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Los Hijos de Cuauhtémoc: Mexican National Identity in Primary School History Textbooks

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Abstract

This paper analyses how the hegemonic Mexican national identity is constructed in Mexican primary school history textbooks. Specifically, the paper argues that history textbooks portray a narrativized history that traces a teleological development from the Aztec Empire to contemporary Mexico. In other words, history textbooks co-opt Indigenous histories and render them as Mexican vis-à-vis Indigenous. First, the paper establishes working definitions of “nation,” “state,” and “nationalism,” relying chiefly on Anderson’s (1983) conception of “nations” as “imagined communities” and Billig’s (1993) notion of “banal nationalism.” Putting these conceptions in dialogue begins to clarify not only what “nation,” “state,” and “nationalism” are in the Mexican context, but also some of the ways they are connected. The analysis centers on two aspects. First, it explores how two prominent national interrogation essays, José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica* [The Cosmic Race] and Octavio Paz’s “Los Hijos de la Malinche” [The Sons of la Malinche], portray Mexican national identity. In Mexican literature, the national interrogation essay is a type of essay concerned with discerning what exactly the substance of Mexican-ness is. Second, using the two essays as a foundation, the paper analyzes the current history textbook used for instruction in the 4th grade of Mexican public primary schools. The analysis pays particular attention to how “Mestizaje ideology” (Sue 2013), race mixture as the basis of national unity, provides Mexico qua nation-state with a claim to appropriate Indigenous histories and cultures. Furthermore, the paper examines how the cartographic techniques of mapping and place-naming establish a direct continuity between Mesoamerican civilizations and the contemporary Mexican nation-state. The paper concludes that the national narrative put forth by the textbook emphasizes mestizaje ideology as an essential part of the Mexican national identity in a similar manner to Vasconcelos. That is, both
have a romantic notion of mestizaje, which – on the one hand – glosses over colonial violence and – on the other – is used to appropriate Indigenous histories.
LAY SUMMARY

This paper analyses the role that public primary school history textbooks in Mexico play in creating Mexican national identity. The paper argues that the narrative told by the textbooks is one that traces a direct continuity between the Aztec Empire and the current Mexican nation-state. Consequently, this allows for the textbook to co-opt the histories of Nahua-speaking Indigenous peoples, thereby making them Mexican instead of Indigenous. First, the paper explores how two prominent national interrogation essays, José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica* [The Cosmic Race] and Octavio Paz’s “Los Hijos de la Malinche” [The Sons of la Malinche], portray Mexican national identity. In Mexican literature, the national interrogation essay is a type of essay concerned with discerning what exactly the substance of Mexican-ness is. Second, using the two essays as a foundation, the paper analyzes the current history textbook used for instruction in the 4th grade of Mexican public primary schools.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, A. Alcaraz Escárcega.
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I want to acknowledge that not only was this research project written on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmí̑m̓ speaking xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people, but that the knowledge-gathering and knowledge-making processes I needed to undertake it also transpired on this place of (continuous) colonial violence and dispossession. For more information, please visit: http://www.musqueam.bc.ca/.

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Special thanks are owed to my family and friends, who have unwaveringly supported me throughout the years – much much love to you all!
INTRODUCTION

“Soy, soy lo que dejaron. Soy todas las sobras de lo que se robaron.”
“I am, I am what they left. I am all the spoils of what they stole.”

“The colonist makes history. His life is an epic, an odyssey. He is invested with the very beginning.”

First vignette: a futuristic city, flying cars and all, with the Mexican flag waving atop the tallest skyscraper. Second vignette: an astronaut saluting the Mexican flag planted on the moon’s surface. Third vignette: The Mexican territory before the Mexican-American War colored by the Mexican flag. Fourth vignette: a hyperloop train with a small Mexican flag. Above this four-image collage the caption reads: “Mexico, if the Tlaxcaltecas had not betrayed us” (see Figure 1, below).¹ I have been fascinated by this meme for about a year now. Even if it is just a meme, it highlights an interesting aspect of the Mexican national identity: that of the alleged continuity between Indigenous societies in Mesoamerica and the contemporary Mexican nation-state. As the meme suggests, according to the hegemonic Mexican imaginary, Mexicans are the direct descendants of the great Aztec Empire. We Mexicans, and not Nahua-speaking Indigenous peoples, are the sons and daughters of Cuauhtémoc.² Tenochtitlan, the imposing imperial center that captured the imagination of the Spanish colonizers, becomes part of our national legacy.

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¹ The Tlaxcaltecas were one of the main rivals of the Aztec Empire. During La Conquista, they allied with Hernan Cortés. It is widely accepted that this alliance played a key role in the conquest of the Aztec Empire.
² Cuauhtémoc was the last tlatoani [ruler] of the Aztec Empire.
How is national identity constructed? Where are the sites and what are the objects that enable the (re)creation and maintenance of “the nation?” In this paper, I analyze how the Mexican national identity is constructed in primary school history textbooks. I argue that history textbooks portray a narrativized history that traces a teleological development from the Aztec Empire to contemporary Mexico. In other words, history textbooks co-opt Indigenous histories and render them as *Mexican* vis-à-vis Indigenous. Thus, the Conquista and the Virreinato are constructed not as the founding moments/eras of Mexico and Mexican national identity. Rather, they are (re)valued as moments of struggle and revival. Hereby the great Mesoamerican civilizations become the ancestors of Mexico, they are no longer “nations” in their own right with their own existing and continuing histories.

My analysis centers on two aspects. First, I explore how two prominent national interrogation essays, José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica* [The Cosmic Race] and Octavio Paz’s “Los Hijos de la Malinche” [The Sons of la Malinche], portray Mexican national identity. In Mexican literature, the national interrogation essay is a type of essay concerned with
discerning what exactly is the character, the substance, of *lo Mexicano* or Mexican-ness. Second, using the two essays as a foundation, I analyze the current history textbook used in 4th grade. I pay particular attention to how “Mestizaje ideology” (Sue 2013), race mixture as the basis of national unity, provides Mexico qua “nation-state” with a claim to appropriate Indigenous histories and cultures. Put differently, mestizaje ideology allows for *all* Mexicans, even those who have no “markers of Indigenous ancestry” (58), to identify ourselves as “*partially indigenous*” (59, original emphasis). Furthermore, I examine how the cartographic techniques of mapping and place-naming establish a direct continuity between Mesoamerican civilizations and the contemporary Mexican nation-state.

Mexico is a good case for me to study for two reasons. The first is contingency. I am Mexican and was born and raised in Mexico City, so I have a good sense of how our national identity is created. Second, since 1960, the textbooks used for instruction in public primary and secondary schools have been edited and published by the National Commission of Free Textbooks (CNLTG), a governmental organization under the direction of the Secretary of Public Education (SEP). This means that for the last 60 years, the “knowledge” that has been (and continues to be) taught in primary and secondary schools has been mediated by an institution with a vested interest in portraying “history” in a way that is in line with both the Mexican foundational myth and the overarching goal of nation-building by the state.

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3 These are also used, to varying degrees, by private schools since these types of schools also need to satisfy the national curricula. In the Mexican education system, primary and secondary school refers to grades 1-9. Grades 10-12 are called “preparatory school.” Preparatory schools do not fall under the purview of the SEP. Rather, they are governed by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

4 That said, as I explain later in the paper, the relationship between public education and the creation of a Mexican national identity can be traced back to the late nineteenth century (Pereyra 2007).
**NATION, STATE, AND NATIONALISM**

Before delving into the intricacies of what I understand the Mexican national identity to be, it is important to establish working definitions of not only “nation,” and “state” but also of what bridges the chasm between them: “nationalism.” For present purposes I rely chiefly on Anderson’s (1983) conception of “nations” as “imagined communities” and Billig’s (1993) notion of “banal nationalism.” Putting these conceptions in dialogue begins to clarify not only what “nation,” “state,” and “nationalism” are in the Mexican context, but also some of the ways they are connected.

Political Scientist Benedict Anderson famously defined “the nation” as “an imagined community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (2006 [1983], 6). Nations are imagined because they stretch beyond immediate experience. “The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them,” Anderson states, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006 [1983], 6). The “nation” is limited because “even the largest of them […] has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (Anderson 2006 [1983], 7).

The boundaries Anderson refers to are spatial. Temporally, the nation is not limited in the same way. There are no other nations beyond the temporal boundary of “the nation.” In other words, “the nation” is constructed to be temporally un-limited. It is a particular type of community with a narrative that starts in “Antiquity” (Saíz Serrano 2017, 4), continues to the present, and is projected into the future. This, however, is not always the case. Settler-colonial nations (such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) have clear starting points to their narratives: settlement and colonization. That is, they have, in a sense, a sort of Arendtian (2006 [1963]) “founding” moment. Settler-colonialism aims to settle colonized lands
by replacing and dispossessing Indigenous populations. Given this, the “master narrative” of a settler-colonial nation does not need to have an “immemorial origin” (Saíz Serrano 2017, 4). Rather, as Frantz Fanon states, the settler “is invested with the very beginning: ‘We made this land’” (2004 [1961], 14). That being said, ideas such as Manifest Destiny suggest that (English) colonizers understood “America” to be a land on hold, a land “kept in reserve” (Vasconcelos 1925, 17) specifically for them. Under this developmentalist logic, it is not only the “destiny” of the settler to colonize native lands but the “destiny” of native lands is to be colonized. Thus, even if the settler master narrative has a clear beginning, the colonized geographical space where the (settler) nation settles is rendered inert. It is constructed as a space “kept in reserve” since antiquity. All of this suggests, then, that “nations” operate at a different temporal level than individuals. Whereas our “lives ‘pass away’ in irreversible time with the passing away of the life of the organism” (Giddens 1984, 35), “nations” have a “long-term existence” that far outlives individual lives. “Nations” do not have “finite” time. They do not irreversibly move “towards death” (35). Rather, they extend indefinitely if not into both the future and the past at least into the future. Thus, the “nation” is spatially limited but temporally indefinite.  

Second, “nations” are imagined to be sovereign. Sovereignty has two facets, internal and external sovereignties. The former refers to the supreme and exclusive rule within a land; the latter is the recognition of this independence by others. Anderson posits that “nations dream of being free” and that the “gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.” (2006 [1983],

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5 I want to emphasize that Spanish colonization operates differently. Spanish colonization of what is now called Mexico did not aim to replace Indigenous populations but rather to insert them, in subordinate and marginalized roles, into colonial society. Tellingly, Criollos, the sons and daughters of Spanish-born couples (called Peninsulares), were barred from the most prestigious and influential political positions.

6 I am not suggesting that nations cannot “die.” Evidently, they can “die” and have ended. Thus, even if they are relatively enduring, they are not necessarily immortal. However, the important takeaway here is that nations are imagined, even if this is not necessarily so, to extend indefinitely into futurity.

7 It is crucial to mention that the nation is imagined to be temporally indefinite. In reality, nations are not “primary nor […] unchanging” social entities. Nations belong “exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period” (Hobsbawm 1992, 9).
Here, Anderson is assuming two things. First, that the nation needs a state to be sovereign. Put differently, the state is the political expression of the nation, which renders its claim to (internal and external) sovereignty legible. Second, that the nation gives rise to the state. However, this is seldom the case.

Eric Hobsbawm identifies three phases of national movements. “[P]hase A [is] purely cultural, literary and folkloric, and [has] no particular political or even national implications.” Phase B, Hobsbawm writes, involves “a body of pioneers and militants of the ‘nationalist idea’ and the beginnings of political campaigning for this idea.” Lastly, phase C is when “nationalist programmes acquire mass support, or at least some of the mass support that nationalists always claim they represent” (1992, 12). Under this schema, Anderson’s nation-to-state movement can be understood as beginning in phase A, with the construction of a shared “culture” that over an extended period of time “naturally” leads to the galvanization of a state-building political movement. Although this bottom-up process could be the case for some European nation-states, various scholars (Palti 2003; Hobsbawm 1992; Billig 1995; Chatterjee 1993) make a compelling case that, for the vast majority of current nation-states, this is mistaken. Michael Billig, for example, argues that nation-building is a “process typically attended by conflict and violence.” “The battle for nationhood,” he writes, “is a battle for hegemony.” (1995, 27). Elías José Palti goes further and states that “definitely, nations did not create modern States, but rather modern States created nations, as we know them” (2003, 7).

What is a “state?” It seems that for the discussion of the “nation” to continue, this needs to be established. Perhaps the most influential definition of the state is Weber’s conception of the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly on the legitimate use of
physical force within a given territory” (1946 [1924], 1 original emphasis). Weber’s definition seems to be currently valid. However, a monopoly on the legitimate use of force is not, I think, the most distinctive feature of states in other periods. In various cases, Mexico being one of them, newly-formed states in the 19th century were equally concerned with mapping, “knowing,” and – to an extent – creating not only its territory but its population as well. These endeavors were undertaken with a plethora of techniques, physical force being only one of them. Thus, I use Ernest Gellner’s conception of the state as an “institution or set of institutions specifically concerned with the enforcement of order (whatever else they may also be concerned with)” (1983, 4) because it historicizes the notion of the “state.” Gellner traces the state to “agrarian societies,” which, for him, were the first societies that had both sufficient size and diversity of tasks to allow for a “political division of labour.” The advent of industrialization and colonization further increased both the size of societies and the diversity of tasks found within them, which led the state to become, in Gellner’s words, “inescapable” (5).

The modern state Palti mentions is the result of “industrial society” (Gellner 1983, 19-39). Echoing Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Gellner posits that this new era, this “society of perpetual growth” (24), relies on the “spirit of rationality.” In turn, rationality contains two elements: consistency – “the like treatment of cases” – and efficiency – the “selection of the best available means to given, clearly formulated ends” (20). The spirit of rationality consequently led to “the conception of the world as homogeneous, subject to systematic, indiscriminate laws.” Gellner convincingly argues that for industrial societies to work, a common set of rules of behaviour and communication is needed. Gellner calls these “high cultures:” “standardized, literacy- and education-based systems of communication” (54). Crucially, in most cases, the only entities with enough capacity to establish and disseminate high cultures are states. It is worth mentioning that, as Anderson assumes, high cultures can develop
“organically.” Arguably, however, in places where the state-building project was (and continues to be) structured by colonialism, high cultures were, at least initially, a top-down enterprise. High culture, Gellner writes, becomes “the necessary shared medium, the life-blood or perhaps rather the minimal shared atmosphere, within which alone members of the society can breathe and survive and produce” (38).

Foucault calls this awesome capacity to dictate, mediate, and influence high cultures “pastoral power” (1982). He suggests that “never […] has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and of totalization of procedures” (782). The latter aspect is what I have been discussing previously, the creation of, in Gellner’s words, “the necessary shared medium” (1983, 38) required by industrial societies to function. This technique is “globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population” (Foucault 1982, 784). On the other hand, “individualization techniques” refer to the ways in which a person comes into a particular kind of subjectivity. In other words, it is the power to shape individuality “in a new form and [submit it] to a set of very specific patterns” (783). It seems, then, that the “totalization of procedures” can explain the creation of “the nation” and that the “structures of individualization” (782) create the national subject and national identity.

Thus far I have explained that the “nation” is an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006 [1983]). It is imagined as spatially limited but, in spite of being particular to a specific period, temporally indefinite. Further, it is able to be imagined as a community because there is a shared high culture between its members. This high culture is, most times, firstly-imagined, disseminated and mediated by the “state.” The “state,” as a sovereign “set of institutions

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9 I want to emphasize that individuals hold multiple identities and that national identity is just one of them. Thus, it is important to not assume that national identity is or will always be the one with the most salience.

10 Recall that I do not use the term “high culture” in a cultural criticism sense (i.e., that which is opposed to “low” or “popular” culture). Rather, I echo Gellner and use it to refer to “standardized, literacy- and education-based systems of communication” (1983, 54) such as cultural institutions, discourses, and practices that are, if not centered, mediated by and originated from the state.
concerned with the enforcement of order” (Gellner 1983, 4), has the capacity to undertake the nation-building project. It is commonly thought that the state is the political expression of the nation, that the nation leads to the state. Although sometimes this is probably true, most times states make nations. Now that I have established both sides of the chasm, I can turn to what bridges them, to how states construct and maintain the nation: “nationalism.”

“Nationalism is primarily a political principle,” Gellner posits, “which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (1983, 1). I find the congruence aspect of this definition to be useful. However, calling nationalism a “principle” casts too narrow of a net and misses an important aspect of the concept, namely the mindless and day-to-day ways through which the nation becomes routinized and performed. Thus, it is perhaps more helpful to define nationalism as the multitude of (mindful and mindless) processes through which the political and the national unit become (and are continuously maintained as) congruent. This revision of Gellner’s definition is important because it acknowledges that, even if nationalism initiates from the state as a principle it then takes a life of its own. Crucially, this life of its own is not necessarily principled. Rather, through its mindless and unprincipled imitation, nationalism is often a habitus of sorts.

Social psychologist Michal Billig addresses this in his identification of two types of nationalism: “hot” and “banal” nationalisms. I will do a more elaborate discussion of these in my next section. For now, suffice it to say that I understand “hot nationalism” to be highly emotive usually outward acts of explicit national pride. Independence movements in the name of a nation, regardless of whether there is one or not, are the obvious example of this. Billig rightly points out that “hot nationalism” is usually conflated with all nationalism. This, Billig argues, is misguided. There is another crucial type of nationalism, one that is so ubiquitous that fades from view: “banal nationalism.” Now that I have sketched the working definitions of “state,” “nation,”
and “nationalism,” I can turn to one of the objects that enable the (re)creation and maintenance of national identities: history textbooks.

Various scholars have written on the role textbooks have in the construction of national identity (Tormey 2006; Pérez Garzón 2008; Sáiz Serrano 2017; Ghosh 2014; Qazi and Shah 2018). Shreya Ghosh argues that History “puts together events from the past in a specific, definite (designed) order for the pursuit of the plot, its central subject, with a certain beginning and end.”¹¹ Crucially, for Ghosh “the conclusion, or the narrative ending, does not sequentially come at the end but runs through the entire length of the story” (2014, 26). If the “end” of a national History is the sedimentation of the current nation-state, then this means that the current configuration of the nation-state is retroactively read into the Historical narrative.¹² In his book *Historical Tales and National Identity*, social psychologist János László further explores this understanding of History-as-narrative. László posits that narratives involve “an initial steady state which implies the legitimate order of things […], a trouble which disturbs this state, efforts for reestablishing the normal state, a new, often transformed state and an evaluation in conclusion, which draws the moral of the story” (2013, 3).

László’s description of the “narrative” is particularly pertinent to the Mexican context. As I hope to show, Mexican national History is narrated as beginning with the “great” Mesoamerican civilizations and cultures, with an emphasis on the Aztec Empire. This is the

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¹¹ From here on I use the word “History” instead of “history” to refer to what Historian Andrew Joseph Pegoda calls “the study of the past, the writing of the past” vis-à-vis the past itself. History then, is “the history that we know and have access to. It’s the events and peoples we study in this class. It’s a socially constructed narrative based on available evidence, mores, hopes, fears, etc, and changes as all of these factors adjust.” (Pegoda 2014).

¹² Qazi and Saeeda rightly point out that several current states are “multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious societies.” However, they argue that “in such circumstances, [the] state can propagate specific ideologies […] by using state apparatuses such as schools, media, churches, and so on” (2018, 2). Thus, even if a state is multi-national these different nationalities are “domesticated.” In other words, the state nests these various “nationalities” under its overarching structure. This renders them as intra-nationalities, usually relegating them to the “cultural” instead of the “political” realm. Thus, the concept of a “nation-state” still has analytical salience. For an elaborate discussion of how Indigenous nationalities are “domesticated” by the Canadian state, see Glen Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.  


glorious origin, the “legitimate order of things.” La Conquista and the subsequent 300 years of
direct Spanish colonial rule (known as “El Virreinato” [The Viceroyalty] or “La Colonia” [The
Colony]) are constructed as the “trouble which disturbs this state.” Lastly, “the transformed
state” (László 2013, 3) is contemporary Mexico understood as the direct albeit transformed
continuation of the Aztec Empire. This deployment of national History leads one to conclude
that the “Mexican nation” and the “Mexican people” that populate it not only have a millennial
history but are also people that have been preyed upon by global colonial empires, and that they
have been able to resist and overthrow colonizing forces. Evidently, this obfuscates the role
that the Mexican state has had and continues to have in the colonization of the Indigenous
peoples that live under its territory.

Jorge Sáiz Serrano writes that the aforementioned “national narratives” are “master
narratives” that “generate tales whereby the progress of each nation is sedimented from
Antiquity to the present, giving them an immemorial origin” (2017, 4). However, as I alluded to
previously, this does not apply to all nation-states. In “The West” it seems that there is a
difference between the master narratives of several European nation-states and settler-colonial
ones. The former indeed hinge on an “immemorial origin” of an almost mythological nature. The
latter, however, have a clear founding moment: the settlement of colonized lands. This is not to
say that there is no mythological nature to this. Arguably, though, this mythos lies on the
brushing aside of (the continuous use of) colonial violence and dispossession from the national
narrative.

13 The original “predator” is, evidently, Spain. However, French, British, and US incursions into Mexico also
figure prominently in the Mexican imaginary. Spanish colonization, however, is different from say the Second
French intervention in Mexico (1861-1867). La Conquista and La Colonia are the (violent and genocidal)
constitutive formations of Mexico. That is, Spanish colonization was not a threat to “Mexico.” It is the very structure
that created Mexico qua Mexico. On the other hand, the French intervention was an invasion of Mexico; it was a
threat to Mexican sovereignty. By situating both of these as foreign interventions, the “national” continuity between
pre-Hispanic and post-colonial is further cemented.
Interestingly, it seems to me that the Mexican national master narrative follows the path of its European counterparts. The (imagined) “beginning” of Mexico – contra, say, the neighboring United States – is not Hernán Cortés disembarking and founding La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (the present-day city of Veracruz). Rather, the story begins, generally, with the plethora of Mesoamerican societies that thrived prior to Spanish colonization, more specifically with the Aztec Empire. Furthermore, these different approaches to national histories align with the ways that different bodies become racialized in these diverse (neo)colonial regimes. Patrick Wolfe argues that “race is colonialism speaking, in idioms whose diversity reflects the variety of unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted conquered populations” (2016, 5). Thus, the post-racial ideology of mestizaje (which I discuss later in the paper), so central to the Mexican national identity, emphasizes both its European and Indigenous roots to paint a picture of a society that is equally “mixed.”

Juan Sisinio Pérez Garzón traces the origins of these national narratives to the formation of Geography and History as distinct social scientific academic disciplines in state-funded public universities (2008, 40-46). Pérez Garzón further contends that this particular government of History and Geography formed professional communities of Geographers and Historians that were “organized by nations and whose respective disciplinary contents where compartmentalized in national specialties” (42, my emphasis). Consequently, this enabled the “study” of, for example, the History of Mexico – hereby metonymically understood, thanks to Geography, as its territory vis à vis a complex web of relations between time, space, and people – as discreet. An important contribution by Pérez Garzón is his entanglement of the state and the university. He convincingly argues that academics not only act “from within the system of teaching implanted by the state” but also that they “are able to influence politically from within Historical and Geographical associations” (42). This suggests, as Foucault constantly demonstrated, that the
production of knowledge is not a “neutral” endeavor. Rather, knowledge-production is mediated and shaped by existing power structures. Thus, authoritative knowledge, such as the content of school textbooks, reverberates existing power relationships (Foucault 1980).

Knowledge, then, is most times not just knowledge but is knowledge-power.\textsuperscript{14} Here, it is important to also take into account those who are being brought into (national) subjectivity: children and teenagers. M. Habib Qazi and Saeeda Shah argue that education is entangled in asymmetrical power relations. In their study of the ways Pakistani national identity is constructed through “Pakistani studies” textbooks, they show that children and teenage students have a limited “scope of resistance against state ideologies, beliefs and political schemes” (2018, 4). Thus, young learners are in an epistemologically vulnerable state and are thus susceptible to internalize the content that is being taught without critically assessing it first.

In his famous essay “The Subject and Power” Foucault explains that knowledge-power brings the individual into subjectivity. It “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him [sic] by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize, and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault 1982, 781). Qazi and Saeeda rightly point that the school is one of the main sites where this (national) subjectification happens. Therefore, they echo Foucault in saying that “the idea of national identity is constructed through institutionalized processes within particular socio-political conditions” (2018, 8). Consequently, they use the Foucauldian concept of “technologies of power” to identify the objects and mechanisms through which one is subjectified as a national (a Pakistani in that specific case). These “technologies” are textbooks. Moreover, Qazi and Saeeda posit that these are also “regimes of truth:” “ensemble[s] of rules according to which the true and the false are separated” (2018, 8). Hereby the content of the

\textsuperscript{14} It is important to remark that I am mostly referring to knowledge produced in the “social sciences.” I would hesitate to say that this can be extended to, say, the natural sciences.
textbook becomes “truth” and what is not in it is “false.” With these considerations in mind, in the rest of this paper I explore the ways through which History textbooks, as technologies of power, discursively construct a particular type of Mexican national subjectivity.
MEXICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Returning to Hobsbawm’s scheme, the formation and sedimentation of the Mexican nation starts with phase B, groups of cultural and political elites formulating and campaigning for a particular nationalist idea. Given its vast size, the heterogeneous peoples that inhabited (and continue to inhabit) it and the stark socioeconomic inequalities between them, one of the main goals of the newly-formed Mexican state was to “define itself.” María Esther Pérez Salas adds that even if the nationalist idea was not entirely clear, there was a strong interest in “configuring an imaginary of the national type.” For this national imaginary to exist, the “knowledge of a history, a culture, a landscape, and a set of costumes” (Pérez Salas 2007, 167) was required, for these would be the elements through which the variegated inhabitants of the newly-formed Mexico could identify themselves (and others) as Mexican.\(^\text{15}\) Thus, the Mexican state sought to “define itself” by discovering the Mexican nation both in terms of population and geography. Evidently, this project relied on the state’s capacity to undertake, on the one hand, massive surveying projects and, on the other, implement institutions that established a relationship between the state and its citizens. I want to emphasize that this project of excavating the nation was sort of tautological. In other words, instead of “discovering” an already-existing nation, the surveying of the republic and the establishment of institutions (such as public schools and hospitals) played in and of itself a significant role in creating the nation.

In this section I provide a brief sketch of the result of these projects: “Mexicanness.” I do this by taking two different approaches. First, I return to Billig’s concept of banal nationalism and use it to explore some of the mechanisms through which Mexican national identity is enacted. I then turn my attention to two national interrogation essays. This type of essay, which was prominent in 20\(^\text{th}\) century Mexican literature, is concerned with discerning what exactly is

\(^{15}\) To this, I would also add an ethnicity.
the character, the substance, of *Lo Mexicano*, Mexicanness. Both essays – Octavio Paz’s “Los Hijos de la Malinche [The Sons of the Malinche] (1950) and José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica* [The Cosmic Race] (1925) – have been enormously influential. I analyze both of these to discuss the Mexican national identity more specifically and to sketch some of the concerns Mexican intellectuals have had regarding the national character. My hope is that the combination of these two different approaches creates a foundation to my analysis of primary school history textbooks. This is by no means exhaustive or definitive. Not only could one choose various other national interrogation essays to analyze, one could look for our national identity in various different sites.16

*Billig’s Banal Nationalism*

In the Mexican case, Billig’s aforementioned concept of “hot nationalism” can be understood with reference to the heroic myth of the “Hero Children.” During the Battle of Chapultepec, the story goes, cadets from the Military College were ordered to evacuate the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City.17 However, the cadets dismissed the order and decided to defend the castle from the US Army’s advances. Towards the end of the battle, only six cadets (the hero children) remained alive. With no ammunition and facing imminent defeat, they decided, as a way of preventing capture, to throw themselves off a cliff. The last one to do so, Juan Escutia, draped himself with the Mexican flag before jumping in order to “save” its integrity.

If Escutia’s actions exemplify “hot nationalism,” then “banal nationalism” are the idle flags found in any government building. For Billig, nationalism mostly lies in its “banal reproduction” (1995, 37). “It is embedded in routines of life, which constantly remind, or ‘flag,’

16 It would perhaps be interesting to look for it in public opinion or in the great murals that adorn the facades of multiple prominent public buildings.
17 The Battle of Chapultepec occurred on September 13th, 1847 and was a part of the Mexican-American War. The Hero Children are commemorated in a monument titled “Altar to the Homeland” at the base of Chapultepec Castle.
nationhood. However, these reminders, or ‘flaggings,’ are so numerous and they are such a familiar part of the social environment, that they operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully” (38, my emphasis). This ubiquity leads “banal nationalism” to cease to appear as nationalism. However, it is through these rituals that the “imagined community” becomes exteriorized, instantiated, and, crucially, maintained.

For example, every Monday morning, all Mexican primary and secondary schools perform the “Ceremony of Honors to the Flag.” In a clear allusion to the “hero children,” six students, the flag’s escort, parade the Mexican flag in the school’s courtyard while the rest of the pupils and teachers stand singing both the Mexican national anthem and the “hymn of the flag.” The ceremony is somewhat analogous to the pledge of allegiance school children in the United States do. It inaugurates the school week. Moreover, the “flag’s escort” is usually selected on the basis of academic or extracurricular excellence; being a part of the escort is meant to be an honor, one which constructs the “model student” as the “model national.”

The historian María Eugenia Chaoul Pereyra traces this tradition to the first decade of the 20th century. Under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), Mexico experienced a period of relative political stability, which allowed the federal government to undertake vast public projects such as free and mandatory public schooling (Pereyra 2007). Pereyra argues that “the subjects of civics and history were not aimed to be an intellectual instruction […] but a moral one” (304). Thus, “they could not be restricted to the rigidity of a classroom setting, but rather had to be interwoven with the life of the school writ large and beyond” (305). Hence, the confluence of two influences allowed public education in Mexico to become “a symbolic expression of a nation-building project that needed to be exhibited to induce cultural

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18 This last aspect is important. As a newly independent state, Mexico had a very turbulent 19th century. Thus, public education under Díaz aimed to “become a bridge that allowed the federal government to reach ample sectors of the populace” (Pereyra 2007, 297) for the first time.
homogeneity” (297): on the one hand, the teaching of “moral” subjects such as civics and history; and, on the other, social-civic practices such as the Ceremony of Honors to the Flag.

Regarding the use of the Mexican national anthem in schools, I recall that only a few students used to stand straight and sing the anthem and the hymn. Most of us simply slouched and yawned. However, “the significance of the ceremony,” Billig states, “is not diminished if treated as routine” (1995, 51). On the contrary, the fact that the nation-state celebrates itself routinely in such a way that is rendered banal means “that the significance is enhanced.” Billig calls this process “enhabitation: thoughts, reactions, and symbols become turned into routine habits and, thus, they become enhabited” (42, original emphasis).

This suggests that nations are not just imagined communities. They are also enhabited ones. Billig argues that “the imagined community does not depend upon continual acts of imagination for its existence” (1995, 70). Once the nation is established, its “imagination” becomes instantiated and codified into both routines such as the “Ceremony of Honors to the Flag” and ubiquitous objects such as flags. This is to say that the nation itself becomes habitual and customary, we become habituated to it. If one freezes the flag ceremony and zooms into the Mexican flag, one notices that there is an eagle with a snake in its beak perched atop a cactus. This is the foundational myth of Tenochtitlan, the dominant city-state of the Aztec Empire. Thus, the Mexican flag represents the nexus between the state, the nation, and nationalism. First, it is a ubiquitous object that is routinely celebrated through ritual and ceremony. Second, the image printed in its fabric tells the story of the (co-opted) mythological origin of the nation.

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19 I am unsure whether this was a sign of banal acceptance of nationality or a sort of proto-critical attitude. I am inclined to think that it was the former, since I do not recall ever asking either my teachers or peers the reasons behind and/or the purpose of the ceremony.

20 In Mexica mythology, the Mexica migrated southward from (the mythical) Aztlán, in what is now the north of Mexico/ southern United States, looking for a new place to establish themselves. Tenoch, their leader, was sent this image as a prophecy from the gods. The prophecy told that the Mexica were destined to build a great city, whose location would be signaled by the eagle.
Lastly, it is a symbol with political salience that is used in a multitude of ways to represent the state.

*National Interrogation Essays*

Now that I have explored some of the ways Mexican national identity is performed, routinized, and inhabited, I can proceed to discern some of its character through an analysis of two national interrogation essays: Octavio Paz’s “Los Hijos de la Malinche” and José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica*. The former, published in 1950, is perhaps one of Paz’s, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990, most lauded works. In it, Paz traces the genesis of Mexicanness to the relationship between Hernán Cortés and “La Malinche,” his Nahua lover and translator. For Paz, this gendered and asymmetric power relationship symbolizes the broader Spanish colonial enterprise on what is now called Mexico. Essentially, Paz argues that Mexicanness is the result of “rape” (1959 [1950], 72). Put differently, Mexicanness begins with the genocide and dispossession characteristic of colonialism. This is similar to the founding moments of settler societies such as the United States and Canada. However, the Mexican case differs insofar as the Mexican nation has always been oriented around “mestizaje,” racial mixture that emphasizes both a European and Indigenous heritage. Paz posits that this, in direct contrast to settler societies in the continent, is the source of a deep self-alienation that results in the “negation of [the] origin” (79) of Mexicanness.

Mestizaje is also the main theme explored in José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica*. Published in 1925, *La Raza Cósmica* presents perhaps the most influential account of what sociologist Christina Sue calls the “mestizaje ideology” (2013). Sue posits that mestizaje ideology served (and arguably continues to serve) as Mexico’s “post revolutionary [1910-1921] national ideology” (14). In juxtaposition to Paz, Vasconcelos argues that Latin America, as the cradle of mestizaje, has the task of “fusing all peoples ethnically and spiritually” (1925, 19).
Whereas Paz sees mestizaje as the result of abhorrent violence, Vasconcelos romanticizes it and sees it as a universalizing force of sorts, certainly as something worthy of immense pride and not intense anxiety.

Later in the paper it will become evident that the national narrative put forth by primary school History textbooks bears striking similarity to Vasconcelos’s mestizaje theory. This is not surprising once the fact that, in 1921, Vasconcelos was appointed as the first Secretary of the then newly-formed Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) is taken into account. I have decided to also bring Paz into my analysis to highlight that national identities, even if its discussions are part of a shared national discourse, are sites of contestation that can be used in different and, sometimes, contrasting ways. Thus, even if there is a hegemonic understanding of Mexican national identity, hereby exemplified by Vasconcelos, other understandings exist.

By far the most influential “national interrogation essay” is Octavio Paz’s anthology *El Laberinto de la Soledad* [The Labyrinth of Solitude] published in 1950. The most famous essay in that collection is “Los Hijos de la Malinche.” In it, Paz explores the constitution of Mexican national identity through an analysis of “la Chingada.” Explaining what “la Chingada” is to a non-Spanish speaker (arguably to a non-Latinx individual) is a difficult endeavor. I could start by saying that la Chingada is “the (female) fucked one.” She is the (idle) recipient of masculine violence, one tinged with a sort of sexual subliminality. Or, I could start by saying that la Chingada is “the (female) fucked one.” She is the (idle) recipient of masculine violence, one tinged with a sort of sexual subliminality. Or, I could start by saying that la Chingada is a place. “When we say go to ‘la Chingada,’” Paz says, “we send our interlocutor to a faraway place, vague and indeterminate. To the country of the broken, used things […] It is a hollow world. It means nothing. It is nothingness” (1950 [1959], 72). In this sense, la Chingada could be seen as somewhat analogous to the “sunken place” from Jordan Peele’s movie *Get Out* – a place of despair that is deep within the confines of our minds.
La Chingada (and her masculine foil, el Chingón) – in their multiple figurations – signify, to an extent, a sort of self-alienation, the result of systemic and brutal colonial violence. For the Pazian Mexican subject, the internalization of European superiority seems to be inherent. Paz states that “races that are victim of a common sort of foreign power (Black Americans, for example), establish combat with a concrete reality. We [Mexicans], on the other hand, fight against imaginary entities, vestiges of the past or ghosts engendered by ourselves” (1950 [1959], 66). In other words, given that Mexican identity is, similarly to other former Spanish colonies, the synthesis of the violent dialectic between Spanish colonizers and colonized Indigenous peoples, there is a Manichean worldview embedded within “Mexicanness.”

The best example of this is the Chingada/Chingón dyad. If la Chingada represents “the open, violated, and forcefully mocked mother” (Paz 1950 [1959], 72), el Chingón – her foil – is “the [male] power, isolated in his own potency, without relation nor compromise to the outside world” (74). Paz states that there is a colonial and gendered dimension to this. As such, the figure of la Chingada evokes Indigenous women whereas the figure of el Chingón is closely associated with Spanish conquistadors (67-80). It is no coincidence, then, that the original Chingada is la Malinche and the original Chingón is Hernán Cortés. Herein lies the self-alienation of the Pazian Mexican subject. Mexicans are los hijos – the sons and daughters – of la Chingada. But in a Manichean world where “life is the possibility of chingar [being el Chingón] or ser chingado [being la Chingada]” (71), Mexicans vehemently reject this genesis.

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21 Given the highly masculinist and misogynist aura that surrounds “la chingada,” a gender analysis of this dyad is crucial. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

22 La Malinche, a butchered version of her name Malintzin, was Hernán Cortés’s Nahua lover and translator. In the Mexican imaginary, la Malinche occupies an infamous position as a traitor (a “malinchista” is someone who has affinities towards the foreign at the expense of the Mexican). This is interesting for two reasons. First, she is – as Paz argues – the “mother” of Mexican identity. Calling her a traitor is a misnomer since she could not betray something (Mexico) that did not exist. Second, she was enslaved and “gifted” to Cortés upon his arrival in the coast of what is now called Veracruz, which suggests that she did not have the agency to “betray” to begin with.

23 It is key to emphasize that, in a sense, we are only the sons and daughters of la Chingada not of el Chingón, since el Chingón “does not belong to our world […] he comes from afar, he is always far” (Paz 1950 [1959], 74).
This self-alienation is to the extent that Paz posits that Mexican identity is “the negation of its origin.” Thus, Paz concludes that “the Mexican does not want to be Indian [sic], nor Spanish. Neither does he want to descend from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as mestizo but as an abstraction: he is a man [sic]. He turns into the son of nothingness. He begins in himself” (78-79).

This beginning in oneself, the negation of one’s origin, is exemplified by José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica* (1925). Vasconcelos’s conception of mestizaje is best understood as the “abstraction” referred to by Paz. For Vasconcelos, mestizaje is the mechanism through which a distilled, “pure,” and post-racial humanity is achieved. Thus, Vasconcelos’s mestizaje is an abstraction of mestizaje insofar as it elides the tremendous colonial violence that led to mestizaje. This suggests that *La Raza Cósmica* offers a romanticized account of mestizaje that highlights its seemingly incongruous racist and post-racist undertones. It is post-racial because Vasconcelos envisions Latin America as the “cradle of a fifth race into which all nations will fuse with each other to replace the four races that have been forging History apart from each other” (Vasconcelos 1925, 17, my emphasis). It is racist because Vasconcelos subscribes, at least to an extent, to a biological reality of race, one which imputes inevitable characteristics to the “races” of the world.

In spite of the explicit romanticism found in Vasconcelos’s writing, he identifies *La Raza Cósmica* as scientific by claiming that his work “attempts explanations, not with the fantasy of the novelist, but with an intuition supported by the facts of history and science” (1925, 8). This conjunction of romanticism and science was prominent in the Mexican nationalist movement of mid-to-late 19th century. Pérez Salas identifies lithographs as crucial in galvanizing and disseminating the Mexican national identity (2007). Some of the most popular lithographs of

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24 An emphasis on “purity” and (racial) homogeneity is characteristic of white supremacist movements. Thus, it is interesting that Vasconcelos appropriates this language to speak of mestizaje, “racial mixture.”
the period were those highlighting the “natural beauty” of the Mexican territory (177-185). An emphasis on the vast natural diversity of the land was not new. In fact, during the later stages of the Viceroyalty it had been one of the main ways in which criollos had distanced themselves from peninsulares. Crucially, in order for the lithographs to be an accurate representation of the landscape, extensive mapping of the territory was needed. Thus, this visual rendering had nationalist, scientific, and romantic dimensions. It was nationalist because these images had the explicit purpose of showing “Mexico” to Mexicans and for this to be a source of pride. It was scientific because it attempted to “know” Mexico through surveying techniques such as mapping. Lastly, it was romantic because it showed an attachment to a pure construction of unchanging nature.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the conjunction of nationalism, science, and romanticism in The Cosmic Race is found in the introduction. “Within our civilization,” Vasconcelos claims, “the warp, the multiple and rich plasma of future humanity is thus being prepared. This mandate from History is first noticed in that abundance of love that allowed the Spaniard to create a new race with the Indian [sic] and the Black, profusely spreading white ancestry through the soldier that begat a native family” (1925, 18). In spite of claiming that the advent of “the fifth race” signals a post-race future, it seems that Vasconcelos has a predilection towards European ancestry. “Nonetheless,” Vasconcelos writes, “we accept the superior ideals of the white [race], but not its arrogance.” Furthermore, Vasconcelos hypothesizes that “perhaps among all the characteristics of the fifth race the characteristics of the white [race] will predominate” (23).

This dissonance between the valorization of the mestizo while having a clear preference for whiteness creates peculiar dynamics that reverberate to this day. Sue observes that “light-

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25 Recall that peninsulares were Spanish colonizers born in Spain and criollos were Europeans born in the Americas.
skinned Mexicans are viewed as marginal to the Mexican community” because their phenotype is different from the “prototypical brown-skinned Mexican.” Thus, “light-skinned Mexicans” need to “assert and authenticate their national identities” (2013, 47) by appealing to “an unpretentious whiteness and an uncompromised Mexicanness” (50). On the other hand, “brown-skinned Mexicans” are “clearly within the boundaries of normative representations of Mexicanness” (48) but face stigma in a society with a clear preference for whiteness. Consequently, “brown-skinned Mexicans” aim to distance themselves from an Indigenous identity and emphasize that they have European heritage (55-58).

Political scientist Juliet Hooker argues that Vasconcelos’s theory of mestizaje claims “that the principal result of a process of mixing that began in the colonial era has been a national population that is homogenous in its mixed-ness, to the point that the various groups that contributed to the mixing process (Spaniards, Indians, and Africans) disappeared as separate racio-cultural groups per se” (2017, 156). It is easy to see that Vasconcelos is engaged in a nation-building project. He constructs the nation as people (mestizos) and, in doing so, sediments the nation-state. Thus, the mestizo becomes the literal body politic, the personification of Mexico. If read more abstractly (i.e., supplanting the idea of “race” with that of “culture”), Vasconcelos’s theory proves to be remarkably similar to the narrativized History of Mexico found in textbooks. This is no coincidence. Vasconcelos, as I mentioned previously, was the first Secretariat of the SEP (The Secretary of Public Education).
AN ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

At first glance, using both national interrogation essays and primary school history textbooks to sketch the hegemonic Mexican national identity might seem disparate. However, as Laura Suárez de la Torre points out, the sedimentation of a hegemonic national identity did not exclusively involve state projects (2007). Rather, “cultural webs” (2007, 163) of elites, to which intellectuals such as Paz and Vasconcelos belonged, also played a significant role in the discursive formation of national identity. Thus, even if these are two somewhat distinct discursive influences on the production and dissemination of Mexican national identity, there is cross pollination between them. As I said in the previous section, this is particularly the case between Vasconcelos’s mestizaje theory and the master narrative put forth by primary school history textbooks. Succinctly, analyzing the textbooks with Vasconcelos and Paz as foundations allows for the master narrative that is being put forth to be historicized and contested.

Recall that when public education was instituted in Mexico, History was deemed to be not only a “moral vis á vis “intellectual” subject, but also one which aimed to highlight that “the history of the country had had an ascendant path with one purpose: to build the peace and progress that the nation currently enjoyed” (Pereyra 2007, 305). Arguably, both of these continued to be explicitly the case until the 2011-2012 school year. For example, in the 2010-2011 4th grade History textbook, there is a short subsection titled “advice from our Mesoamerican ancestors.” Some of the “advices” are to “not mock the elderly or the sickly” (SEP 2010, 40) and “to not get drunk or take drugs” (41). In a similar vein, the History textbook used

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26 Both Vasconcelos and Paz held prominent political positions. Besides being the Secretary of Public Education, Vasconcelos served as the President of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and as the Director of the National Library of Mexico. Paz served as the Mexican ambassador to India between 1962 and 1968.
27 Pereyra makes the fascinating observation that History was taught immediately after recess, when pupils were the most distraught. On the other hand, “national language” (Spanish) and sciences were taught in morning since these required a more active engagement from the students (2007, 303).
28 In the early 20th century, Mexican public schools were “centers of anti-alcoholic propaganda” (Pereyra 2007, 310).
in the 1960-1961 cycle addresses the pupils by saying, “this book aims to help you know your homeland because, by knowing it, you will better understand why you love it and how and why you have to be willing to serve it” (SEP 1960, 10).

This overtly moralistic and patriotic ethos is no longer present. However, the latter aspect still rings true. The book cover for the current textbook features a painting by Jorge González Camarena, a prominent Mexican muralist, titled “La Patria,” the homeland. “This artwork,” the first page of the textbook explains, “illustrated the cover of the first textbooks. Today we reproduce it here to show you what back then was an aspiration: that textbooks would be among the legacies that the homeland could leave to their sons” (SEP 2016b, 3).

Under the current curriculum, 4th grade is the first grade that uses a History textbook. In third grade, a social studies textbook titled The Entity Where I live, is used instead. One of the learning objectives of the Entity textbooks is “to temporally and spatially identify the characteristics of the territory and the quotidian life of the inhabitants of your entity across time” (SEP 2016a, 7). These textbooks, then, are a way of initiating the local (i.e., state-level) subjectivity of the individual. By contrast, 4th grade’s History textbook takes “Mexico” as its “object” of study.

“Our History textbook” (original emphasis), the introduction reads, “will get you close to the study of history of our country, from its first inhabitants until the consummation of Independence” (SEP 2016b, 7, my emphasis). This is an interesting rhetorical move. The textbook claims that that its purpose is to introduce the student to the “history” of Mexico. However, the “object” of study of the textbook is what is colloquially referred to as “Pre-Independence Mexico” (which in turn refers to both “Pre-Hispanic Mexico” and “Colonial Mexico”). This is an antinomical understanding of Mexico. How can there be a pre-Hispanic

29 Here, I use lowercase-h history to denote an alleged “objective” and external thing that we can “know” instead of something (socially) internal that is created.
Mexico? Recall that “the nation” can be interpreted as the state or as the people. I propose that the 4th grade History textbook is a “study” of the nation as the people, one that creates its very “object” of study.\textsuperscript{30}

Broadly, the textbook offers an account of the people that have inhabited the land that is now understood to be the territory of Mexico. The titles of the book’s five modules provide a succinct summary of this narrative: 1) “From the populating of America to the beginning of agriculture;” 2) “Mesoamerica;” 3) “The encounter between America and Europe;” 4) “The formation of a new society: the Viceroyalty of New Spain;” and 5) “The path towards Independence” (SEP 2016b).\textsuperscript{31} Using László’s schema of the narrative, module two, “Mesoamerica,” which offers a fairly detailed account of various Indigenous societies, is the “initial steady stage” (László 2013, 3). This is disrupted by “the encounter between America and Europe,” the “trouble which disturbs” (László 2013, 3) the original state. Lastly, “the formation of a new society” and its “path towards independence” are the effort to re-establish the normal state and the new transformed society that arises from this effort. Crucially, this narrative unfolds on one stage.

Historian Raymond B. Craib calls this invariable rendering of place “stage spaces.” “Space,” he observes, “tends to be perceived as a static and neutral category, a prepolitical object, and little more than a passive stage upon which historical subjects play assigned roles.” Craib further explains that “stage spaces deny certain kinds of agency: the places people have actively created – the transformation of space into place – appear preformed and preordained, detached from meaning and experience” (2004, 3, original emphasis).\textsuperscript{32} He warns that an

\textsuperscript{30} Consequently, 5th grade’s History textbook focuses more on the “nation” qua nation-state.

\textsuperscript{31} The modules’ current configuration was instituted in the 2011-2012 school year. Prior to that year, the titles of the modules were: 1) “Prehistory;” 2) “Ancient Mexico;” 3) “Discovery and Conquest;” 4) “Viceroyal Mexico;” 5) “Independence.”

\textsuperscript{32} In her dissertation, political scientist Anna Jurkevics theorizes that “the notion of place is a phenomenological expression of a particular geographic unit.” Places are “created by humans through collective labour.” Here, Jurkevics does not only refer to physical labour but also to the more discursive Arendtian action. Thus, when spaces
“emphasis on history at the expense of space is, ironically enough, ahistorical” (5). The use of “stage space,” of representing place(s) as space, is used throughout the textbook. This freezes a particular place, the contemporary territory of Mexico, and renders it a trans-temporal and unchanging stage that is always on the background while History unfolds on the foreground. It is this naturalization through the cartographic techniques of mapping and place-naming that constructs the nation.

The first map appears on page 15 (see Figure 2, below). It is a map of three cultural areas: Mesoamerica (in green), and the two lesser known Aridoamerica (orange) and Oasisamerica (purple). Besides the demarcations between these three, the map also traces the borders of the current nation-states of the region (SEP 2016b, 15). What was the map of three distinct cultural areas becomes, as the caption reads, a map of “the three cultural areas of Ancient Mexico” (15, my emphasis). All maps on the textbook show the borders of the contemporary Mexican state. This obscures the extent to which current borderlines are socio-political constructs rather than fixed and unchanging phenomena. They are not on par with the changing shades that color the map differently as the narrative progresses. On page 41, for example, the green of Mesoamerica gives way to six different colors, which represent the different cultural areas within Mesoamerica (41). In turn, on page 96, the various colors collapse onto purple, which tinges the area of the “Spanish expansion and colonization between 1519-1578” (96). The commonalities in all of these maps are, obviously, geographical features such as the Baja California and Yucatán peninsulas. But also, the current Mexican borders. They run across all of these maps, unchanged and essentially eternal, just like rivers.

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33 I use “the textbook” as a shorthand for the 4th grade History textbook.
These “state fixations,” as Craib calls “cartographic projects” such as “the delineation and archiving of village, municipal, state, and national boundaries” (2004,8), are not new. Rather, in the 19th century, these were crucial projects that served “to provide a textual tangibility to an otherwise metaphysical entity, effectively helping to create that which they purported only to represent” (9). In other words, the mapping of Mexico, first done in 1858 by Antonio García Cubas in his Carta General de la República Mexicana, not only materialized the imagined community, it also produced a seemingly “objective” delineation of “who” belonged (both historically and contemporarily) to it. ³⁴

The reproduction of maps is not the only cartographic technique used to construct the trans-temporality of Mexico. Names also play an important part. The most pervasive example found in the textbook is the usage of “México-Tenochtitlan” to refer to the Mexica city-state of Tenochtitlan. By adding “México-,” a continuity between Tenochtitlan, the political center of the Aztec Empire, and Mexico City is established. Furthermore, this creates a metonymic

³⁴ It might also be worth asking, who does the imagining?
understanding of Mexico. This naming implies that Mexico originates not only from an imperial center, Tenochtitlan, but also from the central Valley of Mexico, from the capital of the Republic, Mexico City. Hence, the Mexican nation radiates outwards from center to periphery.

In spite of occupying, at different points in time, the same space, Tenochtitlan and Mexico City are different places. To name Tenochtitlan “México-Tenochtitlan” is to obfuscate this fact. It suggests that it is our (i.e., Mexican) ancestors that transformed this space into place.

Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang call such moves “settler nativism” (2012). Tuck and Yang, writing in a different colonial context, namely that of the United States, define this as “settlers [locating] or [inventing] a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had ‘Indian blood,’ and [using] this claim to mark themselves as blameless in the attempted eradications of Indigenous peoples” (10). In the Mexican, and perhaps Latin American, context, the main difference is that settler nativism is not an individual move but a collective one. Recall that Vasconcelos theory of mestizaje claims that “the principal result of a process of mixing that began in the colonial era has been a national population that is homogenous in its mixed-ness” (Hooker 2017, 156).

At the end of module 3, “The encounter between America and Europe,” there is a subsection titled “Mestizaje and cultural exchange” (SEP 2016b, 97-103). This section establishes Vasconcelos’s mestizaje theory. “By the mid Sixteenth century,” it reads, “many Spanish inhabitants spoke Nahuatl or other originary languages, besides many Indigenous nobles had become Spanishized. The Spanish spoken in Mexico is the result of this cultural mestizaje” (98, my emphasis). What I find interesting here is how the textbook abstracts this process. It abstracts it from its tremendous violence and, by containing it to the cultural realm, from politics.35 Throughout this section, mestizaje is imaged, imagined, by idyllic paintings of couples

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35 One might reply that this violence is elided because it is a 4th grade textbook. However, the textbook does mention this violence. On page 107, the textbook shows a graph of the Indigenous population in central Mexico between 1519 and 1595. In this time period the population spectacularly plummeted from 25.2 million to a mere 1.3 million. The textbook, however, only asks the student to answer two questions: 1) “How many Indigenous died as a
formed by Indigenous women and Spanish men. Unlike Paz, however, these are not the source of deep internal anxieties. On the contrary, similar to Vasconcelos, the book asserts that this mestizaje “generated a new society in which Indigenous, Spanish, Asians, and Africans lived together” (99).
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: TOWARDS A POLITICS OF RECOGNITION?

In this paper, I have explored how Mexican national identity is constructed in two prominent national interrogation essays – Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica* and Paz’s “Los Hijos de la Malinche” – and in the History textbook currently used for instruction in 4th grade in Mexican primary schools. The master national narrative put forth by the textbook traces a direct continuity between the Aztec Empire and the contemporary Mexican nation-state by using the cartographic techniques of mapping and place-naming. Furthermore, this national narrative emphasizes mestizaje ideology as an essential part of the Mexican national identity in a similar manner to Vasconcelos. That is, both have a romantic notion of mestizaje, which – on the one hand – glosses over colonial violence and – on the other – is used to appropriate Indigenous histories. In contrast, Paz sees mestizaje as the result of gendered, systemic, and colonial violence. Evidently, Paz, Vasconcelos, and the textbook employ the same national discourse; they all use the grammar of mestizaje. However, the significant disjunctions between Vasconcelos and the textbook, on one hand, and Paz, on the other, show that Mexican national identity is a site of contestation with hegemonic and competing narratives. Crucially, hegemonic narratives – in this case, what is literally taught in school – percolates to, borrowing Foucault’s term, the capillaries of society. Another important aspect to consider is that this is a nation-building and nation-maintaining project that is done through banal processes. This suggests that for the nation to exist, it needs to be continually performed, enacted, and inhabited.

Interestingly, the textbook has a subsection titled “Indigenous presence in the present” (SEP 2016b, 72-73). It concludes by saying, “in its Indigenous peoples, Mexico has one of the pillars of its cultural identity and grandeur” (72). To me, this seems to fall under what Glen Coulthard calls “the [liberal-colonial] politics of recognition,” “the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to ‘reconcile’ Indigenous assertions of
nationhood with settler-state sovereignty” (2014, 3). This raises various questions. How does the liberal-colonial politics of recognition transpire in other colonial contexts? What is the relationship between the liberal-colonial politics of recognition and the politics of mestizaje?

I think these are important questions that warrant further investigation. By way of last words, I offer a tentative answer to the second question. Regarding the relationship between the liberal-colonial politics of recognition and the politics of mestizaje, I think that both are ways of "domesticating" (both as in placating and making something domestic) political identities that fall outside the nation-state. Whereas mestizaje does it by claiming that "everyone is partially indigenous," which folds Indigenous societies and their legacies into the nation-state, (liberal-colonial) recognition does it by relegating these distinct identities to the "cultural" vis à vis the political realm. In the end, both treat Indigenous identities as being under the purview of the nation-state instead of acknowledging that these identities are, in various ways, political and dissonant from the existing nation-state paradigm.
References


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