

CHAPTER 1

The Children of the *Chingada*

Will Fowler

In Juan Rulfo's groundbreaking novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), the character of Juan Preciado sets out on a doomed quest to find his father.¹ His journey into the ghost town of Comala, where he discovers a world in which the dead live alongside the living, as the unresolved traumas of the past continue to haunt the present, is one full of transcendence. On one level it highlights the existential angst of the individual's quest for meaning—sought invariably in one's origins. Preciado hopes to find out who he is by discovering who his mythical and enigmatic father, Pedro Páramo, was. On another level it is a novel about Mexico and, by default, Latin America, unable to move on, gripped in a vicious circle of unresolved tragedies.² The Aztec purgatorial world of Mictlan (Place of the Dead) is all pervading, expressing the inability of Juan Preciado, the Mexican people, and the population of Spanish America to come to terms with their past. The people of Comala are unable to "move on" when they die. Their souls remain trapped, condemned to relive their tragic lives, time and again, with no hope of attaining any form of resolution or closure. They cannot come to terms with their past because of its violent nature, and yet they desperately seek salvation by trying to understand how it came to pass that their lives ended the way they did.

Preciado's quest, his people's determination to overcome their painful and incomprehensible present by deciphering their sanguinary past, was tragically doomed. Rulfo did not believe they were capable of reaching a meaningful answer in their desperate quest for identity. The orphan that Rulfo was in real life, he saw in Mexico, an orphaned country unable to break with its brutal

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and violent past. This idea was not new. The Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz had already insinuated as much in his seminal *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1985): “All men are born disinherited and their true condition is orphanhood, but this is particularly true among the Indians and the poor of Mexico.”³ It was for this same reason that Paz, like Rulfo’s Juan Preciado, believed that “The question of origins . . . is the central secret of our anxiety and anguish.”⁴ Evidently, neither in the case of Preciado nor of the Mexican people was this quest for origins going to provide rewarding or definitive answers, since the ongoing trauma of the past was too great to be overcome. The open wounds of the nation’s violent origins would never be healed. There was no therapy that could save Mexico.

The questions Rulfo’s angst give rise to are at the heart of the problems we are concerned with in this volume: the dialectic that emerges between a deterministic, primordialist, and essentialist understanding of identity and one that, in being modernist or constructivist, sees in identity the possibility of reinvention and regeneration. In other words, the issue was and remains as follows: do we exist as a nation and if so, why are we the way we are? Or is the “nation” an artificial construct and we can make of our national identity what we will? Using Benedict Anderson’s key text on *Imagined Communities* (1983)⁵ as a starting point, Peter Lambert provides in chapter two a number of key definitions of national identity exploring its relationship with violence. One fundamental point he raises is that a belief in a collective identity, “represents a way of thinking about the world, a framework from which others both within and outside the nation are viewed, providing people with an explanation both of what unites us, culturally, socially and politically, and what divides us from others outside the nation.” National identity thus embodies “a symbolic, imagined community” created around existing historical paradigms. The question remains, nonetheless, where does fiction begin, where does it end? Lambert is right to stress that a national identity cannot be forged in “a historical and cultural void,”⁶ and yet, as becomes evident in a number of chapters in this book, one of the main causes of political violence would appear to be the lack of consensus in the population’s understanding of the historical fabric of their mother country. For Rulfo it was obvious that Mexican national identity did *not* provide an explanation for its people’s cultural, social, or political unity because he did not believe there was such a unity in the first place. To echo Serge Gruzinski’s questioning of the nature of hybridity, syncretism, and *mestizaje* in Latin America, is the process whereby we develop a sense of ethnic and/or national identity a deliberate and voluntary one? Is our appropriation and acceptance of a particular national identity active or passive, conscious or unconscious, objective or subjective, permanent or temporary?⁷

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It is bearing in mind these questions that the problem of political violence becomes particularly striking. In a nutshell, is political violence an inherent Latin American trait? Does the past make Latin America “naturally” prone to violent behavior? Or is political violence the consequence and product of a specific context in which a whole range of factors are determinant, including political manipulation and legitimation? These are not idle questions. As can be seen in Lambert’s theoretical essay, when so many people have been prepared to fight and die for the nation, and when, time and again, issues of autonomy, legitimacy, unity, and identity have been invoked to mobilize people to suffer and exert violence, it is pertinent to ask whether there is a certain fatalistic inevitability about it all. In other words, if to be Mexican, for example, means to be violent “by nature,” then there is nothing a Mexican can do to change this, even if he wants to choose a different way of life. He will be violent, whatever he does, because he is a Mexican.

Thus, if Juan Preciado’s identity is inextricably tied to his father’s and he is unable to forge an identity of his own, he is condemned. If he could move on, regardless of his father’s cruelty, he would be himself. His (our) choice is one that Kath Woodward has defined as one between *roots* and *routes*, with the essentialist *rootedness* satisfying “our desires to belong, to be able to lay claim to an identity which marks us out as sharing culture and experience with those with whom we identify,” while the non-essentialist notion of *route* “permits the inclusion of situated knowledge about identity; one that belongs in place and time and has material meanings.”⁸ As Jorge Larrain reminds us, “The question about identity is therefore not just ‘who are we?’ but also ‘who do we want to be?’”⁹ This in turn allows Larrain to formulate his own synthetic interpretation of collective identities, what he terms “the historical–structural conception,” whereby there is a recognition that cultural–national identities change and evolve rather than ceasing to exist.¹⁰ The problem then lies in whether the members of a particular society–nation believe they are capable of regeneration, moving on, and breaking with the past.

As has been forcefully argued by Claudio Lomnitz, focusing on Mexico, as a peripheral postcolonial nation, national self-obsession is such a pronounced cultural trait precisely because all national projects have failed to deliver the promise “to free Mexico from subservience and to make the nation an equal of every great nation.”¹¹ If Mexicans and, by default, Latin Americans, believe that “on a theoretical plane the continent would . . . appear to be destined to play Sancho Panza to the North Atlantic’s Don Quixote: not a radical other, but rather a common, backward, and yet pragmatic and resourceful companion. An inferior with a point of view,”¹² their tendency to look to the past to excuse or account for their hopeless present (condition?) is evidently understandable. The same can be said about their need to define their very particular national

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identities. Given that, to quote Kobena Mercer, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty,”¹³ it becomes emphatically obvious that, since independence, most Latin American countries have never quite ceased to be in crisis. Or to put it differently, crisis has been the norm rather than the exception. As a result the quest for identity has been an ongoing painful process.

It is following on from this that we can appreciate how Rulfo’s quandary stemmed from a burning awareness of the existence of a culture that was, at the time, perceived by many as doomed. History was perceived to represent a fundamental part of the sense of national identity. In the same way that an individual’s memories of his or her childhood experiences enabled him or her to have a sense of identity, a nation’s history and its historiography gave its people a parallel collective sense of national identity. In Rulfo’s universe, his national–cultural identity was one characterized by its heightened violence (his father was killed during the *guerra de los cristeros*) and hence there was simply no way in which Juan Preciado, Rulfo, or his compatriots could ever aspire to become anything different or other than the condemned people that they were. If the Jews were a “chosen” race, the Mexicans were a “condemned” one. In *Pedro Páramo*, Preciado fails to attain enlightenment. This first-person narrator dies halfway through the novel and is condemned to listen to the voices of the dead of Comala relive the fragmented moments of their tragic and violent past, again and again, forever.

Gabriel García Márquez’s best-selling masterpiece *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) (1967), applies Rulfo’s tragic interpretation to the Colombian setting of Macondo and the Buendía family. The Buendías and, by default, the people of Colombia (and Latin America) feature in his novel as a group who are unable to break away from the cruel fate Destiny has set out for them. Everything that happens in the novel, we discover, has been written beforehand in Melquíades’ parchments. The people of Colombia–Latin America are thus condemned, in this case, to one hundred years of solitude, without a second opportunity on earth. The story of Latin America is, in this sense, a chronicle of a tragedy foretold, a story in which the tragic denouement is known from the beginning. The original sin represented in the incestuous consummation of José Arcadio and Úrsula’s marriage results in the Buendía family (and the people of Latin America) being damned from the outset.

With the mythical foundational stories of most Latin American nations dripping in blood, this dark understanding of the meaningfulness and identity (or lack thereof) of their respective peoples is perhaps not so surprising. Violence was an essential and intrinsic part of everyday life in the ancient indigenous cultures of preconquest America. It was also equally acute in the

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Conquistadors' Spain. While young men were sacrificed on the top of pyramids on one side of the Atlantic, on the other the Holy Inquisition tortured them using a whole array of highly imaginative, perverse, and profoundly sadistic contraptions. The so-called meeting (*encuentro*) of these two cultures in 1492, with the subsequent genocide of the Amerindian population (in Mexico alone, the indigenous population went from 20–25 million in 1519 to 750,000 in 1630)¹⁴ was not one that was characterized by its peaceful nature.

But does this mean that a Mexican is condemned from birth because he or she is the descendant of a *tlatoani* who committed the original sin of making a living cutting the sacrificial victims' hearts out with an obsidian knife? If we believe that they are, we are saying that our national-cultural identity is a constant, unchangeable, predetermined, inherent, and ultimately *essential* element of our self. "We" are not individuals from a particular place or time. We, whether we like it or not, are part of a collective and historic we. We are saying that we are inherently brave, cruel, or hopeless, because of what some great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather may or may not have done as he woke up one summer morning.

What is obvious is that the very notion that we can explain the way we are through an understanding of "our" collective past (one that we cannot remember in empirical terms) highlights the importance of history. In other words, national identity depends on historiography—and historiography is a constructed interpretation of the past, heavily influenced by the needs and concerns of the present.

In this sense national identity is "constructed." We elaborate a collective narrative, constructed to give meaning to our development (or lack thereof) that explains and justifies our past and our present and that gives "us" a sense of identity. As is explored in most of the chapters in this book, there are definitely active forgers of identity engaged in defining and explaining the characteristics of their compatriots. Sometimes they are government officials, sometimes they belong to the elite, sometimes they are influential writers or filmmakers. Marco Landavazo's chapter (three) on the language of nationalist violence in Mexico presents us with a constellation of individuals and institutions that have assisted each other in constructing a sense of identity relying on a violent rejection of all things Spanish. Intellectuals such as Carlos María de Bustamante, revolutionaries such as Miguel Hidalgo, José María Morelos, or Pancho Villa, and government bodies such as the Department of Public Education have all played an active role in forging a national identity that relies on Hispanophobia. Likewise, Antoni Kapcia, in discussing the (re)construction of Cuban historical identity (chapter four), in particular after 1959, highlights the role played by the revolutionary vanguard, which consciously constructed a new revolutionary nation by reconstructing "old

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ideals" such as nineteenth-century notions of *cubania*, *cubanidad*, and *Cuba Libre*. Julia Buxton's study on political violence and national identity in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela (chapter seven), similarly, gives great importance to Chávez and his supporters' elaboration of a "new" understanding of what it means to be Venezuelan following the triumph of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution. There are members of a political class, including Chávez, actively involved in building a collective sense of identity based, in this case, on an eclectic mix of ideas including socialism, Christianity, and the veneration of nineteenth-century "patriotic" heroes. Peter Lambert's chapter (eleven) on Paraguay is equally eloquent in demonstrating that a particular political class, in this case represented by the officers and the Colorado Party that supported and benefited from General Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship (1954–1989), was able to develop a dominant hegemonic political discourse that threaded together a narrative of shared histories, images, myths, symbols, and traditions to legitimate the Colorado Party's rule and justify its use of political violence and repression.

Needless to say, the fabrications of these "identity builders" have not gone uncontested. The absence of consensus is perceived, in a number of chapters, as being at the heart of much of the violence that has plagued Latin American politics since independence. In Buxton's chapter on Venezuela, the violence of recent years has originated from attempts by Chávez and the opposition to forcefully impose their visions of what it means to be Venezuelan: "The political violence of the Chávez period can be understood as a clash between two contrasting visions of the role of the Venezuelan state, the goals of the country and the nature and meaning of Venezuelan citizenship in the context of profound institutional decay."¹⁵ In chapter six, Marisol Dennis interprets Colombia's culture of violence along similar lines, blaming the failure of the warring factions to elaborate an inclusive sense of national identity for the repeated cycles of war and killings that have come to characterize the country's past. In Michael Goebel's chapter (twelve) on Argentina, we can see echoes of these issues in the discussion of the violence of the 1960s–1980s. In this case, two opposed nationalist interpretations of what it meant to be Argentine and what "anti-Argentine" activities entailed are seen to have legitimated much of the political violence of the period. Whether it was the right-wing paramilitaries or the Junta that came to power in 1976, determined to "save the nation" from subversive Marxist anti-Argentine terrorists, or the *montoneros* who took it upon themselves to fight the anti-Argentine capitalist traitors of the *pueblo-nación* who they condemned for being prepared to sell off the national patrimony to multinational companies, both sides used a nationalist discourse to justify their actions.

The fact that these visions of national identity are contested highlights moreover the existence of "alternative identity builders" (i.e., forgers of a collective

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identity who are not in a position of power). José Carlos Mariátegui's idealized interpretation of the Incas as an agrarian communist society in the late 1920s¹⁶ and Pablo Neruda's epic poem *Canto General* (1950) are two well-known canonical examples of Marxist authors, persecuted by the authorities, who attempted to forge their own visions of Peruvian and Latin American identity, respectively. Sarah Barrow's chapter (eight) on the representation of Peruvian national identity and political violence in two films (Francisco Lombardi's *La Boca del Lobo* [1988] and Marianne Eyde's *La Vida es una Sola* [1993]) is an important contribution to this debate. Her study exemplifies the complexities attached to any interpretation of national identity, in this case with reference to Peruvian-ness and the Dirty War of the 1980s. In one sense, her chapter demonstrates the more nuanced and sophisticated interpretations of national identity that can be seen to be constructed, in this case through cinema. In another, her analysis is suggestive in the manner in which we can see how in the case of these two filmmakers' work, they do not limit themselves to reflecting a "preexisting national identity, consciousness, or culture", but rather actively construct it "in and through representation." Francisco Domínguez's tribute (chapter nine) to a long line of Chilean left-wing writers, journalists, and singers, whose work dates from the beginning of the twentieth century up until 1973, provides us with a clear indication of how countercurrents can develop and thrive on the margins of the official discourse. In this sense, Salvador Allende's electoral victory in 1970 was not an aberration, but the culmination of a seventy-year trajectory in which a particularly resilient Chilean labor movement developed, forging its very own interpretation of Chilean national identity, which (like post-1959 Cuban identity) was intrinsically socialist.

However, although all of these identity builders are active, and they manipulate history to suit their present needs, they benefit from the existence of passive identity builders, those who willingly, consciously or unconsciously, accept and appropriate the identity that has been defined for them. It is worth remembering Roland Barthes' take on how myths are forged. A key point Barthes makes is that myths cannot be arbitrary. A myth such as that there is something known as a "national identity" may well be a construct, a fabricated fiction, designed and devised by a group of cynical individuals in a particular context of time. However, if it does not ring true to a significant proportion of the population, it will never gain credibility. To paraphrase Barthes, for us to associate an empty signifier with a signified sign, there must be a cultural correlation that results in us naturally accepting that roses equal passion; or, in our case, Mexican equals Aztec-Spanish blood-thirsty roots equals violent culture. The power of myths lies, according to

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Barthes, in their ability to “transform history into nature,” to abolish “the complexity of human acts, [giving] . . . them the simplicity of essences, [doing] away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, [organizing] a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth.”¹⁷ But for the myth to spread or become hegemonic, there must be a predisposition on our part to believe in it.

Here, of course, lies the paradox—that the fictional construct that is national identity, despite it being a fictional construct, may well reflect a real and essential national identity if a large proportion of people are prepared to believe in it. Larrain rightly reminds us that there are two different poles of culture in which concepts of national identity are played out. In the public sphere national identity is “highly selective and constructed from above by a variety of cultural agents and institutions.”¹⁸ In the social base it takes “the form of personal and group subjectivity.” When the two converge the sense of a shared community identity becomes hegemonic. State-sponsored “traditions, ceremonies, celebrations, national days, remembrance days, military parades, etc.”¹⁹ evidently play a critical role in bringing together the public and the social or private. Pierre Nora’s monumental seven volume work *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, which gave birth to the concept of “sites of memory” (“any signifying unit of a material or ideal order, which has become, by human decision or through the work of time, a symbolic component of the memory-stock of a given community”),²⁰ provides ample evidence of the manner in which history, memory, and identity can bring together the public and private spheres of a given society (in this case France).²¹ Landavazo, Kapcia, Buxton, Domínguez, and Lambert provide, in chapters three, four, seven, nine, and eleven, respectively, compelling analyses of how parallel “building blocks,” “codes,” or sites of memory have been used, recycled, and accepted in Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Chile, and Paraguay to develop (re)constructed senses of these nations’ respective identities.

As mythologists we may very well be capable of deciphering the myth, understanding the nature of the distortion, but if a majority believes in the myth, who are we to question its existence? If the majority of a population believes it has a national identity, whatever the means by which this mass deception may have been reached, this identity exists quite simply because there are people prepared to believe in it. God may not exist, it does not matter. For the millions of people who attend Holy Mass every Sunday, He is real, live, and kicking. As David Brading aptly concluded in his study on the intellectual origins and Mexican tradition of Our Lady of Guadalupe: “That human minds intervened, as much in the painting of the image as in the framing of the apparition narrative, does not alter the conclusion that, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, the Guadalupe is an inspired work of the Holy

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Spirit and the *Nican mopohua* a revelation which depicts the spiritual foundation of the Mexican Church.²²

In other words, as Peter Lambert stresses in the conclusion to chapter eleven on Paraguay, the construction of national identities is “not simply an exercise in social engineering.” The use of myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of popular memory help forge a sense of nationhood that is *popular* and, as a result, hegemonic. It is with regard to the importance of memory in the elaboration of these national narratives that the issue of continuity needs to be stressed. All concepts of national identity rely on a sequence of events, a story, in which there are causes and effects, that have come to make us the way we are. As can be seen in chapter four on Revolutionary Cuba, chapter seven on Chávez’s Venezuela, and twelve chapter on the Argentina of the Junta (1976–1983), the links that are established between a number of perceived paradigmatic events or defining moments in the nation’s past may well be contrived and arbitrary; this does not matter. What is important is that the guiding story makes sense. An essential point that is noted by Barrow regarding the Peruvian “amnesia” of the 1990s is developed fully in Martin Mullins’ analysis of the effects state violence had on Chilean national identity post 1973 (chapter ten). In the chapter, Mullins explores how the need to forget the atrocities of the Pinochet era in order to move on has resulted in a truncated national narrative and a consequent sense of loss of identity. In contrast to the other chapters in this book, which tend to interpret the abuse of concepts of national identity as one of the main causes of political violence in Latin America, Mullins’ study highlights how political violence has had the effect of crippling a nation’s sense of identity. This view evidently ties in with the argument proposed in this introductory chapter—that a history of appalling violence has made any attempt to construct a proud sense of collective identity extremely difficult in Latin America. Nevertheless, the process of national soul-searching and “identity building” or “rebuilding” has not been extinguished by this phenomenon. The opposite is probably the case, given that in times of peace and expansion we are not too concerned about why we are the way we are.

Octavio Paz’s theory that Mexicans are the children of the *Chingada*, the product of a rape, which their Spanish father committed on their Mexican mother, is representative of this.²³ Mirroring the foundational original sin of Adam and Eve in the case of the Old Testament and of José Arcadio’s rape of Úrsula in the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Paz attempted to explain Mexican national identity by focusing on Hernan Cortés’ symbolic violation of La Malinche (*doña Marina*). He gave great importance to the “innumerable meanings” of the word “*chingar*,” in particular when used as an adjective and as a noun: “*chingada*.” The woman who has been and is *chingada* is a “violated

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Mother." In becoming *la chingada* she loses her identity, "she loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she *is* Nothingness."²⁴ For Paz, the fact that Mexicans considered themselves to be the children of the *chingada*, as denoted in the celebratory battle cry "*Viva México, hijos de la chingada!*" was not gratuitous. To quote Paz:

If the *Chingada* is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of the Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal.²⁵

Therefore, for Paz, when Mexicans on the anniversary of independence shout "*Viva México, hijos de la chingada!*," they "condemn [their] origins and deny [their] hybridism." What is more:

The strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican's imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are the symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved. When he repudiates La Malinche—the Mexican Eve, as she was represented by José Clemente Orozco in his mural in the National Preparatory School—the Mexican breaks his ties with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude. The Mexican condemns all his traditions at once. . . . The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. . . . He becomes the son of Nothingness.²⁶

This is the Mexican's quandary, represented by Juan Preciado. In terms of foundational stories and perceptions of national origins, the children of the *Chingada* are the children of Latin America. Like García Márquez's Buendías, who are also the children of rape, the people of Latin America are the descendants of violence. In those countries where the Amerindian population remains significant and where *mestizaje* accounts for the ethnic composition of the majority of the population (Mexico: 70 percent; Central America: 62 percent; Colombia: 50 percent; Venezuela: 70 percent; and Chile: 70 percent),²⁷ the story of the Conquistador and the raped Indian mother is equally emblematic.

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Other conquistadors such as Francisco Pizarro may not have enjoyed such notorious sexual relationships with the locals as Cortés did, but they still raped the women of the conquered territories, both physically and figuratively. In those countries where African slaves were imported in vast numbers (Brazil and the Caribbean), the populations are, in a parallel sense, the descendants of violated black and/or Indian women. Whether it is in the Dominican Republic or in Peru, the people of these countries are, in a figurative sense, orphans, or to use Paz's definition, the children of Nothingness. Their mythical origins are deeply immersed in a cosmos of appalling violence. There are no symbolic figures that they may be proud to descend from. Their father is an arrogant, tyrannical, and uncaring European—Spanish or Portuguese. Their mother is a slut, a traitor, a weak Indian woman, or an oppressed African slave. One way or another, she is *la chingada*.

If the Latin American follows in the steps of Juan Preciado, he or she will discover a void. The origins cannot in their case provide any answers, except that they are doomed. After such a beginning, what other fate could conceivably await them? Like the narrator in Alejo Carpentier's *Los Pasos Perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*) (1953) torn in between belonging to the jungle or the city, nature or culture, civilization or barbarism, the Latin American, according to this equation, is ultimately neither here nor there. And even in those Southern Cone countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay where "the Indian question" was dealt with through extermination rather than through miscegenation, their ancestors may be predominantly European and the figure of the *Chingada* may well be absent, but the founding father figure remains the same: a murderer and a rapist.

Faced with such a compelling mythological interpretation of the violent origins of Mexican national identity, which, in true Barthesian fashion, are "read as a factual system, [rather than as] a semiological system,"²⁸ Paz went on to construct a very persuasive, albeit ultimately flawed, interpretation of his countrymen's characteristics.²⁹ Just to note one example, Paz saw in the recurrent violent and authoritarian tendencies of the Mexican people, traits that could be traced back to Spain and Tenochtitlan. Since "Mexico was born in the sixteenth-century . . . it was the child of a double violence, imperial and unifying: that of the Aztecs and that of the Spaniards."³⁰ Therefore, if the Mexicans of the twentieth century were essentially violent and authoritarian, this was because the Spanish conquistadors and the Aztecs were violent and authoritarian.³¹ Needless to say, there are examples of a parallel understanding of national identity throughout Latin America. The explanation may differ, that is, the roots of authoritarian practices may have other origins that are not ascribed to a Spanish or an Indian temperament. However, the depiction of authoritarianism and its most obvious expression—political violence—as

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being somehow an intrinsic *essence* of all Latin American national identities is one that we find throughout the region. In García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*) (1975) the character of the dictator is at least two hundred years old, conjuring up the idea that every Latin American country has been ruled by the same atrocious and eternal individual tyrant since independence. In a similar fashion, the character of Paraguayan dictator Dr. Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia in Augusto Roa Bastos' novel *Yo el supremo* (1974) is at times alive and at others dead, yet always capable of interfering in Paraguayan politics in the past, present, and future, anachronistically, without time having the ability to restrict his actions to one particular period. It is as if authoritarianism was endemic, as if it was perceived as being an unchangeable constant, past, present, and future, in the character of all Latin American nations.

The truth is, evidently, more complex than that. When we think of national identity in any Latin American country the mosaic of ethnic identities we are faced with is extensive, multilayered, and extremely diverse. Néstor García Canclini tried to summarize the essence of today's Latin American countries as being a "result of sedimentation, juxtaposition, and interweaving of indigenous traditions (above all in the Mesoamerican and Andean areas), of Catholic colonial hispanism, and of modern political, educational, and communicational actions."³² The breathtaking cultural melting pot, *mélange*, cocktail, or fruit salad of identities that is any Latin American country is suggestively captured in Gruzinski's description of Belém. Albeit long, his depiction of the capital of the western Amazon is worth quoting at length, for the issues he raises can be found (with variations) in any town or city in Latin America:

[Belém] is itself a *mélange* of eighteenth-century colonial town planning (designed by an Italian architect), of Belle-Époque Paris, and of chaotic modernity ringed by shantytown *favellas*. Neoclassical palaces by Bolognese architect Antonio Landi, decrepit early-twentieth century dwellings, middle-class high rises, and neighborhoods of shanties with open sewers all compose an ensemble as heterogeneous as it is unclassifiable. In the middle of Republic Plaza, the Teatro da Paz—an opera house as fine as the one in Manaus—rises like some strange vestige of a turn-of-the-century civilization, a lavish wreck that washed up on Amazonian shores. How should we deal with these mixed societies? First, perhaps, by accepting them as they appear to us, instead of hastily reordering and sorting them into the various elements allegedly making up the whole.³³

After all, as García Canclini noted in his study on hybridity: "To have an *identity* would be above all to have a country, a city, or a neighborhood, an

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entity in which everything shared by those who inhabit that place becomes identical and interchangeable.³⁴ Such a place or context does not exist anywhere, let alone in hybrid Latin America. As Gruzinski has shown, when discussing Claude Lévi-Strauss' distinction between "cold societies" (supposedly resistant to historic changes) and "hot societies" (that thrive on change), even the most remote tribes of Amazonia are not impervious to acculturation and miscegenation.³⁵

In brief, national identity is constructed, yet it is also assimilated. If it is a construct we respond to because we recognize, or want to recognize, ourselves in it, then it becomes hegemonic. Having said this, more often than not, the construct fails because of its selectivity, which marginalizes and ostracizes those members of a given society who do not recognize themselves in the construct (or do not want to recognize themselves in it). A superficial glance at the ethnic mosaic that makes up Latin America should suffice for us to appreciate the impossibility of anyone succeeding in imposing a singular homogeneous narrative vision of their country's national identity. Faced with such pluralistic and heterogeneous communities, in which even language is not always a unifying factor,³⁶ the whole idea that there is such a thing as "one" Mexican nation or one "true" Chilean historical identity becomes blatantly absurd. In what way are the Maya of Yucatán, for instance, included in the current hegemonic notion of Mexican national identity? In what sense are footballer Ronaldinho, singer Caetano Veloso, and Chief Raoni of the Megkronoti tribe of the Amazon basin Brazilian? What shared history could a black slum dweller in Rio share with a member of the white elite of the same city? Marisol Dennis' chapter (six) on Colombia vividly demonstrates how no single concept of national identity has ever become hegemonic in that country, at least for long, accounting for the endless cycles of violence. Gruzinski would like to believe that there is hope, that a national identity can be multifaceted, pluralistic, and fluid. As he reminds us with his upbeat reappraisal of the *mestizo* mind: "It is possible to be a Tupi—an indigenous inhabitant of Brazil—and still play a European instrument as ancient and refined as the lute. Nothing is irreconcilable, nothing is incompatible, even if the *mélange* can sometimes be painful."³⁷ Yet the political violence of two hundred years is difficult to ignore.

If we are to be honest, there are contextual factors that have led to the history of most Latin American countries being characterized by political instability, authoritarianism, and violence (there are also exceptions such as Costa Rica). Factors such as weak constitutional systems, the absence of a democratic tradition, wealth disparities, ruined economies, geographical diversities, poor communications, regional identities, racial and social tensions, foreign interventions, and high levels of illiteracy (with the provision of

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education failing to reach significant sectors of the population) cannot be downplayed when studying modern Latin America. Of course, there has been violence, and surely it is by studying the specific political, economic, and social problems that have plagued Latin America's past that the origins of instability, authoritarianism, and political violence will be found. The absence of a national identity in Colombia or the intransigence of a particular national identity project such as that developed during the *stronato* in Paraguay may contribute to and enhance the violence, but the real origins lie elsewhere. Attributing political violence to the psychology of a particular national identity is ultimately false. Notwithstanding this, human nature and conditioning have evidently played a key role in making some societies more violent than others. In the same way that Juan Preciado cannot break away from his origins and his family's violent past, the ongoing cycles of political violence that have afflicted most Latin American nations have resulted in it being very difficult for the younger generations to break away from patterns of behavior that have been played out by one generation after another.

What I am referring to may be termed conditioning factors—the weight of the past. René Girard's concept of mimeticism and its link to violence are worth noting here. Girard argued somewhat persuasively that human nature is mimetic. We copy our parents and those around us as we grow up. This is how we learn to walk, talk, and integrate in society. The downside to our mimeticism is what Girard defined as mimetic desire and its outcome: mimetic violence. We desire what others desire, not because we want it, but because we cannot help ourselves from imitating those around us. To quote Girard: "What makes the object valuable is not its price but the desires that are already focussed on it."³⁸ In a parallel fashion, we resolve our mimetic rivalry through a violence that is also (tragically) mimetic. We are obsessively imitative. Mo Hume's chapter (five) on gender, nation, and violence in El Salvador arrives at the same conclusion by focusing on the different ways discourses of national identity paired with a history of atrocious violence express themselves in the private space. Girard's mimetic repetition of an original mimetic crisis would appear to be played out, time and again, in the ritual of domestic violence that haunts between 60 and 80 percent of the population. Hume's chapter is profoundly disturbing since private and public violence in El Salvador have clearly become a way of life. Violence has become the norm, it has come to be accepted as a national characteristic, it has become hegemonic and everyday. Perhaps national identity does exist after all, in the way that we cannot help ourselves mimicking our parents, who mimicked theirs, in a macabre dance that may well date from the foundational moment in which Úrsula and José Arcadio consummated their marriage. If hope is to be found, it inevitably will entail breaking with this past.

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Isabel Allende reached this very same conclusion at the end of her Chilean family saga *The House of the Spirits* (1982). The cycles of mimetic violence that are suffered by the different generations in the novel, from the beginning of the twentieth century up until 1973, will never end unless we adopt Alba's resolution to forgive. As the character writes, uncertain as to whether her unborn child's father is the torturer who raped her, Esteban García, "It would be very difficult for me to avenge all those who should be avenged, because my revenge would be just another part of the same inexorable rite. I have to break that terrible chain."³⁹ If political violence is not to be endemic in Latin America, perhaps Allende's proposal is the only way forward. To quote René Girard:

In future, all violence will reveal what Christ's Passion revealed, the foolish genesis of bloodstained idols and the false gods of religion, politics, and ideologies. The murderers remain convinced of the worthiness of their sacrifices. They, too, know not what they do and we must forgive them. The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be time enough.⁴⁰

Globalization and the massive migration of Latin Americans to the cities, to the United States, and to Spain and Italy have been transforming the make up of most Latin American countries since the 1960s. This does not mean that expressions of Latin American identity have in any way been watered down. They remain as strong as ever, in particular, as noted by Larrain, in the popular domain, in terms of the mass enjoyment of Latin American music, novels, dance, and soap operas, with football having become "the popular consciousness of national identity."⁴¹ However, the Mexicans of today are not and cannot be the same as the Mexicans of the 1910s, or the Mexicans of the 1860s, or these of the 1810s. This does not mean that they have ceased to be Mexican, or that Mexican identity has ceased to be (re)constructed by identity builders in an ongoing process. Within such a process the fate of Mexico, and indeed Latin America, may be like that of Juan Preciado, or the character of Octavio in Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Amores Perros* (2001), who gets as far as the bus station but cannot bring himself to get on the bus and start a new life. But Mexico might also be like the character of El Chivo, in the same film, who ultimately renounces violence as a way of life and embarks on a new journey into the unknown.

What is evident is that national identity remains a contested and emotional subject. In the case of most Latin American countries, political violence has undoubtedly shared a tight relationship with it, whether as a means of imposing this identity, as an excuse to legitimize it, or, more arguably, as a result of its very nature. One way or another, it is still difficult to reach any

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categorical conclusions. The issues raised in this volume highlight the need for further research into the construction of national identities in Latin America and their troubling relationship with the phenomenon of political violence.

Notes

1. While I would not go so far as to claim, like Fernando Ainsa, that the most meaningful and representative expression of Latin American national-cultural identities is to be found in literature, it nonetheless strikes me as helpful to initiate this discussion with reference to a number of canonical literary texts, in particular Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (Mexico DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955) and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*. For Ainsa's argument that "Iberoamerican cultural identity has been defined by its narrative," see his *Identidad cultural de Iberoamérica en su narrativa* (Madrid: Gredos, 1986), pp. 23–24.
2. It is not fortuitous, in this sense, that Edmundo O'Gorman entitled his seminal interpretation of Mexico since independence as *México. El trauma de su historia* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1977).
3. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (trans. by Lysander Kemp) (New York: Grove Press, 1985), p. 85.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983, 1991, and 1994).
6. See chapter two in this volume.
7. Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind. The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization* (trans. by Deke Dusinberre) (New York & London: Routledge, 2002; first edition: 1999), pp. 19–22.
8. Kath Woodward, *Understanding Identity* (London: Arnold, 2002), pp. 156–157.
9. Jorge Larrain, *Identity and Modernity in Latin America* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 39.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–39.
11. Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico. Silent Mexico. An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 81.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
13. Kobena Mercer, "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Post-Modern Politics," in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 43.
14. Alan Knight, *Mexico. The Colonial Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 20.
15. See conclusion of chapter seven.
16. José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (trans. by Marjory Urquidí) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971; first edition: 1928), pp. 34–36.

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17. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000; first edition: 1957), pp. 126–127, 143.
18. Larrain, *Identity and Modernity*, p. 34.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
20. Definition taken from Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (trans. by Paul Gifford) (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littre, 1992).
21. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 2 vols. (English-language [abbreviated] edition; ed. by Lawrence D. Krizman; trans. by Arthur Goldhammer) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). First edition: *Lieux de Mémoire*, 7 vols (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1992). I thank Prof. Paul Gifford for taking the time to discuss Nora's theories with me.
22. David A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 368.
23. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, pp. 74–88; and Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2003; first edition: 1950), pp. 212–227.
24. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 86.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.
27. Will Fowler, *Latin America 1800–2000* (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 3.
28. Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 131.
29. For a historian's deconstruction of Paz's myths, see David A. Brading, *Octavio Paz y la poética de la historia mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002).
30. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 100.
31. It is striking to see this interpretation applied to modern Mexican history, as recently as the mid-1990s. In best-selling popular(ist) historian Enrique Krauze's award-winning *Siglo de caudillos* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1994), the phenomenon of the *caudillo* is accounted for in terms of a national psychology that can be traced back to Hispano-Mexican authoritarianism (see pp. 17–18). For a critical assessment of Krauze's interpretation, see Will Fowler, "Fiestas santanistas: La celebración de Santa Anna en la villa de Xalapa, 1821–1855," *Historia Mexicana* LII:2 (2002), pp. 395–402.
32. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (trans. by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López) (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997; first edition: 1990), p. 46.
33. Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, p. 8.
34. García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, p. 132.
35. Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, p. 12.
36. The relationship between language and national identity is not covered in the present volume, but it remains a fundamental component in any interpretation of identity. In Latin America, eighteen countries use Spanish as the official language, but this does not mean that there is such a thing as a standard "Latin American" Spanish. Accents and usage differ. Moreover, there are other languages as well (Maya, Quechua, Aymará, and Guaraní are four worthy of mention). Are

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Aymará speakers in the Andes, for instance, excluded from a Bolivian or Peruvian national identity that projects the Spanish language as the language of the collective?

37. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
38. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (trans. by Yvonne Freccero) (London: Athlone Press, 1986; first edition: 1982), p. 142.
39. Isabel Allende, *The House of the Spirits* (London: Black Swan Books, 1989; first edition: 1982), p. 490.
40. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p. 212.
41. Larrain, *Identity and Modernity*, p. 2.

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