos. The Mexican government has constantly pushed for this Mexican ideology through various means, such as education and other governmental programs.

Lynn Stephen points out that:

Through a battery of state-linked institutions[,] including schools, cultural missions, newspapers, development projects, and local systems of government, Mexico's ruling party ... and its precursors made "Indian" an identity to which all Mexicans could lay claim as they sought to build a nationalist consciousness to support continued domination of the political [*993] system. n15

So this goal of promoting "Indianness" as part of the Mexican identity is a political strategy, and therefore provides a false sense of unity among the many ethnic groups that exist in Mexico, including whites and mestizos. n16 Two government programs most successful in incorporating indigenous people into mainstream society have been the education programs and the INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista). n17

Education has long been used as a means by which identity is constructed and educators have debated over this issue. In the early twentieth century, intellectuals thought it was a mistake to consider Mexico to be derived mainly from Spanish culture because the indigenous influence was stronger. Therefore, some solutions to national problems would be found by looking at the indigenous culture. One way to do this was to incorporate chapters on the indigenous past into textbooks. The problem that Mary Kay Vaughan refers to is the constant friction between Mexican historians who wish to accentuate Spanish culture versus those who want to emphasize indigenous culture. For example, in analyzing history textbooks in Mexico in the 1920s, Vaughan contends that some Mexican historians thought that indigenous people had to be pushed out of their small towns and become urbanized before they could be considered mestizos. n18 She writes,

Indian migrants to the city who adopt urban ways and customs in abandoning the rural community are usually thought of as mestizo, although the process of change is often graded and prolonged. This manner of defining race is important in understanding the attitude toward race in the texts. For all the historians, Mexico is a mestizo country. In the light of the texts, mestizo implies the absorption of an urban educated culture... . As the historians judged that there was nothing worthwhile to preserve in Indian culture, they contributed to the maintenance of class stratification and social prejudice by disparaging the Indian. n19

Hence a new identity had to be acquired in order to be civilized.

This push to take on a new identity has persisted in the twentieth century as the Mexican government has tried to incorporate indigenous people into mainstream life through the educational system. n20 For example, Judith Friedlander writes that in Hueyapan, a [*994] Mexican Village, children in first grade are presented with a very positive image of the mestizo. n21 Mestizos' houses and their living environment are depicted as being urban, very stylish, clean and comfortable. n22 On the other hand, indigenous people live in rural areas and are usually represented as outsiders. Barbara Margolies also observed this process in the San Felipe community in the Valley of Mexico. She writes, "Children are first indoctrinated in concepts of mestizaje with the story of the castes, followed by the postscript of the 'mixing' of the castes." n23 Children are taught that the "Mestizo is the symbol of Mexican nationalism and the embodiment of a doctrine that stresses 'national solidarity as a fundamental factor for the integration of the country.'" n24 This propaganda has worked in some communities. For example, according to Margolies, some people in the community where she did her research do not see themselves as more indigenous, but rather as more white. n25 One of her informants states, "We Mexicans are more like the white race than any other race, but we are all Mestizos." n26 The mestizo rhetoric is heard constantly in Mexican rural areas. n27 What is ironic about this mestizaje is that the indigenous culture of the Mexican people is supposed to be as important as the European culture, yet what is presented in this miscegenation is the romanticization of the indigenous past.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 forced people to take the indigenous population into account in Mexican society. For instance, Manuel Gamio in 1920 criticizes those people who ignored the indigenous population. n28 By 1920 the indigenous population was estimated

by Gamio to be at least twelve million, yet they were not regarded as important or even acknowledged to exist. n29 Gamio also points out that indigenous people were ignored by people who lived in Mexico City because they did not see any Indians with headaddresses on the street, theaters, or on the Plaza de la Constitucion. n30 This attitude illustrates how the mainstream society perceived Indian identity in Mexican society. Given this attitude, it is no wonder that the [*995] indigenismo movement that began was not meant to pay more attention to Indians, but rather to incorporate Indians into society. n31 Villa Rojas points out that the indigenismo movement intended to incorporate indigenous people into the social norms and national development and under the norms of social justice where the Indian and non-Indian would be just citizens equal and free. n32 But the ultimate goal of this movement was to transform the Indian into a mestizo.

Stanley D. Ivie also points out that the Mexican Revolution intensified the issue of identity in Mexican society. n33 This question divided the Mexican reformers into two groups: indigenistas and hispanistas. n34 The hispanistas believed that Mexican identity was forged at the Mexican conquest - that is, indigenous people were destined to be assimilated into the "Latin" civilization. n35 They did not see anything that the indigenous population could contribute to society except themselves as human labor. n36 However, he first had to go through a process of assimilation to be like his counterparts, the mestizos and the whites. n37 To achieve this process, Jose Vasconcelos, the first Mexican Secretary of Education, designed an educational plan which was Spanish in all aspects. n38 The goal was to eradicate the indigenous culture through education in rural schools and to forge a homogeneous society by making the indigenous people like the mestizos and whites. n39 Furthermore, like the colonial missionaries, he formed a group of teachers (which he called missionaries) who were instructed to go to small villages to educate the Indians. Vasconcelos' frustration did not stop him from trying to continue his goals. n40 Ivie points out that Vasconcelos was convinced that any attempt to educate the indigenous people, which was not based on the works from Spain, was doomed to failure. n41 Vasconcelos stated, "'Imaginad' ... 'en lo que nuestro pueblo se convertiria si s?bitamente se les pidiera que perdiera su matriz cultural europea. <exclx>Ni siquiera los Estados Unidos evitarian la regresi?n a los Pieleros Rojas!'" n42 Vasconcelos even [*996] urged literate Mexicans to take the role of teachers and teach their neighbors to read and write. He urged them to do this as their patriotic duty. A certificate of "Buen

Mexicano" was given to those who had taught ten people how to read and write.

The hispanista ideology persisted until the mid 1930's when the indigenistas started to gain popularity. Dissatisfied with the hispanistas' vision of Mexican history, they offered their own answer to the question of Mexican cultural identity. Ivie contends that for the indigenistas, Mexico was unquestionably Indian. n43 Even though the Spaniards had triumphed militarily, Mexican culture remained indigenous. n44 The indigenous culture that existed in Mexico molded the Mexican society. n45 So if they were going to search for a Mexican identity, this identity was to be found in indigenous culture and traditions. This role that the indigenous were going to play is visualized by the leaders of the revolution, as stated by Ruiz:

Las masas, indigenas por [la "R]]aza,' morenas de color, campesinos de clase, fueron la esencia del Mexico Revolucionario. Asi Rivera, Orozco, y Siqueiros dirigieron su inspiracion al campesino, describiendo el lienzo y en el muro su lucha por [la] justicia e igualdad. Lo que el artista pinto, el escritorlo puso en palabras. n46

However, this description is still a romanticization and an idealization of the indigenous people. So despite the Indians' presence in Mexican life in murals, museums, sculptures and archaeological zones, they do not have an equal social position in Mexican society. Bonfil Batalla has accurately noted that the official discourse of the government is translated in lenguaje plastica or museo-grafico, where they glorify the dead culture that represents the seed for the origin of the Mexico of today. n47 The government maintains that Mexicans should feel proud of their past because it assures Mexicans of a high historic destiny as a nation. n48 Yet, they ignore the living Indian in a segregated and marginalized society. Even in the state of Oaxaca, where the majority of the population is indigenous, the government glorifies the ancient past of the Indians. n49 So the word "indigenous," in Mexico, has become a synonym for museums, ruins, and traditional dances.

[*997] The exaltation of the Indian past in the twentieth century is perhaps best summarized in Jose Vasconcelos' book *La Raza Cosmica*. n50 Vasconcelos formulates the idea of a mixed race which would combine the best of the indigenous people and the Spaniards to form a cosmic race. n51 Vasconcelos sees in Mexico's future a new race. Therefore, Indians had to be diluted. n52 It is clear that even though Vasconcelos advocated the mestizo ideology, he saw no place for indigenous people in Mexican society. n53 So the pride that Vasconcelos thought Mexicans

should feel about the mixture of indigenous and Spanish people's blood was based not on living Indians but rather on their past.

After the Mexican revolution, indigenistas took advantage of the growing anti-Spanish sentimentⁿ⁵⁴ and emphasized indigenous languages and customs in rural life. Indigenous people were a symbol of honor and pride. However, just like the hispanistas, the ultimate goal of the indigenistas was assimilation. Unlike the hispanistas, the indigenistas did not believe that assimilation would be achieved through education alone, but by focusing on all aspects of culture. Indigenistas had to develop bilingual education, whereas the hispanistas were content teaching in Spanish only. Another difference between the indigenistas and the hispanistas is that hispanistas only see Mexican history beginning at the time of the conquest. In other words, the nucleus of Mexican culture begins at this time. Even though these two approaches seem different, they have the same goal: to "Mexicanize" indigenous people.

In contemporary Mexico, indigenous people are struggling to be accepted. Inequality still exists between indigenous and non-indigenous people. The indigenous people are still seen as backward, while many Mexicans desire the white-skinned, blond hair ideal.ⁿ⁵⁵ Mexicans are ambivalent when they are trying to define what a Mexican is.ⁿ⁵⁶ For instance, the rhetoric that Mexicans use in Mexico is that Mexico is a mestizo country, yet the image that Mexicans project abroad is much different, despite the discourse among intellectuals about the diversity that should exist in Mexico.ⁿ⁵⁷ Richard Rodriguez observes that:

Despite Mexico's many monuments to the Indian, or maybe because [*998] of them, Mexicans end up embarrassed by their own image. In Mexican Spanish, *Indio* is a slur. Mexican mothers yearn for light-skinned children. And the blond faces on the Mexican television reveal a fantasy life among Mexicans Though most Mexicans carry a measure of Indian blood, the country has a history of ferocious mistreatment of the Indian. The Indians of Chiapas have borne witness to this for centuries.ⁿ⁵⁸

The Mexican mainstream continues to ignore a large segment of their population. Those who have become culturally hispanicized are not counted as indigenous. Nevertheless, "using an ethnic basis, estimates for the number of Indians who belong to a distinct cultural group range as high as forty percent of the total Mexican population."ⁿ⁵⁹ Claudio Esteva Fabregat contends that the so-called Indian problem in Mexico

is still being debated.ⁿ⁶⁰ Mexicans are looking for other ways to bring indigenous people into the mainstream society and are trying to assess the impact of indigenous population growth. Migration to urban areas and privatization of communal land are two possible ways to usher indigenous people into the mainstream.ⁿ⁶¹ Intellectuals would like to believe that Mexico is really a country of mestizos. This ideology of *mestizaje* is racist because it glorifies aspects of the European culture such as the language and religion, while it denigrates most aspects of Indian culture, such as language, customs and dress. Mexico is a multi-cultural society, not just a society of mestizos or Aztecs.

To conclude, we need to stop thinking about Mexico as a mestizo society and go beyond the Aztec myth on both sides of the border. Mexico needs to make the link between the rhetoric and the social reality. In the United States, we also need to link Chicano discourse and the changes in migration movements (i.e., indigenous immigration). We have to focus on what we have in common, such as social and political struggles. I see indigenous and Chicano struggles as two rivers that run parallel, but never join. Our histories and struggles have been the same, but separated by an imagined border. Yet, we are here (in the United States) now and want to be part of these histories of struggles and resistance. We, indigenous people, want to be masters of our destinies.

FOOTNOTE-1:

n1. See Felipe H. Lopez & Pamela Munro, *Zapotec Immigration: The San Lucas Quiavini Experience*, 24:1 *Aztlan* 129 (Spr. 1999).

n2. See generally Carlos de Sigüenza y Gongora, *From a Newsletter*, 1692.

n3. *Id.* at 118-22.

n4. See Gabriel Mendez Plancarte, *Humanistas Del Siglo XVIII* 140 (1962).

n5. See Henry C. Schmidt, *The Roots of Lo Mexicano: Self and Society in Mexican Thought, 1900-1934* 21 (1978).

n6. *Id.* at 30.

n7. *Id.* at 22.

n8. *Id.* at 21-22.

n9. Henri Favre, *Raza y Nacion en Mexico, de la Independencia a la Revolucion*, 45 *Cuadernos Americanos* 32, 52 (1994).

- n10. Alan Knight, *Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940*, in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, at 71, 85-88 (Richard Graham ed., 1990).
- n11. *Id.* at 85.
- n12. *Id.*
- n13. Stanley Ross, *Forging a Nation*, 83 *Revista de Historia de America* 135, 137 (1977).
- n14. Favre, *supra* note 9, at 51.
- n15. Lynn Stephen, *Zapotec Women* 15 (1991).
- n16. *Id.*
- n17. See *id.* at 92.
- n18. Mary Kay Vaughan, *Counsel on International Studies, History Textbooks in Mexico in the 1920's* 8-9 (1974).
- n19. *Id.* at 8 (emphasis omitted).
- n20. See Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Study of Forced Identity in Contemporary Mexico* 144-52 (1975).
- n21. *Id.* at 147-49.
- n22. *Id.* at 147-48.
- n23. Barbara Luise Margolies, *Princes of the Earth: Subcultural Diversity in a Mexican Municipality* 140 (1975).
- n24. *Id.* (internal citations omitted).
- n25. *Id.* at 141.
- n26. *Id.* at 140-41.
- n27. *Id.* at 141.
- n28. See Manuel Gamio, *El Conocimiento de la Poblacion Mexicana y el Problema Indigena*, 1 *Ethnos* 75 (1920).
- n29. *Id.*
- n30. *Id.*
- n31. Alfonso Villa Rojas, *El Resurgimiento del Indigenismo Mexicano*, 31 *America Indigena* 1022, 1023-31 (1971).
- n32. *Id.* at 1023.
- n33. See Stanley D. Ivie, *Politica Nacional y Educacion Indigena: Una Comparacion Entre los Estados Unidos y Mexico*, 31 *America Indigena* 954, 955-75 (1971).
- n34. *Id.*
- n35. *Id.*
- n36. *Id.*
- n37. *Id.*
- n38. *Id.*
- n39. *Id.*
- n40. *Id.*
- n41. *Id.*
- n42. *Id.* at 967.
- n43. *Id.*
- n44. *Id.*
- n45. *Id.*
- n46. *Id.* at 969.
- n47. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo: Una Civilizacion Negada* 91 (1990).
- n48. *Id.*
- n49. Carole Nagengast & Michael Kearney, *Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism*, 25 *Latin American Research Rev.* 61, 63-64 (1990).
- n50. Jose Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cosmica* (1976)
- n51. *Id.*
- n52. *Id.*
- n53. *Id.*
- n54. Ivie, *supra* note 33, at 969.
- n55. See Richard Rodriguez, *The Strong Man is Unmasked as Everyman*, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 19, 1995, at M1.
- n56. *Id.*
- n57. *Id.*
- n58. *Id.*
- n59. Alexander Ewen, *Mexico: The Crisis of Identity*, *Akwe:kon J.* 28, 29 (Summer 1994).
- n60. Claudio Esteva Fabregat, *Los indios de Mexico en la sociedad nacional mexicana*, 7-8 *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, July 1991, at 129-54.
- n61. *Id.* at 149.

