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1. ~~which contest~~ on indigenous contestants and was billed as the "first entirely

The two racially exclusive beauty pageants have even been conflated in Maria Bibiana's hometown Necaxa, Puebla, where since the 1920s citizens have celebrated an India Bonita festival each May in which they crown two beauty queens, one from the indigenous countryside and one from the mestizo

town.<sup>2</sup> Bibiana's 1987 appearance on *Nuestro Mundo* stirred local pride when it revealed to Necaxans that their own *hija del pueblo* had been crowned "La Primera Miss Mexico." After that, she was regularly invited to the yearly crowning of Necaxa's Indias Bonitas in a ceremony staged before a three-foot-tall 1921 photograph of a young María Bibiana Uribe dressed in local indige-

first Miss Mexico? Why has the all-white Miss Mexico contest, whose winner continued on to the worldwide competition in France, been all but forgotten? What does this process of remembering and forgetting reveal about the historically changing place of Indianness in Mexican national identity?

This article focuses on the India Bonita Contest in an effort to understand nation-formation and constructions of Indianness during the early 1920s in Mexico.<sup>4</sup> It does not claim that the contest was the most important part of the movement, only that it is particularly revealing about the goals, methods, and contradictions inherent in the efforts to identify Indian culture as characteristically Mexican and to bring Indians into the national fold. These, in turn, were part of the dual process of “creating” the Mexican Indian, and of “ethnizing” the nation (or what Manuel Gamio and Moisés Sáenz at the time termed “Indianizing” Mexico, and which historian Mary Kay Vaughan has more recently referred to as “the browning of the nation”).<sup>5</sup>

4. Most literature on nations and nationalism is Eurocentric and conflates the related concepts of nation and state, as well as citizenship and nationalism, which limits the usefulness of its analyses. Nevertheless, some authors demonstrate the kinds of historical and conceptual issues that can be addressed through a hermeneutic distinction between “nation” and “state,” and also between “national identity” and “patriotism” (though I question the utility of some authors’ overconcern with typologizing and litmus tests). See Walker Connor, “A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group, is a . . .”; idem, “When is a Nation?” in *Nationalism*, ed. Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; reprint, New York: Verso, 1991); Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology”; Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, “From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Representation”; and Stuart Hall, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (1960; reprint, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993); Nicola Miller, *In the Shadow of the State: Intellectuals and the Quest for National Identity in Twentieth-Century Spanish America* (New York: Verso, 1999), esp. 137; Alan Knight, “Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910–1949,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1990); Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1997); and Claudio Lomnitz Adler, “Modes of Citizenship in Mexico,”

The early 1920s was an era of guarded optimism that followed the violence and destruction of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20). Urban cultural

political elites were motivated by a desire to transform Mexico's culturally, economically, and racially disparate peoples into a culturally cohesive, politically stable postrevolutionary nation. Indianness, they argued, was the thread that would unite the diverse populations living within the territory of the Mexican Republic and distinguish Mexico among a global family of other nation-states. To be truly Mexican one was expected to be part Indian or to demonstrate a concern for the valorization and redemption of the Mexican Indian as part of the nation. Those who rejected the country's Indianness were publicly chastised for their foreignness and lack of nationalist zeal.<sup>7</sup>

The India Bonita Contest was one among a number of parallel projects. At the same time that it was occurring, José Vasconcelos was traveling to each of the federal states to convince state legislators to ratify the creation of a federal education system, which for the first time would extend public education and the nationalist project into the rural corners of Mexico.<sup>8</sup> President Alvaro Obregón announced the creation of the famous summer school for foreigners at the Universidad Nacional in Mexico City that would soon become a launching ground for studies of popular culture and a key institution for better under-

7. See, for example, Gamio, *Forjando patria*, Manuel Gamio and José Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1926); see articles in a special issue entitled "Mexico: A Promise," *Survey Graphic* 5, no. 2 (1924); Best Maugard, *Manuales y tratados*; Coignard, "El valor efectivo"; Doctor Atl, *Las artes populares en México*; and José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía* (1946; reprint, Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1996), which shows great hostility toward the trend. See also Rick A. López, "The Morrows in Mexico: Nationalist Politics, Foreign Patronage, and the Valorization of Mexican Popular Aesthetics," in *Casa Mañana: The Morrow Collection of Mexican Popular Arts*, ed. Susan Danly (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2002); Vaughan, *Cultural Politics*, 44–46; and Miller, *In the Shadow of the State*, 137

standing “the Mexican people.”<sup>9</sup> The Secretary of Transportation and Communications, after a drawn-out debate over whether Mexico needed roads, announced plans to link together the country with new highways.<sup>10</sup> This was also the time when an effort to name a national tree led to public debate about whether the ahuehuete or the ceiba was more distinctly Mexican.<sup>11</sup> These initiatives and others like them were very different from one another, and of radically different scales, but they were all early efforts toward the common goal of creating a culturally cohesive Mexican population with a shared identity and some level of solidarity. Together, they highlight the interrelationship between cultural assumptions and political policy at the closing of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>12</sup>

9. Alvaro Obregón, “El intercambio de estudiantes con Estado Unidos,” *El Universal*, 21 May 1921; J. M. Puig Casauranc, *Addresses Delivered by Dr. J. M. Puig Casauranc at Columbia University* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1926), 9; Frances Toor, “Mexican Folkways,” *Mexican Folkways* 7, no. 4 (1932); and idem, *Mexican Popular Arts* (Mexico City: Frances Toor Studios, 1939). See also Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press,

Though the Indian-oriented nationalism promoted through the India Bonita Contest became important in the early 1920s, it was not yet a dominant discourse. In fact, many civic leaders rejected altogether this new project of linking Mexican national identity to living Indian cultures, preferring a continued focus on more entrenched discourses that looked to Mexico's Spanish roots and its prequest Maya and Aztec past.<sup>13</sup> And some advocated a focus on a form of mestizaje that evaded or minimized the need to validate the idea of Indianness.<sup>14</sup>

Nor was the India Bonita Contest an uncompromised nationalist act. As will become clear, part of the reason Félix Palavicini, ex-revolutionary and owner of *El Universal*, initiated the contest was to draw public attention to his newspaper.<sup>15</sup> *Excelsior*, his newspaper's rival, bitterly criticized the contest, going so far as to accuse *El Universal* of drawing attention to itself by dishonestly promoting a mestiza of the rural elite as a humble Indian; María Bibiana Uribe, it falsely charged, did not even speak an indigenous language. Hoping to discredit its competitor, *Excelsior* exploited people's fears of being played for fools by Bibiana, who supposedly was sitting in her hometown of San Andrés Tenango laughing at the *catrines* (toffs or dandies) whom she had successful





tive identity in modern Mexico. It also examines some of the implications of the discourses that emerged in Mexico during the early 1920s.

#### **The India Bonita Contest**

The India Bonita Contest began in January 1921, when Félix Palavicini, founder and director of the prominent periodical *El Universal*, told his staff that he wanted to celebrate the Mexican Centennial by sponsoring a contest that would bring greater attention and sympathy toward Indians as part of Mexico, and to make them an important concern for cultural and political leaders.<sup>19</sup> Palavicini informed his staff that he wanted the contest to rival the recent success of the newspaper's *Concurso de la Obrera Simpática* (Most Likable Woman Factory Worker Contest).<sup>20</sup> The public announcement for the India Bonita Contest stated that it had long been the custom to award prizes for the beauty of a woman or for the inspiration of a poet, but no periodical or maga-

accomplish, the newspaper would solicit outside entries. The contest would run from January through August 1921, and the winner would receive a prosperous and respectable *padrino* (godfather) selected by *El Universal* along with a 3,000 peso prize (which was 15 times larger than the normal prize for public competitions, and eventually grew to over 10,000 pesos worth of cash and prizes).

Rafael Pérez Taylor and Hipólito Seijas, the chief architects of the contest, expressed concern about the distrust they would encounter on the part of Indians, whom they claimed were separated by rigid social barriers from urban white and mestizo society.<sup>22</sup> They became further disheartened when their efforts to recruit contestants in the regions surrounding Mexico City were met with evasion, and even hostility. Distrust was exacerbated by language barriers, since neither the writers nor the photographers spoke any indigenous languages, and few of the women they approached spoke Spanish. Despite Taylor and Seijas's efforts, after several days the newspaper still lacked a single contestant.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Seijas decided on a change of strategy. He gave up on the outlying communities, and instead turned to marketplaces within the city's Indian barrios to search for *gatitas*.<sup>24</sup> (In the parlance of the time, the deprecativ term *gatita* was often used by white middle- and upper-class urbanites to refer to young indigenous girls, especially migrants who came from rural areas to the city, where they developed ties with wealthy whites through some form of menial employment whether working a market stall, grinding corn into *nixtamal*, or cleaning houses. The term also carried a licentious connotation, since it often suggested a certain kind of sexual allure.) Since *gatitas* had experience with urban whites, Seijas reasoned they would be more likely to have at least some working knowledge of Spanish and perhaps be more willing to talk to the organizers. These *gatitas*, then, would be sufficiently exotic for the purposes of the contest, but not so "Other" as to be inaccessible.

Seijas began combing the vending stalls and the rows of women hunched over metates in the market section of the neighborhood of San Antonio Abad, and within the first hour he identified a potential candidate. With some effort, he convinced her to be photographed and entered in the contest.<sup>25</sup> This first

22. Julian Sorel, "La India Bonita de Mexico: ¿Por qué triunfó María Bibiana Uribe?" *El Universal*, 7 Aug. 1921.

23. "La apoteosis de la India Bonita," *El Universal*.

24. Ibid.

25. "El Concurso de la India Bonita abarcará toda la república," *El Universal*, 25 Jan. 1921.



Figure 1. Charro and china poblana stereotypes performing the famous *jarabe tapatio*. Source: Frances Toor, "El jarabe antiguo y moderno," *Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras*, 1921, p. 10.

Tehuana and china poblana outfits were culturally and politically safe and racially neutral. They provided a nonthreatening way of celebrating Mexican popular culture, aided by their similarity to European peasant outfits. (It was also common to modify the costumes to exaggerate their resemblance to French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch peasant vestures.)<sup>29</sup> They promoted Mexican culture while inviting comparisons to European folk traditions, and they celebrated regional traditions while deflecting attention from the country's cultural fragmentation, rural exploitation, and the gulf that separated existing aesthetic canons from the reality of Mexico.

The type promoted by the India Bonita Contest, in contrast, drew greater attention to Mexico's racial diversity, its cultural fragmentation, and the aesthetic gulf dividing urban Whites from rural Indians. The India Bonita Contest did not explicitly critique Mexican contemporary society. Instead, contest organizers focused on marginalized rural Mexico in the name of the new pop-

29. See, for example, the way images are paired in "Lleno de atractivos fue el Día Alemán en las Fiestas del Centenario," *Excelsior*, 18 Sept. 1921; and in "Mujeres más bellas de México," *El Universal*, 17 July 1921.

ulist national politics promoted by the Obregonista state, and with the declared goal of creating a more inclusive definition of what it meant to be Mexican.

Hoping to reorient public opinion about the place of indigenous peoples within the Mexican nation, coordinators conducted the India Bonita Contest much like an education campaign, periodically providing the public with examples, practice, and reenforcement. They began by declaring that they were searching for *indias legítimas* who were “bonitas.” As *El Universal* identified suitable examples, it published portraits along with short explanations of how the depicted subjects related to the promoted ideals. Articles were at times explicit about some of the characteristics that organizers sought, such as an oval face, dark skin, braids, perfect teeth, and a “serene” expression. For the promoters these were not just signs of Indianness, but specifically features they wanted to mark as positive Indian characteristics. This becomes clear if we compare these idealized characteristics to the way *indigenas* were typically caricatured in the popular press: hunched, blank-eyed, disheveled, graceless, filthy, and with thick red drooping lips.<sup>30</sup> The published photos and written profiles not only demonstrated what the organizers considered indígena, but what they thought beauty might mean in relation to indigenous peoples, who had been excluded from established canons of Western beauty.

Readers were then invited to submit entries of their own. Initially, outside entries conformed to established criteria. But with time they tended toward whiter women disguised in folkloric dress, or indias whom the sponsors did not consider bonitas.<sup>31</sup> Seijas then put the process back on track by publishing more of his own “discoveries.” By the later months of the contest, entries strayed less from the organizers’ expectations, and fewer lessons in Indianness and nonwhite public beauty were necessary.<sup>32</sup> (See figure 2. Note the aesthetic

Figure 2. Some India Bonita contestants.  
Source: *El Universal*,  
17 July 1921.



The peculiar way the India Bonita Contest was promoted becomes clearer when we compare it to the Concurso Universal de Belleza. Both contests objectified women and feminine beauty, yet we find important differences between the two events. Parisian planners of the French-based Concurso Universal de Belleza invited different countries of the world to send national representatives, and *El Universal* took charge of organizing the search for Miss Mexico.<sup>34</sup> Since it was based upon a relatively agreed-upon canon of beauty, the organizers of the Mexican branch of the competition (some of whom were also involved in the India Bonita Contest) issued a simple call for photos of

James Oles (Washington: Smithsonian Institutional Press, 1993), 23; and Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano: Ensayos sobre cultura popular y nacionalismo* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1994), 163.

34. "Gran Concurso Internacional de Belleza," *El Universal*; and "El Universal fue el primer periódico de América que realizó el Concurso Mundial de Belleza," *El Universal*.

Mexican beauties. No training of the audience was necessary, nor did the newspaper publish any photos until after the finalists were selected (see Figure 1).

figure 4) Doubting their own claims that these “indias” were indeed “bonitas,” the organizers back-tracked by announcing that in selecting these finalists, “the judges considered only the Indian features of the contestants, and in no way were they guided by ideas of beauty or personality.”<sup>36</sup>

Contest organizers were also ambivalent about acknowledging any agency





clothing (see figure 4). The physical similarity among the contestants is striking, suggesting that the judges shared a fairly narrow definition of what Indian

Indian. This contest, he said, was a nationalist act that reminded everyone that even though they had been oppressed and kept down, Indians remained a vital part of Mexico. Gamio stressed that the contest marked an important first step toward culturally integrating the populations of Mexico because it helped bring Indians into the national fold and drew attention to the need for their economic advancement and redemption. He insisted that it was crucial that the winner be an authentic Indian, and he guaranteed us that María Bibiana Uribe was the real thing. Should anyone doubt his judgment, he was prepared to compare her physical measurements to Jenk's Anthropomorphic Index, a table of the ideal bodily measurement of each race.<sup>45</sup>

Heartened by the judges' comments, the newspaper expressed satisfaction

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her language (“Mexicano” [Náhuatl]), and the specifics of her racial lineage (“Aztec”).

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Figure 6. María Bibiana on the cover of a Mexican magazine, holding a lacquered bowl from Olinálá. Source: *El Universal Ilustrado*, 17 Aug. 1921.

our sky, our countryside, our forests. . . . [T]his pretty and fortunate little Indian girl brings with her all the good of the nation.”<sup>50</sup> Published photos of Bibiana further emphasized her indigenoussness, along with her simplicity and purity (see figures 5 and 6).

Just hours after the judges’ vote, journalist Jacobo Dalevuelta interviewed María Bibiana in the offices of the newspaper.<sup>51</sup> Dalevuelta recounted that when he asked for her age, she responded, “I don’t know, Sir, I have no idea.” At first, this gave him pause, he claimed, but upon further reflection he realized that there was no reason she should know her age:

50. “La representante de la raza,” *El Universal*.

51. Dalevuelta [pseud.], “Mi entrevista con la India Bonita,” *El Universal*. For further discussion of the India Bonita Contest as a gendered performance, see Adriana Zavala, “Dressing and Undressing the Indigenous Fe/Male Body in Mexico: Fine Art, Popular Visual Culture, and Performativity, ca. 1910–1950” (Ph.D. diss., Brown Univ., forthcoming). For more on theater and the consolidation of Mexican popular stereotypes, see Aurelio de los Reyes, *Cine y sociedad en México, 1896–1930*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Univ. Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993), esp. vol. 2; and Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano*.

What difference does it make to her whether she is 15 or 20? In her forests, under the protective shadow of giant pine groves, surrounded by the exquisite aroma of gardenias, this mountain-girl contemplates the natural world that has bestowed upon her such beauties. Bibiana lives in peace and tranquility, rising early and meeting the sun and moving through the morning breeze. She strolls through the woods singing the song of life, watching the love of the birds nesting in the swaying boughs. Picking flowers as she goes, to carry them to her village church.<sup>52</sup>

Dalevuelta further exoticized her by rendering her speech in an exaggerated Indian dialect, making her seem exotic, rustic, and uneducated. He concluded the Spanish-language interview with María Bibiana (who spoke very little Spanish at the time, though Dalevuelta never informs the reader of this) by asking if she was happy:

Are you happy, Bibiana?	¿Eres feliz, Bibiana?
Well . . . who knows, sir, who knows.	Pos . . . quen save, señor quen save.
Do you know what it is to be happy?	Sabes lo que es ser feliz?
No, sir, what is that?	No, señor ¿Quee's eso? <sup>53</sup>

The popularity of the India Bonita Contest catapulted María Bibiana Uribe into the center of Mexico City social circles, and she began receiving invitations to numerous theater performances, concerts, and dinner parties, and many musical scores, plays, songs, and poems were penned in her honor. On 11 September the musical score for a foxtrot called “La India Bonita” filled an entire page of *El Universal* and was flanked by images of the composer and of María Bibiana (see figure 7



tains, among the indios. But the little the play did to positively portray Indians was undermined by its closing monologue delivered in a supposedly Indian dialect that mocked Indians as ignorant bumpkins.<sup>55</sup>



“does not give us a production-line depiction of a mestiza, an opulent tehuana, or an enticing gatita china poblana, but rather of the simple type, a plain poor Indian girl, belonging to the indigenous races of the republic.”<sup>60</sup>

The interest in revaluing living Indians as “muy mexicano” was spreading, especially among Left-leaning nationalists. It was at this time, for example, that Diego Rivera returned from more than a decade in Europe to begin his studies of Mexican popular culture, which gave rise to his famous murals. Asked about his decision to return, Rivera replied that he wanted to study the aesthetics of Mexico’s popular Indian classes, which he believed could provide an unexplored fount of inspiration and beauty. That which European artists had been striving for without success, he argued, was found everywhere in Mexico, but remained unappreciated and poorly understood.<sup>61</sup>

These were the years when Jorge Enciso, Roberto Montenegro, Dr. Atl [Gerardo Murillo], Adolfo Best Maugard, and many others were returning from Parisian, Spanish, and Italian avant-garde circles and began experimenting with how the modernist notions they helped develop in Europe might relate to postrevolutionary Mexico. These cultural nativist artists dedicated themselves to forging a new artistic orientation that identified particular aesthetic traditions as indigenous and valorized them as “muy mexicano.”

One journalist wrote, “Our artistic revolution consists .BLconsistsLtOóq;e TOáEL”rtis’

tive and intentionality of the “state.” In the movement to exalt the Mexican Indian, we find that the state was actually something of a Johnny-Come-Lately. And when it did become involved, it was at the urging of intellectuals, artists, and commercial interests who actively courted government support for their cultural nationalist movement. In the case of the India Bonita, it was not until five months into the contest, after it had already become a public success, that the state finally joined the act. But when the government did enter the

nation.<sup>65</sup> Another called for the systematic study of Mexico's national territory to find out what groups lived where, how they lived, in what numbers, what languages they spoke, and what traditions they followed. The information was to be translated into a set of maps to provide visitors to the Centennial with a visual representation of the Mexican nation.<sup>66</sup> Such proposals were overly ambitious for 1921 given the shortage of expertise, the paucity of data, the lack of time before the September Centennial, and the lack of funds; but these same ideas would be pursued during the decades that followed.<sup>67</sup>

The India Bonita Contest was part of this early effort to discover, validate, and publicly promote things distinctively Mexican. Like the Vietnamese or Subcontinental Indians who served as representatives of Greater France and of the British Empire at Colonial World Fairs, María Bibiana was both the representative of, and the justification for, Mexico's colonization of its own back yard.<sup>68</sup> But, unlike these other cases, the India Bonita was treated not as an annex to the nation, but as a central component of the true national consciousness.

Equally important was that the India Bonita extended the nationalist project into the realm of aesthetics. Emerging idioms of aesthetic valuation and performativity, and the ways they were read onto the human body, were integral to the broader project of dominating and gendering the diverse populations that lay within the mapped boundaries of Mexico and defining them in

65. This bears more than a passing similarity to the French colonial strategy to form an idea of Greater France. See Herman Lebovics,



politicians, artists, and high society, including Plutarco Elías Calles, Adolfo de la Huerta, Aarón Saénz, José Vasconcelos, and most of the other high government officials and many Mexican and international business leaders.<sup>70</sup>

María Bibiana's second major social commitment was a garden party held in her honor at the home of Don Andrés Fernández, her new Spanish godfather selected by *El Universal* as part of the contest prize. María Bibiana arrived in regional costume, accompanied by her mother and Hipólito Seijas to meet Andrés Fernández and his family (see figure 9). During the visit, Fernández gave her a coral necklace and earrings, and promised to educate her at his own expense at the same finishing school where he sent his daughters. He also offered to safeguard María Bibiana's prize money until she turned twenty-one, at which age he felt she would be ready to use it more responsibly.<sup>71</sup>

The public was encouraged to join in this exaltation of the India Bonita. When the big Centennial parade filed through downtown Mexico City, *El Universal's* float carried María Bibiana and her court, and was drawn by six oxen flanked by "strong and dark" Indians (see figure 10). It was decorated with an Aztec calendar and *nopal* cactuses, and across the back was emblazoned

and supposedly “aware of herself as representing the lofty glorification of all the heroic and struggling races of Indian Mexico.”<sup>72</sup> The parade carried her from the main square of Mexico City to the well-known Indian town of Xochimilco just beyond the edge of the city, thus creating a state-sponsored spectacle that drew a strong link between the European-style city and the

ater hall before a sold-out crowd that included President Obregón, all the government ministers, and most of the international envoys sent to the centennial from Asia, Europe, and the Americas. During a procession that carried Bibiana to the theater, the president lifted her into his personal carriage to ride beside Señora Obregón, as he walked alongside. Once they arrived at the theater, she sat in the balcony on the right-hand side of the president. The evening began with Mexican songs, followed by Miguel Lerdo de Tejada's famous Orquesta Típica. Then came a monologue by actor Tomás Perrín praising María Bibiana as the representative of all indigenous races in Mexico, emphasizing her humble background, her simple ways, and her sudden exposure to the Mexico City limelight. He lamented that Mexico's Indians had been treated as a marginalized, exploited underclass, and he expressed his hope that the India Bonita Contest might contribute to a new consciousness that would inspire change. Next came a *zarzuela* entitled *La India Bonita*, followed by poetry reading, then a waltz entitled, not surprisingly, *India Bonita*.<sup>76</sup>

In short order the famous theater actor Leopoldo Barestáin come on stage to play an ignorant Indian attempting to eulogize the India Bonita.<sup>77</sup> He was dressed as a stereotypical indigenous peasant with a wide *sombrero*

tion and manner of speech created an insulting caricature of supposed Indian Spanish, highlighted by a feigned lack of common sense. The eulogy seemed above all to mock the very notion that an Indian might be capable of honoring anyone, even a fellow Indian. If Indians were to be honored, his performance made clear, it should be by urban whites and mestizos, not by other Indians.

At the end of the night, which had been filled with popular music, revues, eulogies, poetry, folk dances, and other events that paid tribute to lower class



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Figure 13. María Bibiana (left) and María Conesa (right) after the next day's repeat performance. Source: *El Universal*, 26 Sept. 1921.

braids.<sup>80</sup> (See figure 12.) A photo from a repeat performance of the evening's event shows an even tighter pairing, with Conesa and Bibiana side by side in the same frame (see figure 13). Though the pairing seems to have had the intention of highlighting their similarities, we are instead struck by the contrast between the indigenous girl in simple clothes, and the white woman exaggeratedly dressed as an Indian stereotype. In effect, Bibiana represented the "authentic" India Bonita, and Conesa the more readily consumed simulacra—María Bibiana as the raw material, and María Conesa as the generic national type.

The crowning of the India Bonita, like most of the events that surrounded the contest, paid homage to a racially and culturally diverse Mexico. It celebrated not a uniform mestizo homogeneity, but an ethnicized and cultural plural nation that could encompass pure Indians and pure Spaniards, and every

80. "La gran fiesta de la India Bonita en el Colón," *El Universal*, 25 Aug. 1921; and "Esta noche se repite en el Colón el homenaje a la India Bonita," *El Universal*, 26 Aug. 1921.





heavily Indian reality) or Francisco Zamora (who praised popular traditions, but complained that they had to be brought to the city, since the countryside was too dull and uncivilized to spend time in) recognized, however ambivalently, that a unilateral movement toward European or Mexico City culture was unfeasible.<sup>87</sup> And rancor against the United States was not enough to build unity, Vasconcelos argued, since a negative or defensive posture could not provide enduring *internal* unity.<sup>88</sup> Mexicans, they insisted, needed a unifying cultural identity. There was a growing consensus among Mexican intellectuals and state officials that this collective personality should be rooted in the culture of the rural popular classes, and that it should include everyone living within Mexico's political boundaries.

The India Bonita Contest occurred as part of the growing interest in “creating” and valorizing the Mexican Indian, ripe for a redemption and incorporation into an increasingly “ethnicized” Mexican nation. In 1921 notions of the relationship between Indianness and Mexican national identity were just beginning to take a new direction. As Mexico's middle and upper classes were “taught” to appreciate that which was “authentically Mexican” (that is, things indigenous), the India Bonita became a popular symbol of the promise of postrevolutionary Mexican society—both the embodiment of Mexico's Indian present, and the image of the ideal rural recipient of postrevolutionary transformation (a transformation to be managed from the urban center in the name of an immature, tractable, and grateful rural indigenous population).

Like the India Bonita, Mexico's rural lower classes, recast as Indians, were increasingly treated as passive embodiments of the national essence, but perpetually in need of outside intervention to give this essence meaning and form. Even the most pluralistically minded urban intellectuals argued that indigenous rural dwellers needed to be taught how to be Mexican, how to take part in modern society, and how to make their own unique contribution to the nation. As peasants were being rewritten as Indians, and Indians were being rewritten as Mexicans, they were also redefined as vital to the national consciousness. But cultural elites did not see them as capable of planning for the nation's future, nor did they invite them to formulate their own national level

87. See Francisco Zamora, “Pequeñas reflexiones sobre la vida campestre,” *El Universal Ilustrado* 4, no. 208 (1921).

88. José Vasconcelos, “Nueva ley de los tres estados: El periodo nacionalista, el intelectualismo y el estético,” *El Universal*, 11 Sept. 1921. For an outstanding study of Mexico's external nationalistic displays during this period, see Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996).

political discourses. Instead, Indians and the rest of the popular classes were expected to conform to the evolving discourses developed by the urban white and mestizo ruling class centered in Mexico City.<sup>89</sup>

Analysis of the India Bonita Contest of 1921 makes clear that now-naturalized assumptions about what comprises Indianness, and what its relationship is to Mexican national identity were once considered radical. We also find that the search for a place for Indianness in Mexican society began as an unfocused project initiated by intellectuals and commercial interests, and only later adopted by the state. The project was filled with ambivalence and contradictions, many of which are still with us today. While the messiness has been erased from much of Mexico's historical memory, the movement's contradictions continue to constrict the lives of many poor peasants who remain marginalized within their own society, and whose political options continue to be hemmed in by historically constructed notions about the relationship between Indianness, the Mexican nation, and Mexico's rural lower classes.<sup>90</sup>

Today ideas of Indianness have become naturalized as part of Mexican national culture. This has brought a certain amount of amnesia concerning past debates over the question of whether indigenous culture should even have any place in Mexico's modern national identity. Recollections of messy, contradictory beginnings and of racially segregated beauty contests have been erased from popular readings of the nation's cultural past.<sup>91</sup> In their place have emerged deceptive memories of a seamless legacy of mestizaje.

89. This continued to be true into the 1970s, and even into the present. See Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Study of Forced Identity in Contemporary Mexico* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975).

90. See Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, trans. Christopher J. Hall (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992); Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo: Una civilización negada* (1987; reprint, Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1994); Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits from the Labyrinth*; Jan Rus, "The Comunidad Revolucionaria Institucional': The Subversion of the Native Government in Highland Chiapas, 1936-1968," in Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*; and Alexander Dawson, "From Models for the Nation to Model Citizens: Indigenismo and the 'Revindication' of the Mexican Indian, 1920-1940," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998). For excellent studies of how similar processes unfolded in other heavily indigenous Central American countries see Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1965* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998); Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: The Making of Race and Nation, 1750-1954* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); and Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000).

91. Discourse and memory, however, are ironically contradicted by daily practices, and by portrayals in advertising, television, and beauty contests, which define the ideal Mexican as tall, thin, white, and blond.

The willingness of both Necaxans and the larger Mexican public at the end of the twentieth century to reflexively see María Bibiana as simultaneously

