

## The India Bonita Contest of 1921 and the Ethnicization of Mexican National Culture

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In a 1987 filming of Televisa's *Nuestro Mundo* Guillermo Ochoa introduced his guest as La India Bonita María Bibiana Uribe, winner of the first Miss Mexico competition. He drew attention to her colorfully ribboned braids, indigenous-style outfit, and bare feet, explaining that she chose to come on the show this way so as to appear before the Mexican public just as she had 66 years earlier when she became the first Miss Mexico. But according to the historical record, María Bibiana Uribe never even participated in the Concurso Universal de Belleza of 1921, which crowned the first "Miss Mexico."<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Miss Mexico contest was based on an entrenched canon of classical beauty that precluded consideration of nonwhite contestants. Televisa's *Nuestro Mundo* unintentionally conflated the Miss Mexico pageant with the India Bonita Contest, which focused on indigenous contestants and was billed as the "first entirely racial contest."

The two racially exclusive beauty pageants have even been conflated in María 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

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1. María Bibiana Uribe, interview by Guillermo Ochoa, televised, *Nuestro Mundo*, Televisa, 1987; "Un Gran Concurso Internacional de Belleza," *El Universal*, 1 Mar. 1921; "El Concurso Universal de Belleza," *El Universal*, 12 Mar. 1921; "El día 30 de abril se clausurará el Concurso Universal de Belleza," *El Universal*, 4 Apr. 1921; "La mujer mexicana en el gran Concurso Universal de Belleza," *El Universal*, 3 May 1921; "'El Universal' fue el primer periódico de América que realizó el Concurso Mundial de Belleza," *El Universal*, 22 June 1921; and "Mujer más bella de México," *El Universal*, 17 June 1921.

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 indigenous clothes and holding a lacquered gourd. Local and regional radio stations and newspapers likewise merged the two competitions, referring to María Bibiana interchangeably as the "First Miss Mexico" and the "First India Bonita."<sup>3</sup>

Both locally and nationally, the public considers it unremarkable that an Indian girl from the Sierra de Puebla outside of Necaxa would have been crowned the first Mexican beauty queen. María Bibiana Uribe is accepted as both the first Miss Mexico and as the first "India Bonita" without any hint that the two categories might have been considered incompatible in 1920s Mexico. Nor has anyone questioned María Bibiana's statement that all of the Miss Mexico finalists were Indians. Instead, the public assumes that Mexico has long been a racially mixed nation where Indian culture has woven seamlessly into the national fiber. And, since the country was even more Indian in the past, audiences have had no trouble accepting Bibiana's claim that all the finalists in the first competition for a Mexican beauty queen would have been indigenous women.

The incongruence between memory and the documented past prompts us to ask the following questions: How did María Bibiana Uribe, winner of an indigenous beauty contest, become transformed by popular memory into the

2. Though no documents record the origins of the Necaxa event, it seems to have begun around 1921, when María Bibiana became the India Bonita and President Obregón visited the town. For Obregón's visit, see "Inauguración de la Casa de Cultura no. 82/122: 'Necaxacalli,'" *Fojas Culturales*, no. 141/200, Secretaría de Cultura, Necaxa, Apr. 1998, Archivo de la Biblioteca Municipal, Necaxa, Puebla. Later, during the 1960s, folklore revivals inspired India Bonita competitions across Latin America in which the contestants were judged for their appearance, performance, deportment, and accoutrements. See Katherine Boreland, "The India Bonita of Monimbó: The Politics of Ethnic Identity in the New Nicaragua"; and Carlota McAllister, "Authenticity and Guatemala's Maya Queen," in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, ed. Coleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York: Routledge, 1996).

3. María Bibiana Uribe, interview, broadcast, Radio Station XOJT, Necaxa, 1991; Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author, Necaxa, Puebla, 24 Sept. 1999; and Rosa Zarate Uribe and Alfredo Zavala Zarate, interview by author, Necaxa, Puebla, 24 Sept. 1999. Also see "Murió ayer 'La India Bonita', a causa de un paro cardíaco," *El Universal*, n.d. Sept. 1991; and María Bibiana Uribe, interview by Arturo Allende, in *Cambio de la Sierra* (Huachinango, Puebla), 2 May 1991.

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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,” *Public Culture: Society for Transnational Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (1999). For a critique of the Eurocentricism of nationalism literature, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books for The United Nations Univ., 1986). For an insightful post-structural analysis that integrates local and international perspectives of nation, see Julie Skurski, “The Ambiguities of Authenticity in Latin America: Doña Bárbara and the Construction of National Identity,” in Eley and Suny, *Becoming National*.

5. Manuel Gamio, *Forjando patria* (1916; reprint, Mexico: Porrúa, 1992), 96; Moisés

The early 1920s was an era of guarded optimism that followed the violence and destruction of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20). Urban cultural elites began exploring the Mexican countryside to learn who the Mexican people were, what values they held, and what patterns of thought, religion, and aesthetics they followed. In their search for a uniquely Mexican identity, elites inspired by the social reforms growing out of the Mexican Revolution turned their attention to Mexico's rural populations, whom they recast as fragmented, unintegrated, and culturally Indian.

These urban elites interpreted Mexico as falling horribly short of new ideas of what it meant to be a modern nation. They felt that to be modern a nation had to be a culturally, economically, and politically distinct and unified people with deep historical roots, for which France (and less frequently, Germany, the United States, or Japan) was seen as the archetype.<sup>6</sup> Cultural and

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Sáenz, *México íntegro* (1939; reprint, Mexico City: SEP/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), 155–56; and Vaughan, *Cultural Politics*, 197. See also Knight, "Racism," 78–80, 105 n. 48.

6. See, for example, Gamio, *Forjando patria*; José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997); Adolfo Best Maugard, *Manuales y tratados: Método de dibujo: Tradición, resurgimiento y evolución del arte mexicano* (Mexico City: SEP, 1923); Doctor Atl [Gerardo Murillo], *Las artes populares en México*, facsimile of 1922 edition (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Museo de Artes e Industrias Populares, 1980); and Jeronimo Coignard, "El valor efectivo de ballet mexicano," *El Universal Ilustrado* 4, no. 232 (1921). Each of these authors idealized European countries' supposed level of integration, and presented them as models for what Mexico might achieve (though in its own distinctive idiom). See also Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Mexican elites' understanding of France as a united single people reflected the claims of the French state, but contrasted with the reality of the relationship between Paris and its rural hinterlands. See, for example, Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992); Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993); Gérard Noirel and Michel Oferlé, "Citizenship and Nationality in Nineteenth-Century France," in *European Integration in Social and Historical Perspective: 1850 to the Present*, ed. Jytte Kausen and Louise A. Tilly (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); James R. Leaning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France During the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); Susan Caroline Rogers, *Shaping Modern Times in Rural France* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991); Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of Spain and France in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989); idem, "The Nation in the Village: State-Building and Communal Struggles in the Catalan Borderland During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988); and Eugen Joseph Weber's classic, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1976).

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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.

8. "El viaje de propaganda cultural del Sr. Vasconcelos a Jalisco y Colima," *El Universal*, 2 March 1921; "Hoy se pública el decreto que crea la Secretaría de Instrucción," *El Universal*, 8 July 1921; "No quieren que se federalicen las escuelas," *El Universal*, 5 Sept. 1921; and "60,000,000 de pesos para educación," *El Universal*, 27 Oct. 1921; and "El senado aprobó se fundara la Secretaría de Instrucción," *Excelsior*, 6 Sept. 1921. See also José Vasconcelos, *El Desastre*, 4th ed. (Mexico City: Ediciones Botas, 1938); Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico, 1880–1928* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1982); and idem, *Cultural Politics*; Claude Fell, *José Vasconcelos: Los años del águila: Educación, cultura e iberamericanismo en el México postrevolucionario*, trans. María Palomar and Javier Manríquez (Mexico City: Univ. Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989). SEP was created by law in July 1921 and became a department with a functioning minister in November and December of that same year. Other important government institutions founded during this time include the Department of Demographics and the Department of Geography, which were charged with culturally mapping Mexico.

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, 1992), 18–20, 36; and Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, “The Cosmopolitan Summer, 1920–1949,” *Latin American Research Review* 32, no. 3 (1997).

10. “La Secretaría de Comunicaciones en la celebración del centenario,” *El Universal*, 7 July 1921. Mexico had various kinds of roads from before the revolution, but few were capable of carrying automotive traffic or delivery trucks. See also “De la construcción de buenos caminos,” *El Universal*, 13 Mar. 1921; “El lunes proximo será inaugurado el primer Congreso Nacional de Caminos,” *Excelsior*, 2 Sept. 1921; “Centenares de soldados dedicanse a construir,” *Excelsior*, 4 Sept. 1921; “En el Congreso Nacional de Camino se acordó la forma de reunir fondos,” *Excelsior*, 8 Sept. 1921; and “Cada día aumenta el uso de autos de carga en toda la república,” *Excelsior*, 11 Sept. 1921.

11. See “El ahuehuete en definitiva va a ser el árbol nacional,” *Excelsior*, 4 Sept. 1921. Also see “¿Cuál debe ser el árbol nacional?” *El Universal*, 1 July 1921. Interestingly, an article announcing the debate over a national tree appears beside five images of contestants for the India Bonita Contest.

12. In connecting state formation and state projects with nation formation and cultural discourse, while maintaining a focus on class, ethnicity, international processes, and institutional mechanisms, I have found the following works particularly useful (in addition to other works mentioned in the article): Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1994); James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998); Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995); Stuart Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); Gilbert Joseph, Catherine Legrand, and Ricardo Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998); Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in the Mexican*

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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

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*National Space* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992); Vaughan, *Cultural Politics*; and Stuart Hall's essays and interviews in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).

13. See, for example, "La unión de los mexicanos," *Excelsior*, 3 July 1921; and "El homenaje de la raza," *Excelsior*, 20 Sept. 1921.

14. See Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, and his contributions to *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*. Also see Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (1909; reprint, Mexico City: Era, 1978); and Agustín F. Basave Benítez, *México mestizo: Análisis del nacionalismo mexicano en torno a la mestizofilia de Andrés Molina Enríquez* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992).

15. The use of a beauty contest to promote a newspaper had some precedent in the United States. Though beauty contests normally occurred in conjunction with local and regional fairs, in 1905 the U.S. had its first nationwide beauty contest, which was sponsored by a consortium of newspapers. But unlike the India Bonita Contest, U.S. beauty contests did not take on nationalist overtones until WW II. See Coleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, introduction to *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, 4–5. In Mexico, one commonly finds festival queens and agricultural queens beginning in the late nineteenth century, but these were not, as far as I have determined, beauty contests. Rather than have contestants compete with one another, a festival committee simply appointed as festival queen the daughter of a prominent political or economic figure. This tradition was continued in 1921 with the appointment of the daughter of Plutarco Elías Calles as official queen of the centennial festivities.

hoodwinked.<sup>16</sup> *El Universal's* promotion of the contest, along with *Excelsior's* denigration of it, reveal the role of nonstate organization in linking ideological with commercial interests.<sup>17</sup>

During the early 1920s, then, the project to promote living Indian culture as central to Mexican national identity was not the dominant discourse, nor was it promoted out of selfless nationalism; neither was it simply a "state project." It was initiated by independent intellectuals and commercial enterprises and only later did it win state sponsorship. Yet, it was certainly a new discourse, and it did sell newspapers, and the India Bonita Contest did capture the public imagination as few other events of the time could.<sup>18</sup> Most importantly, it was a discourse that received the support of the new coterie of post-revolutionary intellectuals who during the 1920s came to dominate most government departments, and many of whom later spearheaded postrevolutionary political and cultural government initiatives.

This article attempts to convey the messy, experimental, and contested nature of early postrevolutionary efforts to promote Indian cultures and to link them with Mexican national identity. The analysis denaturalizes common assumptions about the relationship between Mexican national identity and ideas of Indianness, which have become central to popular memory and collec-

16. The accusation by *Excelsior*, and later unwittingly perpetuated by Minister of Education Moisés Sáenz, makes clear the degree to which politics of Indian authenticity made it easy to attribute negative traits to "Indians," but any honors or benefits given to individuals as Indians were always subject to challenge by charges that one was not "authentic." See "La India Bonita es una abnegada madre de familia," *Excelsior*, 10 Apr. 1922; Rosa Zarate Uribe and Alfredo Zavala Zarate, interview by author; and Moisés Sáenz, "México y el indio," in *México íntegro* (1939; reprint, Mexico City: SEP/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), 146.

17. Nicola Miller provides an insightful general analysis of the changing relationship between intellectuals and the state, though I take issue with some of her conclusions concerning the solidity and single-mindedness of "the state" during the 1920s and early 1930s and her sharp distinction between state discourses and intellectuals' ideals. See Miller, *In the Shadow of the State*, esp. 249–50. Thomas Benjamin, in his discussion of the creation of an "official history" of the revolution during the 1920s, addresses the role of intellectuals in the creation of discourses that are too often attributed exclusively to "the state." See Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución: Mexico's Great Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History* (Austin: Univ. of Texas, 2000), 73–146.

18. Though the discourse did owe something to Porfirian intellectual thought, the particular ways it was articulated at this time were novel. See, for example, Knight, "Racism"; and Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, "La figura del indio en la pintura del siglo XIX: Fondo ideológico," in *La polémica del arte nacional en México, 1850–1910*, ed. Daniel Schávelzon (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988).

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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 magazine had ever thought to adorn its pages with the "strong and beautiful faces" of the indigenous women of the Mexican "lower class."

This was not Palavicini's first attempt to link nationalist aesthetics with the popular classes. Seven years earlier, in October of 1914, as minister of education, his plans for the federal *Dirección General de las Bellas Artes* (Department of Fine Arts) called for "democratizing art without watering it down, so as to make it useful for the popular classes."<sup>21</sup> But the India Bonita Contest was the first time he focused specifically on Indian culture as a way to promote his populist politics. *El Universal's* sponsorship of the contest, then, was novel in its effort to link aesthetics, pro-Indian nationalism, and the growing influence of mass media.

The newspaper made plans to send photographers in search of *indias bonitas*, whose portraits would appear in the newspaper along with brief personal profiles. After giving the readers some idea of what the contest was trying to

19. "La Apoteosis de la India Bonita: Breve Historia del Concurso en que triunfó María Bibiana Uribe," *El Universal*, 25 Sept. 1921. Palavicini founded *El Universal* in 1916, and subsequently founded the newspapers *El Globo* and *El Día*, and the magazine *Todo*.

20. "La apoteosis de la India Bonita," *El Universal*. The India Bonita Contest easily dwarfed all previous public contests by the newspaper.

21. Antonio Pompa y Pompa, interview, typescript, 1984, Archivo Incorporado "Manuel Gamio," Archivo Histórico del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Subdirección de Documentación, Mexico City (hereafter listed as AHINAH/SD/Gamio), caja 7, exp. 94. See also Félix F. Palavicini, introduction to *La patria por la escuela* (Mexico City: Linotipografía Artística, 1916).

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.

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selection made a clear statement about what organizers were looking for: a young pleasant-looking girl of humble position, with dark skin, rounded facial features, heavy eye-lids, and with little or no formal education. This and other early successes were followed by a broader recruitment campaign that extended beyond the capital into provincial centers like Oaxaca, Guanajuato, and Jalapa. Nevertheless, the contest advanced at a halting pace.

One of the main problems was that the public simply did not understand what *El Universal* meant when it advertised that it was searching for “indias” who were “bonitas.” Readers submitted photo entries of white women in folkloric garb (a form of costuming that had already become a cherished tradition among urban Mexican elites). Some entries even included signed testimonies attesting to the contestants’ distant Indian heritage. Other readers simply mocked the very idea of the contest by submitting joke entries showing coarse men disguised as indigenous girls. Clearly, integrating notions of Indianness and what I would term “public beauty” did not come easily to many readers.<sup>26</sup>

White and mestizo contestants disguised in folkloric outfits generally conformed to the established regional Mexican types known as the *china poblana* and the *tehuana*. The *china poblana* was a regional style of dress from the State of Puebla. Its popularity had been firmly established by the late nineteenth century, and it was frequently paired with the *charro* (a male characterized by a broad hat and tight pants, the *charro*-type was rooted in the rural landowning elite, though in some circumstances it denoted the *revolucionario*, and is now most often associated with Mexican *mariachis*). (See figure 1.) The *tehuana* was a female type distinguished by regional dress from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Southern Mexico, characterized by a large pleated headpiece circling the face. These types were generally denoted by style of dress, with little connection to race or ethnicity. Before the *china poblana* and *tehuana* vogue reached new heights in the 1920s, they were already ubiquitous in festivals, revue theater, film, and public cultural events. Mexico’s white elite often adopted these outfits to celebrate national holidays.<sup>27</sup> Even members of the United States colony, with a reputation for being insulated from Mexican culture, adopted the *china poblana* outfit for their celebrations of the Fourth of July.<sup>28</sup>

26. “La apoteosis de la India Bonita,” *El Universal*; and Sorel, “¿Por qué triunfó María Bibiana Uribe?”

27. See, for example, “Gran Concurso Internacional de Belleza,” *El Universal*. See also *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública* 1, no. 3 (1923). On the *tehuana*, see Aída Sierra Torre, “Geografías imaginarias II: La figura de la *tehuana*,” in *Del istmo y sus mujeres: Tehuanas en el arte mexicano* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte, 1992).

28. “Hoy conmemoran los americanos de México el aniversario de su independencia,” *El Universal*, 4 July 1921.

Figure 1. Charro and china poblana stereotypes performing the famous *jarabe tapatio*. Source: Frances Toor, "El jarabe antiguo y moderno," *Mexican Folkways* 5, no. 1 (1930): 27.



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.

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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 *indígenas* 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 consistency that has developed by this late stage of the contest.) For the India Bonita Contest, publication of photos and repeated training of the audience were vital. Without them there could be no consensus building about the subject. After a winner was selected, the contest even published an article by anthropologist Manuel Gamio explaining how an Indian could be considered beautiful.<sup>33</sup>

30. See, for example, the numerous cartoons in *Excélsior*, *El Universal*, *El Universal Ilustrado*, *Mexican Art Life*, and *Mexican Life*.

31. Sorel, “¿Por qué triunfó María Bibiana Uribe?”

32. The newspaper ran all photos that were “publishable” except joke entries.

33. Manuel Gamio, “La Venus India,” *El Universal Ilustrado* 5, no. 224 (1921). See also Karen Cordero Reiman, “Constructing a Modern Mexican Art,” in *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914–1947/México en la imaginación norteamericana*, ed.



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Figure 3. Some Miss Mexico finalists. Source: *El Universal* special art insert, 17 July 1921.

Mexican beauties. No training of the audience was necessary, nor did the newspaper publish any photos until after the finalists were selected (see figure 3; compare with figures 2 and 4.) Organizers and participants relied on a shared knowledge about what constituted “universal beauty,” and no one found it necessary to explain why only white women were included among the finalists.<sup>35</sup>

Despite an interest in promoting a positive valuation of Indianness, the organizers of the India Bonita Contest were themselves ambivalent about things Indian. In the regular beauty contest they praised the elegance of a pose or the impression of a smile. But in the India Bonita Contest they talked about braids, pure race, passive attitudes, mispronounced Spanish, typical Indian clothes, innocence and awkwardness, prayers to the virgin, grinding of corn, and humble social stations. Despite its positive valuation of Indianness, the newspaper remained unwilling to publicly promote Indian beauty as on the same level, or even of the same type, as white beauty. Their ambivalence about Indian beauty became even clearer when the ten finalists were announced (see

35. Of course, like most kinds of elite popularity contests, contestants and finalists were probably selected based largely on political and economic favoritism.

Figure 4. María Bibiana Uribe (left), finalists (center), and Bibiana with her grandmother (right). Source: *El Universal*, 2 Aug. 1921.



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 on the part of their female indígena subjects. In none of the many articles discussing whether particular girls were really Indian did the contest organizers think to ask the girls how they defined themselves.<sup>37</sup> Nor did organizers encourage girls to take the initiative to enroll themselves in the contest. Instead they urged employers to send in a photo if they had an india bonita in their hire. Accordingly, published profiles consistently listed the name of the discoverer before the name of the girl herself (which was occasionally omitted

36. “Once candidatos al premio en el Concurso de la India Bonita: Ayer reunió el jurado y escogió los tipos, que tendrán que venir a México para hacer la elección definitiva de triunfadores,” *El Universal*, 23 July 1921.

37. We see a similar process with the Zapatistas, who, according to historian John Womack, did not define themselves as Indians, but were defined as such by government officials and in wartime propaganda. See John Womack Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 70–71.

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altogether).<sup>38</sup> *El Universal* even tried to convince photographers to “go out to the picturesque populations within their state to search the peasant huts and the cane fields for candidates.”<sup>39</sup> By the very way they managed the contest, organizers cast non-Indians as the protagonists who delved into the dark corners of Mexico to discover and publicize its passive indigenous wonders. And so, while the contest advocated the inclusion of Indianness as part of the Mexican national identity, it relegated the subjects to a subservient role in the construction of a new relationship between indigenous peoples and the nation.

**Judging Indian Beauty**

Shortly before the newspaper selected the contest judges, a reporter expressed concern that Mexican judges would choose the whitest, least indigenous of the contestants, the one who most approximated the Western ideal of beauty. This, he feared, would undermine the very intent of the contest. He felt that only foreign judges were free of the anti-indígena prejudices that the Mexican middle and upper classes were supposedly taught since childhood, and hence, foreigners might be more open to Mexican indigenous culture, the “real” Mexico.<sup>40</sup> Though the contest organizers decided not to follow the reporter’s suggestion regarding foreigners, they seem to have shared some of his concerns, as shown by their decision to include as judges Jorge Enciso (a nativist artist who avidly promoted things Mexican and valorized Indian culture), Manuel Gamio (an anthropologist committed to incorporating Mexico’s Indian populations), and Rafael Pérez Taylor (one of the organizers of the contest and future head of the Federal Department of Fine Arts). The other two judges, Carlos Ortega and Aurelio González Carrasco, were recognized authorities in dance and theater.

The panel of five judges met near the end of July 1921 to look through hundreds of photographs, from which they selected ten finalists whom they invited to Mexico City at the newspaper’s expense.<sup>41</sup> A group photo of the finalists reveals ten young women seated in two rows, all dressed in regional

38. See, for example, “El Concurso de la India Bonita,” *El Universal*, 2 Feb. 1921.

39. “El Concurso de la India Bonita: En Córdoba se ha formado un comité de señoritas, que se encargará de buscar al tipos más hermosas de la región: Entusiasmo para concurrir a este certamen, en toda la república,” *El Universal*, 26 Jan. 1921.

40. Rafael López, “Hebdomadarios de *El Universal*: El Concurso Racial,” *El Universal*, [ca. 15 July] 1921.

41. “Docientos treinta y tres Indias Bonitas de disputarán el premio,” *El Universal*, 21 July 1921.

clothing (see figure 4). The physical similarity among the contestants is striking, suggesting that the judges shared a fairly narrow definition of what Indian looked like. In addition to physical criteria, the judges were clearly guided by social criteria: the majority of submissions had been of girls working in urban markets, yet most of the finalists were servants from rural regions, suggesting that *indias legítimas* were supposed to be rural and subservient.

When the judges reunited at the beginning of August to evaluate the finalists in person, they quickly narrowed their selection to María Bibiana Uribe and Ignacia Guerrero. Some favored the green-eyed Ignacia Guerrero, but Gamio insisted that no one with light-colored eyes could be considered a real indígena.<sup>42</sup> Earlier that year, Gamio had written an article arguing for the need to break down European canons of beauty:

The classic model of physical beauty, the Greek model, does not exist, nor has it ever existed in Mexico. For lack of this aesthetic ideal, we have substituted the White physical type of Hispanic origin. But this is a crass error because Whites make up only a small part of the Mexican population, and they are physically different from the majority; moreover, there is no evidence that Whites are more attractive than Indians or mestizos. We should not establish exclusive canons of beauty. Tehuana, Mixtec, and Maya types of feminine beauty, as well as Yaqui, Mayo, Tarahumara, and Tepehuane types of masculine and feminine beauty, along with types of mestizo beauty derived from these families, must be aesthetically analyzed, made known, and understood.<sup>43</sup>

Intent on valorizing noncanonical Indian beauty, Gamio stood firm. Finally, the panel settled the matter with a vote, which María Bibiana won, three to two.<sup>44</sup>

Several days after the decision, all the judges voiced sentiments similar to Carlos Ortega's statement that to crown and fete a queen of aboriginal beauty was a meritorious act that vindicated a "repressed, despised, and forgotten caste that has been ignored by Mexican artists, musicians and writers." Jorge Enciso added that until now Mexicans had never recognized the worth of the

42. "La apoteosis de la india bonita," *El Universal*.

43. Manuel Gamio, "Sugestiones sobre arte vernáculo," Jan. 1921, typescript, AHINAH/SD/Gamio, caja 8, exp. 25.

44. "La apoteosis de la India Bonita," *El Universal*; and Sorel, "La India Bonita de Mexico." Based on my research of the contest and of each of the individuals involved, the ones who voted for Bibiana were most likely Gamio, Taylor, and Enciso.

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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 with the attention the India Bonita Contest had received up to that point, and with the way it had infused the 1921 Centennial celebrations with a new kind of nationalist fervor based on an association with the indigenous masses. This competition, the newspaper claimed, was "as much a realization of beauty as an example of civic education, because it contributed to the current movement to affirm national unity by identifying . . . with all the components of the Mexican races."<sup>46</sup>

**Representing the India Bonita: Media and the Arts**

The India Bonita Contest became an inspiration for Mexican artists seeking to tap into the nation's cultural uniqueness. The day after the judges selected María Bibiana Uribe as the winner, *El Universal* ran on its front page a large photo of the 15-year-old from the Sierra de Puebla.<sup>47</sup> One of the accompanying articles paid particular attention to her exotic, but distinctive rural experience, her homemade indigenous-style costume (her *tixtle*, her *quixquematle*),

45. Sorel, "¿Por qué triunfó María Bibiana Uribe?"

46. "La representante de la raza: La princesa de ojos de obsidiana que reinará en las fiestas de septiembre," *El Universal*, 2 Aug. 1921. The India Bonita Contest of 1921 had much in common with beauty contests that later emerged in 1960/70s Guatemala, but it differed greatly in its construction of Indians' relationship to whites and to the nation. See McAllister, "Authenticity and Guatemala's Maya Queen."

47. "María Bibiana Uribe de la Sierra de Puebla proclamada India Bonita de México," *El Universal*, 2 Aug. 1921. The article states that she was 16 years old, but contest organizers were intentionally misinformed by María Bibiana's family; she was actually 15 years old. Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author. Confusion over her age and ethnicity even led one article to report that she was an 18-year-old "meshica." See *El Universal Ilustrado* 5, no. 222 (1921), cited in Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano*, 163.

Figure 5. María Bibiana Uribe. Source:  
*El Universal*, 25 Sept. 1921.



her language (“Mexicano” [Náhuatl]), and the specifics of her racial lineage (“Aztec”).<sup>48</sup>

The articles continued with another full page that included a three-quarter plane, full-length image of a barefoot María Bibiana (see figure 4). In her hands she held a lacquered bowl made from a gourd and decorated in the style of Olinalá, Guerrero (which was beginning to gain popularity as an authentically Mexican style of artisanship). Though the bowl had been handed to her in the photography studio as a prop (no doubt to highlight her aesthetic authenticity), one of the reporters suggested that it belonged to her. He encouraged readers to picture her wearing the bowl on her head to protect her from the sun (a common practice among indigenous peasants in Central Mexico at the time), and using it to scoop drinking water from mountain springs during her long walks in the woods.<sup>49</sup> He concluded that María Bibiana was a shy rural Indian girl about to receive public fame beyond her provincial imagination, a “fortunate Cinderella who brings with her all the grace of our lakes,

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

49. Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author; Jacobo Dalevuelta [Fernando Ramírez de Aguilar], “Mi entrevista con la India Bonita” *El Universal*, 2 Aug. 1921.

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Figure 6. María Bibiana on the cover of a Mexican magazine, holding a lacquered bowl from Oiinálá. 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 ¿Queue'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). The contest even attracted foreign attention.<sup>54</sup>

Revue theater performances playing on popular Mexican types rose in popularity thanks in large part to the excitement created by the India Bonita Contest. The dominant figures in most of these plays were the traditional

52. Dalevuelta, “Mi entrevista con la India Bonita.”

53. Ibid. According to her daughter, María Bibiana Uribe, whose language was Mexicano [Náhuatl], did not become proficient in Spanish until later in her life. Rosa Zarate Uribe and Alfredo Zavala Zarate, interview by author.

54. “La India Bonita,” *El Universal*, 11 Sept. 1921; and “La India Bonita en Nueva York,” *El Universal*, 20 Sept. 1921.

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Figure 7. A foxtrot dedicated to the India Bonita. Source: *El Universal*, 11 Sept. 1921.

stereotypes (chinas poblanas, tehuanas, and charros) that had long enjoyed widespread recognition, and which were easily consumed due to their lack of reference to race or class, and thanks to their similarity to European folk types. The repertoire remained limited and nonthreatening—even the few portrayals of indígenas generally avoided any allusion to political marginalization or class oppression. But those few that included portrayals of Indians did succeed in drawing attention to Mexico's indigenous population, to Mexican diversity, and to other issues that fed into more progressive politicking.

Alejandro Michel and Javier Navarro, inspired by the contest's recovery and valorization of Mexico's living Indian culture, directed a series of skits called *Mexicanarías* that became one of the most successful revues of the year. What set *Mexicanarías* apart from similar revues was its attempt to deal with Indians in a less slapstick or derogatory manner. One dialogue in the play even insisted that the real Mexican national character was to be found in the moun-

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>

*Antojitos Mexicanos* (literally, Mexican snacks) was another particularly successful revue during these months. It playfully depicted a charro sampling a number of exquisitely prepared regional dishes served by chinas poblanas, tehuanas, and campesinas. At the end of the play the charro's overindulgence in the rich variety resulted in a bout of indigestion, perhaps warning the audience about the potential hazard of the movement for a more inclusive Mexico.<sup>56</sup>

Another theater capitalized on the success of the India Bonita Contest by staging a successful revue called *El Indio Bonito*, about a handsome young Indian man who heard about an *india bonita*, then spent most of the play courting her. At the end of the play, the Indian and his wife moved to Xochimilco (the most recognizably Indian town for contemporary Mexico City urbanites), where they created a home on a *chinampa*.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, there was Julio Sesto's *La India Bonita*. This Teatro Colón revue starred María Conesa (the revue actress famous for her impressions of charros, chinas poblanas, tehuanas, and revolucionarias). One reporter stated that initially he thought the play was going to be a parody of the India Bonita Contest, but was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was a serious performance.<sup>58</sup> Another reviewer glibly noted that, though revue humor was not his taste, he was delighted to see a play about an india rather than the overdone themes of crazy town councils, President Obregón's garbanzo beans, potholes in the city, *gringos*, drunken ruffraff, or pot heads. He was also happy that the performers were not following the "tasteless practice" of adopting a "ridiculous" manner of speech intended to imitate Indian Spanish.<sup>59</sup> Another commentator called it one of the best plays of the year, and he went on to say that the play took on a more challenging depiction of *la india mexicana*: the play

55. "Una revista genuinamente mexicana," *El Universal*, 31 July 1921; and "El homenaje de la India Bonita en el teatro principal, ayer anoche," *El Universal*, 17 Aug. 1921.

56. "Los estrenos del sabado," *El Universal*, 16 Aug. 1921.

57. "La apoteosis de la India Bonita," *El Universal*. A *chinampa* is a kind of floating garden frequently used in the Valley of Mexico since the days of the Aztec empire. For a very different description of the play that relies on different sources and ties the plot more closely with the India Bonita Contest, see Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano*, 164.

58. Birotteau, "Notas teatrales: 'La India Bonita,'" *El Universal Ilustrado* 4, no. 200 (1921).

59. Jerónimo Coignard, "La India Bonita en el teatro," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1921.

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“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 . . . in separating ourselves from the foreign, in moving away from foreign influence to marshal our own artistic manifestations toward something genuinely created and developed by the people.” Musicians, he argued, were gaining interest in Mexican music, painters were starting to look at the Mexico around them, and even literature was finding its own direction: “We have begun to turn our eyes to what is ours [*empezamos a volver los ojos a lo nuestro*].” As the greatest evidence of this change in orientation, he cited the India Bonita Contest. “All of this is just a start,” he wrote, “a great beginning. Later, when *mexicanismo* is more profound, it will be more sincere. Then we will see—ever more rooted in our customs and arts—*lo mexicano*.”<sup>62</sup>

**The State Joins the Act**

Though recent studies have tempered the historical revisionist view of the Mexican-state-as-Leviathan, many scholars continue to exaggerate the initia-

60. “La India Bonita: El gran éxito del Teatro Colón,” *El Universal Ilustrado* 4, no. 202 (1921).

61. “Entrevista con el pintor Diego Rivera,” *El Universal*, 21 July 1921.

62. “La idea nacionalista en las fiestas del centenario,” *El Universal*, 24 Sept. 1921.

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 picture, it entered with gusto, incorporating *El Universal’s* India Bonita Contest into the official programs for the centennial.

Five months into the India Bonita Contest, the federal government decided to fund an official state-sponsored recelebration of the 15 September centennial of independence (which had been previously commemorated by the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship in 1910).<sup>63</sup> The first public act by the newly formed Centennial committee was an excited announcement that the celebrations would be open to the public and that many of the events would be “popular” in character. Scheduled programs included theater, opera, ballet, parades, and so forth, but the events that gained the most attention were those based on popular culture, like revue theater, *orquestas típicas*, and folk dances. Among the most successful events were the India Bonita Contest (which became incorporated into the official festivities) and the Exhibition of Popular Arts.<sup>64</sup> Centennial organizers emphasized that this populist orientation marked the distance between the new regime and its Europhilic and elitist Porfirian predecessor.

Much of the documentation surrounding the planning of the Centennial lamented Mexico’s lack of integration and suggested a strong interest in redefining living Indians from a national embarrassment into an integral component of the Mexican nation. The archives include fascinating proposals for the centennial in this regard. One document proposed transporting Indians from all corners of the republic to Mexico City to witness the celebrations so that they might return home with news of the Mexican

63. Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Archivo Histórico “Genero Estrada,” Mexico City (hereafter AHSRE), fols. L-E-955-66. Also see “El Sr. Ing. Alberto J. Pani fue nombrado Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores,” *El Universal*, 26 Jan. 1921; “El comité ejecutivo de la fiestas del centenario,” *El Universal*, 14 May 1921; and “Editorial: Nuestras iniciativas del centenario y la simpatía popular,” *El Universal*, 10 Sept. 1921.

64. Xavier López to the Comité Ejecutivo de Festejos del Centenario, 5 Sept. 1921, AHSRE, L-E-956. Also see Rick López, “Two Ways of Exalting Indianness in 1921: The Noche Mexicana and the Exposition of Popular Art,” in *Forjando Patria: State, Society and the Formation of National Identity in Mexico 1920-1940*, ed. Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, forthcoming).

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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, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992).

66. Edmundo de la Portilla to the Secretario de la Comisión Nacional del Centenario, 22 May 1921, 30 May 1921, and 20 June 1921, AHSRE, esp. L-E-955, L-E-962.

67. See *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública* 1, no. 1 (1922): 349, 373; 1, no. 2 (1922): 229–30, 267–69, 511–32; 5, no. 2 (1925): 157; 5, no. 7 (1925): 167–69. See also *Memorias de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, esp. 31 Aug. 1931, 230, 296–317. For the problems of lack of expertise and trained researchers, a problem that plagued Mexico into the 1950s, see the various letters between Gamio and Franz Boas, AHINAH/SD/Gamio, caja 1; Gabriel Fernández Ledesma to Alfonso Pulido Islas, 9–10 Jan. 1939, Biblioteca del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), Colecciones Especiales, Archivo Histórico, Fondo Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, Mexico City (hereafter cited as INBA/CE/GFL); and Gamio, *Forjando patria*, 160–61, 173. For more discussion of how these ideas were later pursued by the postrevolutionary governments, see Rick López, “‘Lo más mexicano de México’: Popular Arts, Indians, and Urban Intellectuals in the Ethnicization of Postrevolutionary National Culture, 1920–1972” (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 2001).

68. See Lebovics, *True France*; and Jan Morris, *The Spectacle of Empire: Style, Effect, and the Pax Britannica* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982).



Figure 8. María Bibiana Uribe at Alberto Pani's home. Source: *El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921.

relation to centralizing political and cultural authorities. In this way, aesthetics began to play a vital role in national narrations of ethnicity, class, and collective identity in Mexico.<sup>69</sup>

#### **The State, the Public, and the India Bonita**

As the wildly successful India Bonita Contest was incorporated into the federal festivities, government officials went out of their way to be identified with the India Bonita and, through her, with emerging interpretations of Mexican national identity and populist politics. The day after María Bibiana was selected, Minister of Foreign Relations Alberto Pani invited her to his home for a party given in her honor (see figure 8). Attendees included prominent

69. On the importance and uses of narration, see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (1986; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. introduction and chap. 1; and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). Ricardo Pérez Montfort's "La consolidación del acuerdo estereotípico nacional, 1921-1937," *Eslabones 2* (1992), examines the consolidation of stereotypes in postrevolutionary Mexico, but does not engage the contested nature of the process nor the larger question of how the nation was narrated.

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Figure 9. María Bibiana (second from right), her mother (on her right), and Hipólito Seijas (second from the left) at the home of Bibiana's new godfather, Andrés Fernández (far right). Source: *El Universal*, 24 Sept. 1921.

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 "PRO-RAZA." The India Bonita sat on high, showing off her regional costume and holding a clutch of wild-flowers, "enjoying intensely the attention"

70. Humberto Ruiz, "La sociedad al día," *El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921.

71. "D. Andrés Fernández educará a la India Bonita en un buen colegio: Es el mismo en que se educa en Puebla una hijita de aquel prominente español," *El Universal*, 23 Aug. 1921; "D. Andrés Fernández y su esposa ofrecieron ayer una fiesta a la India Bonita," *El Universal*, 24 Aug. 1921; Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author; and "La India Bonita es una abnegada madre," *Excelsior*.

Figure 10. María Bibiana atop the *El Universal* parade float. Source: *El Universal*, 19 Sept. 1921.



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 indigenous countryside. As her float rolled down the avenues escorted by the indios (whom Bibiana later recalled as charros and who handed Bibiana their handkerchiefs to wipe the beads of sweat from her forehead), the crowd met her with cheers and showered her in flowers, confetti and streamers.<sup>73</sup>

María Bibiana and the India Bonita Contest became one of the most celebrated cultural events of the season. And this popularity was by no means limited to Mexico City’s high society. For every play, song, or poem composed in her honor, there was also a bar, milk-stand, or corner snack shop named for her.<sup>74</sup> (See figure 11.) Perhaps a reporter did not greatly exaggerate when he declared that the India Bonita Contest not only represented the glorification of the *raza indígena*, but also had become one of the major events of the Centennial.<sup>75</sup>

A few days after the parade, María Bibiana was officially crowned in a the-

72. “María Bibiana Uribe, La India Bonita, reinó ayer en la bella fiesta floral capitalina,” *El Universal*, 19 Sept. 1921.

73. Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author; and María Bibiana Uribe, interview by Arturo Allende; and “María Bibiana Uribe, La India Bonita, reinó ayer,” *El Universal*.

74. “La apoteosis de la India Bonita,” *El Universal*; Hipólito Seijas, “La glorificación popular del Concurso de la India Bonita,” *El Universal*, 24 May 1921.

75. “La más solemne fiesta del centenario,” *El Universal*, 24 Sept. 1921.

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Figure 11. A *pulquería* dedicated to the India Bonita. Note panel on left, which shows Seijas trying to enroll indias. Source: *El Universal*, 24 May 1921.

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*, and his dic-

76. "La apoteosis de la India Bonita," *El Universal*; María Bibiana, interview by Guillermo Ochoa; María Bibiana Uribe, interview, broadcast, Radio Station XOJT, Necaxa, 1991; Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author; and Rosa Zarate Uribe and Alfredo Zavala Zarate, interview by author. See also "Murió ayer 'La India Bonita,'" *El Universal*; María Bibiana Uribe, interview by Arturo Allende; and "El último homenaje a María Bibiana Uribe, reina de la raza aborígen en las Fiestas Patrias," *El Universal*, 26 Sept. 1921.

77. "El último homenaje a María Bibiana Uribe," *El Universal*.

Figure 12. María Bibiana (right) and María Conesa (left) after the performance. Source: *El Universal*, 18 Sept. 1921).



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 and indigenous culture, President Obregón announced that through María Bibiana the entire Indian race was being honored. He presented Bibiana's monetary award to her new *padrino*, Don Andrés Fernández, who received it on her behalf as Félix Palavicini, playing on ideas of *mestizaje*, pointed out that Fernández was a Spaniard married to a Mexican, and that, like all Mexicans, it was his responsibility to be concerned for the Indian.<sup>78</sup> After the evening's finale, María Bibiana had to be rushed out the emergency exit to escape the pressing crowd of people determined to touch at least the hem of her sleeve.<sup>79</sup>

One of the stars of the evening was María Conesa, the leading figure in Julio Sesto's *India Bonita*. In side by side photos published in *El Universal* we see María Bibiana wearing a simple *rebozo*, holding a *batea* from Uruapan, Michoacán, and María Conesa dressed to the nines in folkloric garb and

78. Ibid. While playing on the theme of *mestizaje*, the message also makes clear the subservient, marginalized, and largely symbolic role Indians were to play in the Mexican nation.

79. Rosa Zarate Uribe, interview by author.

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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.

permutation in between. Manuel Gamio, for instance, argued that Mexico's pluralism should be celebrated and reinforced, and that all Mexicans should valorize and redeem Indian cultures as part of the national essence. Groups that refused to embrace Indianness, according to Gamio, were not, and could never be, truly Mexican.<sup>81</sup>

Without question the contest had transformed María Bibiana into an overnight-celebrity and a symbol of the promises of a new direction for postrevolutionary society. *El Universal* expressed optimism that the fact that the India Bonita Contest had struck a chord in Mexican society might augur well for the will of the Mexican public to forge a union between the two races, and for the glorification of living Indians as the basis for *la nacionalidad mexicana*.<sup>82</sup>

Erased from these sanitized images of the India Bonita was the reality of María Bibiana's life. The Spanish godfather given to her as part of her prize never fulfilled his promise to educate Bibiana at a boarding school. In part, this can be explained by the fact that it was later discovered that María Bibiana Uribe was already pregnant when she received her crown. Early pregnancy outside of official marriage was the norm among the indigenous population from the Sierra de Puebla at the time (as it still is in many rural regions). But it violated the ideals of elite polite society, and would have posed an embarrassment to Don Fernández had he sent her to the boarding school. Her early pregnancy outside of wedlock also contradicted the romantic, virginal image of the India Bonita constructed by *El Universal* and by the Mexican state.

Another harsh reality faced by María Bibiana upon her return home was the loss of virtually every centavo of her 10,000 pesos of cash and prizes. According to her daughter, María Bibiana, as an uneducated Indian, could not understand the value of money and therefore was easy prey for unscrupulous relatives and other predators. Moreover, as a young woman, she was given little control over her own funds. She married the father of her child (her first of six children) and, to make a living, she had to turn to doing other people's laundry and cleaning houses. In short, her life before, during, and after the

81. See Gamio, *Forjando patria*, 1-8, 28, 38-64, 101-118, 144-45, and especially 95-99. Historians often mistakenly impose Gamio's later disillusionment with indigenous culture, and his later hard line advocacy of homogeneity, onto his earlier thinking. But a closer reading shows that during the early 1920s he called not for the destruction of pluralism or of regional differentiation, but for the incorporation of select differences into a national identity.

82. "‘*El Universal*’ y sus Concursos de Centenario," *El Universal*, special Centennial insert, 27 Sept. 1921.

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contest was not the ideal promoted by *El Universal* or by the Obregón regime. A significant gulf divided the image of the India Bonita from the reality of life for a young indigenous women like María Bibiana.

Nevertheless, the image of the India Bonita personified the promise of mutual transformation as rural Indian Mexico became integrated into urban white Mexican society. But just as the contest organizers did not directly invite indigenous peoples to contribute to the construction of new cultural and political discourses, María Bibiana was not invited to teach the public or state officials anything about rural or Indian Mexico.<sup>83</sup> Nor did she have the opportunity to comment on what role she thought rural Mexicans should play in national society. Instead, she was there passively to approve of the displays of Indianness enacted before her, to affirm that the emerging movement to incorporate the indigenous population was a good project that was based on a true understanding of the Mexican Indian.<sup>84</sup>

**Conclusion: The India Bonita Contest and Mexican Identity**

The India Bonita Contest of 1921 helped focus public debate about the role of living indigenous cultures within Mexico's national identity. During the contest, prominent figures like Manuel Gamio, Francisco Bulnes, Andrés Molina Enríquez, Martín Luis Guzmán, José Vasconcelos and many others engaged in often-acrimonious public debates over race, indigenous culture, and national identity in the pages of mainstream newspapers and journals.<sup>85</sup> Mexican intellectuals, eager to forge Mexico's diverse populations into a cohesive cultural nation, promoted a growing recognition of the need to unite urban with rural Mexico, which were often interpreted as "modern Mexico" and "Indian Mexico."<sup>86</sup> Even people like Vasconcelos (who lamented Mexico's pluralistic and

83. As Gyan Prakash has observed, despite elite efforts to form a nation-state out of a diverse population, "the subalterns were regarded as incapable of articulating the demands of the nation." See Gyan Prakash, introduction to *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 10.

84. On power relationships and discursive agency, see Gerald Sider, "When Parrots Learn to Talk and Why They Can't: Domination, Deception, and Self-Deception in Indian-White Relations," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 1 (1987).

85. See for example Francisco Bulnes, "Las razas inferiores son funesta en el trabajo libre," *El Universal*, 1 Mar. 1921; Manuel Gamio, "Las pretendidas razas inferiores de México," *El Universal*, 3 Mar. 1921; and Martín Luis Guzmán, Letter to the editor, *El Universal*, 5 Mar. 1921.

86. See, for example, "Editorial: Aspectos del centenario," *Excelsior*, 21 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 período 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).

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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 *La India Bonita* and as the first Miss Mexico testifies to the legacy of the cultural movement begun in the 1920s. The pervasiveness of this postrevolutionary cultural heritage might even lead us to conclude that perhaps María Bibiana Uribe was, in a way, the real First Miss Mexico. For while El Concurso Universal de Belleza with its implicit exclusion of nonwhite Mexico was a holdover from Mexico's Porfirian past, the India Bonita Contest marked the way toward a new postrevolutionary Mexico.

