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### **Review/Reseña**

Carrie C. Chorba, *Mexico, From Mestizo to Multicultural: National Identity and Recent Representations of the Conquest*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007.

## **Revisiting Conquest and Mestizaje in Mexican Contemporary Cultural Production**

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In this excellent contribution to identity politics and nationalism in Mexico, Carrie C. Chorba situates the shift in Mexican national identity from “mestizophile” to multiculturalism in the 1990s. Chorba links this shift to the neoliberal policies introduced by Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the subsequent Zapatista uprising in the primarily indigenous state of Chiapas, and the celebrations/protests of the Quincentennial. Due to the powerful correspondence of all three events, Mexican national identity began to

falter and fracture, exposing previously unshakeable cornerstones—such as *mestizaje*—to critique and reassessment. Specifically, conquest, the origin myth of Mexican national identity and *mestizaje*, became a central issue in the re-thinking and re-imagining of Mexican identity. In fact, Chorba argues that conquest acts as a “lightning rod” in this “moment of weakened nationalism” (5-6). During this time, conquest was re-analyzed, re-imagined and re-assessed by Mexican artists, intellectuals and politicians alike. By re-imagining the conquest, the “homogenizing, mestizophile national identity pervading Mexico” gave way to an “official admission of Mexico’s ethnic and linguistic diversity—or ‘pluriculture’” (backcover). Chorba examines the portrayal of conquest in a series of cultural products from the 1990s including the novels *Nen, la inútil* (1993) by Ignacio Solares, *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* (1991) by Carmen Boullosa, and *El naranjo, o los círculos del tiempo* (1993) by Carlos Fuentes; the film *La otra conquista* (1998) directed by Salvador Carrasco; the play *La Malinche* written by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda; and finally, the 1992 cartoon series *El Ahuizotl* in the newspaper *La Jornada*.

Importantly, Chorba demonstrates that there were several different revisitations to the place of conquest in national identity, each with vastly different outcomes and interpretations. While some of these new interpretations of the conquest successfully critiqued mestizophile discourse and promoted a new multicultural identity for Mexico, others only further reified the ideal of *mestizaje*. In the introduction, Chorba briefly describes the role of the state in the promotion of mestizophile ideology and, in particular, the shift away from this by the state under the presidency of Salinas de Gortari. Following the introduction, Chorba organizes the book into three main chapters, each containing an analysis of two cultural products that revisit conquest and mestizophile ideology in a similar fashion. In the first of these, chapter two, she compares and contrasts the novel *Nen, la inútil* (1993) and the film *La otra conquista* (1998). Both of these works attempt to reverse the effect of conquest; from trauma to love (in the case of the relationship between Spanish conquistadors and Indian women) and from harmony to violent oppression (in the case of the mass conversion of the indigenous population to

Christianity). In the following chapter, she compares two collections of stories, one by Carlos Fuentes and the other by Carmen Boullosa, that promote the advantages of a multicultural model, in particular, the multicultural values of tolerance and understanding, over mestizophile ideology. Finally, Chorba compares the play *La Malinche* and the cartoon series *El Ahuizotl*, which use parody and mimicry to critique not only the imagining of conquest in national identity, but also to critique present day neocolonial relations with the US.

Due to the stranglehold that the PRI had on Mexican politics for most of the twentieth century, the state has always had an immense influence on the imaginings of national identity (8). In the introduction, Chorba argues that both nationalist discourses (“discursive strategies that attempt to define those elements that constitute a nation”) and identity discourses (those strategies that “define who Mexicans are—as individuals and as citizens”) worked together to promote, legitimize and naturalize mestizaje as the central plank in national identity (8-9). Specifically, after the revolution the state desperately needed a “coherent” and “cohesive” discourse that the highly splintered nation could rally behind: mestizaje (9). Revolutionary politicians, intellectuals and artists contributed to the production of this collective image through legislation (the 1917 Constitution), policies, racial and cultural theories, and art that celebrated mestizaje. Embedded explicitly and implicitly in the mestizaje national narrative was a history of domination, conquest, and colonization by outside forces, first European, followed by American. In short, to be a mestizo people was to be a conquered people.

Chorba eloquently argues that it is this connection between mestizophile ideology and anti-imperialism in Mexican national identity that became a significant obstacle to the neoliberal policies of Salinas de Gortari in the 1990s. As memory and history played a central role in the creation of national identity, it follows, then, that they needed to be refashioned and rearticulated in order to accommodate the changes in the 1990s. For example, Chorba demonstrates that in his desire to enter into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Salinas de Gortari had to move away from old nationalist discourses (whether *indigenista*,

*Hispanista*, or mestizophile) to a new “modern” nationalist discourse. In part, the purpose of this shift was to de-center the importance of anti-imperial (read anti-American) sentiment in nationalism in order to accommodate a friendly relationship with the US. As an example, Chorba demonstrates how under Salinas de Gortari, there was an erasure of the Niños Héroes from multiple sites of nationalist discourse, including textbooks.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the heroic (and futile) stand taken by the Niños Héroes had been a longstanding national symbol of the struggle against American imperialism. The “downplay” of them as a national symbol marked a shift from “resistance” to “accommodation” in relations with the US, opening up the space in public opinion for Salinas de Gortari to negotiate the free trade agreement (11-12).

At the same time as Salinas de Gortari was negotiating NAFTA, Mexico and the rest of the Americas were grappling with how to celebrate—if at all—the Quincentennial anniversary of Columbus arrival in the Americas. Indigenous groups were drawing international attention to the manner in which they had been treated by various governments throughout the hemisphere. Mexico was no exception. In fact, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas would become the *cause célèbre* of this movement. Moreover, the “golden age” of Mexican identity and culture was coming to an end while the political stranglehold and hegemony of the PRI crumbled. As a result of political opposition, failed economic policies, the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968, and the government’s bungling of its response to the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, demands for democratization abounded. The confluence of all these events led to a major identity crisis and the fault lines of the mestizo as a hegemonic myth that erased the cultural history and diversity of the multiple indigenous groups of Mexico emerged (33-35).

Thus, a shift to a multicultural discourse offered several important opportunities to the Salinas de Gortari administration: it created new spaces wherein overtly neoliberal and American-friendly policies could be fashioned as part of a newly multicultural, democratic, and ‘modern’ national identity while simultaneously acknowledging the growing

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<sup>1</sup> *Los Niños Héroes* were teenage cadets who died defending Chapultepec Castle during the US siege of Mexico City in 1847.

discontent with the treatment of the indigenous peoples. In this time of economic, political, and cultural flux and instability, Mexicans began to rethink many aspects of their history, culture, and identity (25-29). In this context, Salinas de Gortari introduced a constitutional amendment that stated that Mexico was a “pluricultural” nation. Artists contributed to this shift by producing alternative interpretations of Mexico’s most salient origin myth: the Spanish conquest.

The novel *Nen, la inútil* and the film *La otra conquista* offer such alternate interpretations of two important events in the conquest: the violent and violating coupling of the Spanish conquistador and the Indian woman and the forced conversion of millions of Indians to Christianity. Until the 1990s, the most dominant understanding of the former was the Cortés-Malinche paradigm most famously espoused by Octavio Paz in *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1962). In this interpretation, Mexicans see themselves as “hijos de una tragedia,” wherein the mythic father of the nation is an oppressive foreigner and the mother a violated woman and a traitor. The latter, the story of Juan Diego and the apparition of the brown-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe, is a hopeful story of the spiritual meeting and blending of Christianity and indigenous culture. Chorba provides a brief but immensely useful analysis and critique of both Paz’s Cortés-Malinche paradigm and various theories of a syncretic and popular Catholicism in Mexico. These two cultural works make for an interesting comparison because one, in the case of *Nen, la inútil*, attempts to “[romanticize] a traumatized origin” whereas the other, in the case of *La otra conquista*, “traumatizes an idealized beginning” (59).

In the 1993 novel *Nen, la inútil*, Ignacio Solares attempts to salvage the origin myth of the mestizo from trauma (the rape of the Indian woman by the Spanish conquistador) by telling it as a romance. The backdrop for this romance is the historical events including the meeting of Moctezuma and Cortés and the two shipwrecked Spaniards, Aguilar and Guerrero, discovered in Yucatán living with the Maya. In these two events contrasting possibilities of conquest are represented: the violent clash between the Spanish and the Aztecs epitomized by the *Noche Triste* and an amorous partnership represented by the shipwrecked Guerrero, who is remembered

in history as the Spaniard that had “gone native,” married a Mayan princess and adapted harmoniously to his new life in the Americas. In between these two stories is the romantic tragedy of Nen, a clairvoyant Indian woman, and Felipe, a young and ambitious conquistador. While these two characters represent colonial stereotypes of self and other, they also transcend these binaries with spiritual and sexual similarities (44-45). Moreover, their relationship is ambiguous, marked by violation in the earthly rape of Nen by Felipe, followed by their harmonious and spiritual coupling on an alternate plane. In this novel, Solares implicitly asks what might Mexico’s national identity be today if it had an origin of love and romance rather than trauma and violence. Thus, transforming Mexicans from “hijos de una tragedia” to “hijos del amor.”

Similarly, in the film *La otra conquista*, the director Salvador Carrasco attempts to revisit the story of conquest by asserting the agency of indigenous people and culture. In this film, the director successfully challenges and blurs the three dominant interpretations of the “acceptance” of Christianity by the indigenous population: violent, resistant, and syncretic (71). The first theory postulates that indigenous people accepted Christianity because they were so devastated by conquest they had no other choice. The second theory, “the idols-behind-altars,” proposed that indigenous people accepted Christianity publicly but secretly practiced their own religion in private. The third theory argues that Christianity in Mexico is syncretic, the result of indigenous people adapting and merging Catholicism with local beliefs. The film challenges the enduring and harmonious legend of Juan Diego witnessing the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe with the bleak and violent story of Topiltzin. A young Aztec scribe, Topiltzin, survives the great massacre of Aztecs by the Spanish in 1520 only to be crushed to death by a statue of the Virgin Mary after his conversion to Christianity. Topiltzin’s conversion to Christianity is explained by all three theories (violent, resistant, and syncretic): he is forced to convert through the threat of violence while secretly worshipping an Aztec goddess and, finally, experiencing a vision merging the Virgin Mary with an Aztec goddess. In the end, his death represents the demise,

both literally and metaphorically, of his people and culture by the “other conquest.”

Chorba contends that while both *Nen, la inútil* and *La otra conquista* attempt to “revise” and “revitalize” mestizaje, in the end, both reify many colonial stereotypes. In the final scenes of *Nen, la inútil*, Solares silences Nen by only including the narration of Felipe, thus marginalizing and rendering passive indigenous women in mestizaje. Similarly, Carrasco represents indigenous culture as always one of “loss,” never as transformation. This is made abundantly clear with the sterility of Topiltzin (representing the end of Aztec culture) and being crushed to death by a statue of the Virgin Mary. In the denouement of both stories, the active voice of the indigenous population is silenced and the connection between contemporary indigenous cultures with those of the past is denied (77). As a consequence, rather than “revitalize” or “revise” mestizaje, these stories point to the “reality of mestizaje as assimilation” (75).

In Chapter 3, Chorba examines two collections of stories that do not attempt to salvage mestizophile ideology but, rather, advocate tolerance and understanding as “pillars of multiculturalism.” Specifically, she looks at *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* (1991) by Carmen Boullosa and *El naranjo, o los círculos del tiempo* (1993) by Carlos Fuentes. The former is a collection of nine versions/fragments of the life of Moctezuma told by various narrators after his reappearance in contemporary Mexico City. The latter is a collection of stories that “examine[s] the cyclical nature of history and the many peculiar ironies of the past” and how time and “historical fact” contribute to contemporary life (98-99). Both collections challenge the Western linear concept of time, the possibility of “knowing” the truth and, by extension, history, and both “discard the essentialist notion of Mexico as mestizo” (76).

In her novel *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* (1991), Boullosa does not attempt to recover the past, but rather illustrate the flaws of the historical project by using a montage of personal narratives, historical documents, and scenes from contemporary Mexican life. The context for the nine stories is the women’s discovery of Moctezuma in a park in Mexico City after a night of partying. Each of the nine stories is told by different

narrators who “debate their own ability to recreate Moctezuma fictively in various anecdotal plots, since so little useful information about him exists in historical documents” (77). However, the author’s intention is “revisionist” in that she attempts to recover and recoup indigenous culture and “infrastructure” by using the Aztec notion of time (circular, divisions of twenty) and Nahuatl syntax in her storytelling. Moreover, her objective, although un-reached and “impossible,” is the vindication of Moctezuma, who is remembered in history as a coward. Through these nine fragments, it becomes clear that indigenous cultures were never seriously integrated into Mexican life, thus making the history of mestizaje false. This leads Boulosa to the controversial assertion that, in fact, Hernan Cortés was the first Mexican (96).

In “Las dos orillas,” one of the five stories in *El naranjo, o los círculos del tiempo*, Fuentes tells a fictional story of conquest drawing on the historical figures of Jerónimo de Aguilar, Malinche/Malintzin/Doña Marina, and Hernan Cortés. Jerónimo de Aguilar was one of two shipwrecked sailors discovered by Cortés living in the Yucatán. Fluent in Mayan and familiar with local customs, Aguilar becomes a translator and key advisor to Cortés in his march to Tenochtitlán. In Fuentes’s story, Aguilar becomes immensely powerful as translator, controlling not only the communication between the Spanish and the Indians, but also the future of the relationship. This becomes particularly evident in key moments during the conquest when Aguilar translates “irresponsibly and incorrectly” (105). This connection between language, power, and conquest is further complicated with the introduction of Malintzin, a slave given to Cortés who can speak Mayan and Nahuatl. Her fluency in Mayan and Nahuatl combined with Aguilar’s fluency in Mayan and Spanish completes the communication channels between the conquistadors and the indigenous population. In the beginning, Aguilar romanticized his relationship with Malintzin as the future of both cultures: they were both bilingual and, for all intensive purposes, bicultural. However, when Malintzin, now Doña Marina, learns Spanish and rejects his amorous advances for Cortés, she effectively cuts him out of the power dynamic. This translation becomes a



treasonous act for him and ends the possibility of a “harmonious mestizaje” (115).

Chorba argues that both of these texts challenge the myth of mestizaje as falsely asserting the equal integration of both Spanish and indigenous cultures. Using important textual and narrative strategies that illustrate the centrality of language in conquest and the cyclical nature of time, both also offer an important critique to the construction of history. However, Chorba contends that the result of both cultural works is not an attempt to promote the inclusion of indigenous peoples and cultures, but rather the “heavy alignment” with Spanish language and culture (172). This is done in the case of Fuentes’s with his explicit preference for Spanish as the flexible and hybrid language and with Boullosa’s assertion that Cortés was the first Mexican. She further argues that while both authors advocate multiculturalism and its pillars of tolerance and understanding, in practice, the shift to a multicultural model did not translate into greater rights or equality for indigenous people in Mexico (122).

In Chapter 4, Chorba examines the cartoon series *El Ahuizotl* and the play *La Malinche*, arguing that their critical project was far more successful. Rather than attempt to recast the past (as in the *Nen, la inútil* and *La otra conquista*), or to critique mestizophile ideology by demonstrating the impossibility of the historical project and the lack of any true integration of indigenous people into Mexican identity and culture (as in *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* and *El naranjo, o los círculos del tiempo*), these last two works collapse the past and the present with allegory, parody, and satire. Both connect the conquest of the sixteenth century with the push for modernization in the 1990s, speaking to the deep “popular suspicions about the cyclical nature of history and the eternal nature of the conquest” (124). In addition, these two cultural works not only explicitly critiqued the popular imaginings of conquest and mestizaje, but also worked against the so-called “modernizing” project of Salinas de Gortari by pointing out the continued oppression of Mexico’s indigenous people and the absence of substantive democracy during his presidency.

*El Ahuizotl* was an immensely popular cartoon series that ran in *La Jornada* newspaper in 1992, the year Mexico was set to celebrate the

Quincentennial. The cartoon series juxtaposed the events of the sixteenth century with those of the 1990s by mimicking and mocking both conquerors and conquered, oppressors and oppressed. Both the name and the masthead for the cartoon drew on significant references from Mexican culture. The name “El Ahuizotl” was a play on the word for nuance and the “tl” suffix, common in Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs). In addition, the image on the masthead was an Aztec warrior (with feathered headdress) was featured alongside the caption “Triweekly with bad instincts, though in Hispanicized Nahuatl” and the number 500, referring to the Quincentennial. Cartoons in the series included images of conquistadors campaigning for Cortés with banners promoting modernization and unity; images of Cuauhtémoc, the last emperor, bemoaning the fact that he had been “tapped” in a bad year (mocking the well known tradition of outgoing Mexican presidents picking their successors); and images of conquistadors buying tacky tourist gifts (that tell them to go to hell in hieroglyphics) on a beach. Chorba argued that rather than revise or critique historical fact, *El Ahuizotl* used well-known historical facts to critique the current political situation in Mexico.

Similarly, in the play *La Malinche* “Mexico’s distant past and its recent history appeared irreverently satirized and eroticized on stage” (161). Written by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda and directed by Austrian Johann Kresnik, the play was highly controversial. On the one hand, the play was accused as being a vulgar, obscene, and grotesque assault on Mexican culture and, worse, this assault was by a foreigner, the director Kresnik. On the other hand, it was immensely popular with youth and lauded as an innovative critique of Mexican identity and the impact of globalization and imperialism on Mexican culture. Like *El Ahuizotl*, this play collapsed the past in the present with satire and mockery. For example, in one scene, after the sixteenth century massacre at Cholula, the cast sings the song “El Corrido de Acteal” referring to the massacre of forty-five indigenous people in a Chiapas’ church in 1997. The play also juxtaposes the Spanish celebration of the conquest of the Aztecs with the celebration of NAFTA by foreigners and Mexico’s elite. Also targeted in the play was the influx and hegemony of American popular culture, including the popularity of

Halloween and the demise of the *Día de los Muertos*; the increase in shopping malls and the decline of the tianguis (local markets); and the preference of US-trained elite (Salinas de Gortari was Harvard-educated) over UNAM graduates.

According to Chorba these two cultural works do not attempt to salvage mestizaje nor offer an alternative model in multiculturalism; rather, their focus is to critique modernization and the growing (negative) influence of globalization on Mexican culture. Instead of asserting a new interpretation of conquest, both *El Ahuizotl* and *La Malinche* compare, through satire and parody, the conquest of the indigenous people in the sixteenth century with the new conquest of Mexico by modernization, PRI hegemony, and US imperialism.

Chorba concludes the book by linking the critiques of mestizophile ideology and the reinterpretation of conquest with the Chiapas uprising in 1994. In combination with the identity crisis, Mexicans were becoming increasingly frustrated with the hegemony of the PRI and the impact of US imperialism on Mexican culture. In addition, the critique of conquest and mestizophile ideology revealed the fact that mestizos were, in fact, not a synthesis of Spanish and indigenous. Rather, mestizaje was an assimilationist project by another name. This revelation effectively removed the connection and claim to the glorious indigenous past (the Aztecs in particular) as part of Mexican identity. The Zapatista uprising became a lightning rod that illustrated not only the falsehood of the mestizo-as-hybrid myth, but also eliminated any claim on an indigenous past as the foundation of Mexican culture and identity. Finally, Chorba asks whether or not “an inclusive ideology such as multiculturalism will embrace all and will even afford rights as bestowed by a government convinced of its nation’s pluriculture” (173).

The only problem with Chorba’s analysis is that she, like Boulosa and Fuentes, supports the idea that “tolerance,” “understanding,” and the multicultural model offer an emancipatory and inclusive alternative to the homogenizing mestizophile ideology. I contend that multiculturalism is as susceptible to many of the same exclusions as mestizophile ideology. While the move away from the homogenizing force of mestizaje in the 1990s

opened up spaces for indigenous people in Mexico that were previously closed, multiculturalism should not be viewed as an inherently emancipatory discourse. Chorba discusses the “politics of recognition” central to the multicultural model, but does not recognize that there is also a “politics of difference” inherent in this discourse.

In Canada, an example she uses as one of the first nations to promote the model, multiculturalism has, after nearly forty years, demonstrated some pitfalls. In particular, the notion that diversity is to be “tolerated,” in many ways, only reinforces the Self/Other division. This is due to the fact that those marked as “multicultural” are Canada’s ethnic and racial minorities. As a result, an enduring critique of multiculturalism is that it, in fact, excludes minorities from “mainstream” Canadian identity and “ghettoizes” difference (Bissoondath 1994, Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002). Conversely, there is also a growing concern that multiculturalism and its pillars of tolerance and understanding have gone too far. This concern, largely popular in Quebec and among ultra conservatives, contends that Canadian society should not be made to be tolerant of “other” cultural values that threaten “Canadian” identity. In Quebec, this became the “reasonable accommodation” debate and has become a means to express xenophobic, and largely Islamophobic, concerns regarding the negative influence of immigrants in Canada. While I am not advocating the abandonment of multiculturalism as a model, it is, however, a discursive strategy like any other, imbued with existing relations of power. However, this is a small concern with an excellent examination of identity politics in Mexico. This book is valuable to experts, teachers and students of Latin American studies, particularly those with an interest in identity politics, popular culture, and the shift to neoliberal policies of the 1990s.

### References

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