

'LA INDIA BONITA'

National Beauty in Revolutionary Mexico

APEN RUIZ

University of Texas at Austin



ABSTRACT

'La India Bonita', a beauty pageant celebrated in Mexico City in 1921, was a performance that embodied the concerns of revolutionary intellectuals seeking to build a 'new Mexico' in the aftermath of the Porfiriato. Mexico's indigenous heritage and the figure of the feminine woman emerged as critical resources for nationalists, especially their efforts to combat the threat to the formation of national consciousness posed by feminism. This essay seeks to uncover the gendered construction of the rural *mestiza* in post-revolutionary Mexico, through a critical reading of representations both in the popular press and in the narratives of intellectuals such as the social scientist, Manuel Gamio, his peers, and predecessors.

Key Words ◇ beauty contest ◇ feminism ◇ gender ◇ intellectuals ◇ Mexico nationalism ◇ race

The triumph of *La India Bonita* [the Beautiful Indian] has moved everybody; it has reached the white minority because of its originality and because they have pity and sympathy towards the suffering race; at the same time, this race has enthusiastically and intensely vibrated when seeing the brown virgin so highly praised, in whom the indigenous people feel that their ancestral souls palpitate. (Gamio, in *El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a)¹

They must be represented; they cannot represent themselves. (Marx, 1852)

The beauty contest 'La India Bonita' took place in Mexico City in 1921. The winner, Maria Bibiana Uribe, was a 16-year-old indigenous woman who, as the press noted, 'has arrived to us, accompanied by her grandmother, a pure Indian of the "meshica" race who does not [even] speak Spanish' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 11). Accounts in the print press of the time breathlessly detailed the sensation and anticipation caused by the contest. As the opening epigraph from the newspaper *El Universal Ilustrado* indicates, 'La India Bonita', the woman and the contest, were important

symbols in a Mexico that was presenting itself as a revolutionary nation state.

The fascination of 'La India Bonita' for the general populace, the press, and significantly, Mexico's intellectual elite, has gone unremarked in studies that take as their focus feminine symbols that were and still are present in the Mexico's national imaginary (Xochitl, Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, or Adelita) (Brading, 2001; Fernández Poncela, 2000; Resendez-Fuentes, 1995). I should make clear that although 'La India Bonita' could not, and can never, displace these other images in the national-popular imaginary, she is nevertheless an intriguing figure around and through whom a number of discourses (representations) about race, gender, culture, and nation were constructed. These discourses, couched in populist and indigenist language, were typical of the revolutionary social atmosphere of the 1920s in Mexico (Knight, 1994; 1998). Accordingly, this essay, in a similar vein to earlier discussions, situates the body of 'the Beautiful Indian' as the space where the Mexican nation has been historically constructed and suggests that she, like these better-known symbols, played a complex and contradictory role at a foundational moment in Mexican history.

The aim here is to uncover the extent to which the representations of 'La India Bonita' flow out of long-standing dialogues among and between leading figures in the sciences and society regarding the national-racial question in postcolonial Mexico. This was understood as an independent Mexico in which Mexican elite were constructing a definition of the nation differentiated from their colonial and European precursors. The preoccupation with the Indian heritage of 'La India Bonita' exemplifies how this distinction was structured: her body mediated the link between Mexico's living Indian populations and the country's mythical Aztec past, although as I show, her Indianness was a homogeneous, domesticated construct.

I also claim that 'La India Bonita' was elevated to the status of a national icon in the particular context of the 1920s because she embodied the intellectual concerns about women and the nation in that historical moment. Reading the accounts of her transformation from beauty queen to historical-popular signifier, it is clear that the discursive construction of 'La India Bonita' proceeds in several contradictory directions at once, and articulates the diverse concerns of the architects of postcolonial Mexico. She was portrayed as a rural *mestiza* woman newly arrived in the modern cosmopolis of Mexico City and as a woman who maintained her ancient and enduring 'Indianness' while simultaneously demonstrating her capacity to become modern enough by virtue of her participation in a beauty contest. And while her beauty-queen status marked her as undeniably *feminine*, it was made apparent that she was not *so* modern that she would become a *feminist*, a key distinction made by nationalists. This is a particularly important distinction, insofar as a central tenet of nationalism's patriarchal

basis is its oppositional, even antagonistic relationship, to feminism. According to this logic, 'La India Bonita' would always and could only be a woman, not a feminist.

Analytically, I examine images and commentaries that appeared in the popular media regarding the contest with other texts concerning indigenous and *mestiza* women. The specificities of the beauty contest, that is, its production, performative aspects, and its textual representations, enable an understanding of the larger historical context in which the event was produced. A striking feature of these representations is the overlap, in content at least, between the so-called 'scientific' modes of writing (i.e. monographs, historical treatises, academic journals) and the 'popular' channels of communication (i.e. newspapers, tabloids, magazines). A focal point of this essay is the parallel between media discourses and scientific, primarily anthropological, texts. Specifically, I note the resonance between the popular writings of national intellectuals such as Manuel Gamio (1883–1960), the 'father of Mexican anthropology', on the subject of 'La India Bonita' and his theoretical perspectives as a state-sponsored scientist.²

In a historical vein, it is illustrative to contrast the views on and about women and nation in the work of figures such as Gamio in the 1920s with those of his peers and predecessors. Even though these scholars claim their ideological positions to be significantly different in terms of content, analysis, and in other aspects from their pre-revolutionary predecessors, I will argue there are significant continuities that persist in their discourses, especially the extent to which the *nation is always thought through its women*.

In sum, this article is an attempt to uncover the complexities of the relationship between nationalism and women as an intellectual question in Mexico. It seeks to uncover the nuances of the breaks and continuities between the deep-rooted cultural origins of pre- and post-revolutionary Mexico. And it analyzes how and why nation-building inevitably includes women, as if nations could not exist without confronting the woman question.

The Beauty Contest

Displaying the Nation after the Revolution

As a national icon, 'La India Bonita', the woman, epitomized ideas about gender, race, and nation at a particular moment when Mexico's identity as a *mestizo* nation was masterfully being articulated, and when the national political elite was divided by ongoing conflicts over economic, political, and cultural power. 'La India Bonita' was not only the pseudonym for Maria

Bibiana Uribe, it also referred to a beauty contest and a play organized by the government for the centennial celebration of the consummation of Mexico since Independence.³ Whereas the centennial celebration in 1910 has been well-examined as a public display of Porfirian nationalist propaganda (García, 1911; Tenorio-Trillo, 1996a)⁴ far less attention has been paid to the 1921 celebration that was held at the height of the revolutionary years.

The decade of the 1920s is widely considered a crucial moment during which discourses about who would constitute the new national subject (that is, the essence of the post-revolutionary nation) were being shaped by intellectuals through new means of communication (print press, radio, theater, and films) (Beezley, 1994; Pérez Monfort, 1994; Reyes, 1981; Vaughan, 1997). These centralist discourses were forged mostly by the urban, intellectual elite, and public festivals, such as the beauty contest celebrated in the nation's capital, were concrete realizations of those discourses.

Most studies about 1920s in Mexico emphasize the extent to which national cultural representations turned to Indian peoples and how the trope of 'the Indian' appears with increasing frequency in expressive culture (Cawson, 1998; Delpar, 1992; Knight, 1994; Pérez Monfort, 1994; Vaughan, 1997; Widdifield, 1996). Ricardo Pérez Monfort's work stands out among several that have examined popular culture and festivals in Mexico City. Pérez Monfort considers 'La India Bonita' to be one of the best examples of 'popular indigenism' and an important moment when the stereotypical image of the Indian was shaped.⁵ The contrast between these latter-day constructions of the nation and those of previous eras are readily apparent. For instance, during the Porfiriato's great centennial celebration of 1910 marking the beginning of Mexico's war of independence, Aztec rulers such as Cuathemoc were glorified in Mexico City's main avenues, as part of a *Desfile Histórico* (García, 1911). But for the Porfirian elite who inscribed the 'Indianness' of the nation in its history, in its ruins and mythical heroes, that essence remained a thing *of the past*.

The revolutionary gaze directed at Indian people is significantly different; during the 1920s the clear intent was to incorporate extant elements of indigenous cultures into the national imaginary. In the 1921 commemoration, 'La India Bonita' emphasized Mexico's Indian heritage by simultaneously invoking the nation's past while reminding Mexicans of that presence in the contemporary moment. This time not only is the ancient Aztec aristocracy invoked as the essence of Mexico's patrimony, but the living Indian, 'La India Bonita', is summoned from the rural interior to the cosmopolitan center for the benefit of urban Mexicans. This view of Indianness did not match the reality of a country with multiple and conflicting indigenous cultures and languages. Instead, it appealed to a general and homogeneous notion of 'Indian' as a prerequisite for the belief in *mestizaje* as the basis of national identity and development.⁶

While it is clearly not accidental that a female beauty contest was selected as one of the major acts of nation-building in the 1920s, none of the studies on the topic ask how those nationalist discourses, practices, and cultural representations were *gendered*. That is, was the image of the Indian inevitably a feminine one? How and in what ways was the female Indian made the essence of Mexican nationhood? I claim that 'La India Bonita' is a significant example of the gendered nature of nationalism; it is a public display that crystallizes a multiplicity of nationalist concerns about purity, tradition, and anti-feminism, at a moment when the growing presence of women in society was challenging traditional gender roles (Cano, 1996, 1998; Macías, 1982; Pérez, 1999; Ramos, 1993; Soto, 1990; Tuñón, 1998).

'La India Bonita' Arrives in the City

My analysis of the beauty contest is limited to images and commentaries published in two important periodicals of the time (*El Universal* and *El Universal Ilustrado*). The contest's details were published in the newspaper *El Universal* in July of 1921, and shortly thereafter, letters from different parts of the nation with pictures of candidates were received at the newspaper's office. The jury was composed of the anthropologist Manuel Gamio, Jose Enciso (a painter known for his interest in depicting the Indian face of the nation), Aurelio González Casanova and Carlos M. Ortega, who were both writers of popular plays, Rafael Perez Taylor, a journalist, and Heriberto Frias, who was a cinema critic and society reporter for the city (*El Universal*, 12 July 1921: 9). All of these men were in one way or another invested in the project of raising national consciousness.

The data on the contest are limited. We know that the winner of the contest was Maria Bibiana Uribe, a young⁷ woman who, as it was reported, 'ha llegado a nosotros acompañada de su abuela, una india de pura raza "meshica" que no habla español'.⁸ Maria Bibiana's dress and rural provenience were also read as markers of her indigenouslyness. But, for reasons unknown, while *El Universal Ilustrado* reproduced a picture of Maria Bibiana Uribe and the other 10 finalists, the names of the others were not published. Maria Bibiana traveled in August 1921 from her village in the Sierra de Puebla, in order to spend some weeks in Mexico City until the date of the Fiestas del Centenario. Once there, according to a press account, she would ostensibly dream about the 'leyenda del bello príncipe Tonatiuh que unió sus destinos a los de una plebeya' until the big day arrived.⁹ During her stay she was fêted by members of the government and by the urban masses that flocked to the Teatro Esperanza Iris to see the award ceremony. In Mexico City Maria Bibiana had the opportunity to be 'conducida a un aristocrático palacio, donde manos delicadas le sirvieron té en porcelanas de Sevres'.¹⁰

In the palace, the main organizers of the Centenario received Maria

Bibiana. The prize was awarded to her on Sunday night 'ante una selecta concurrencia, Maria Bibiana recibió, en nombre de la clase indígena, el homenaje que la clase intelectual rinde a la raza de Bronce'.¹¹ The apotheosis of La India Bonita was a parade and competition of allegoric floats that paraded through the streets of Mexico City. Though the float that carried Maria Bibiana was finally left out of the competition, she was the object of significant public interest, much of it created by newspaper coverage of the celebration (*El Universal*, 22 July 1921: 8). Subsequently La India Bonita became an image used in advertisements, and even a commercial trade mark: La India Bonita huaraches (a type of sandal).

Ricardo Pérez Monfort (1994) notes that the appearance of 'La India Bonita' provoked multiple reactions among urbanites due to the complex position of the Indian within the national imaginary. The coverage that the press accorded 'La India Bonita' was a key part of the overall strategy utilized by the contest's organizers, Mexico's elites, concerning the country's indigenous past and its people. It is readily apparent that this elite, at a moment of revolutionary change, had turned their eyes to the 'raza de Bronce'. From the papers, the public learned that Maria Bibiana had been born and always lived in the mountains, and that she still wore her 'huipil' tied to her hip.¹² As in a fairy tale, Maria Bibiana was portrayed as a poor indigenous girl representing the Indian race, blessed and marveled at by elite social circles in the city. Her arrival in the national capital was described as the merging of the two contrasting faces of Mexico—the country's rural, indigenous aspect and its urban, modern counterpart.

From a close reading of newspaper articles and editorials, it is clear that the public reactions recorded in the media are also intended to *create*, not merely reproduce, popular opinion. The media narratives are meant to inculcate a shared sense of national feeling among Mexico City's urban classes that, as will become apparent, crucially rested on imagining a continuity with the past and the reinforcement of social distinctions and differences from other classes (Anderson, 1983). Importantly, these narratives have specific gender connotations that deserve to be examined more fully.

While she inspired curiosity and wonder among her audiences, as the news accounts made clear, it is not difficult to also note the sense of estrangement among those who met her. Maria Bibiana's visit to the residence of Alberto Pani, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, provoked both wonder and fascination among the urban elite. But this fascination also heightened and emphasized the difference and distance between the subject and her observers. Everything about her was a reminder to her audience that she was an Indian, a distinction especially marked in her clothing. According to the reporter, 'el contraste de su traje con los cortes a la última moda, era encantador. Junto a las cortas faldas de seda, su grueso y largo titixtle. Sus pies desnudos junto a sus finísimas zapatillas.'¹³ This contrast reproduces by means of the dress code the contradiction of *mestizo* nationalism. It is a

contradiction that lies in the gap created between a woman that represents the purity of indigenous cultures (through the use of indigenous clothing) and those who look at her but only in relation to her lack of western traits (her failure to wear elegant silk dresses and fancy shoes).

If spectators had a variety of reactions to the appearance of Maria Bibiana, what of her own feelings? According to one account, Maria Bibiana was perfectly satisfied being the center of attention among Mexican social elites: 'se regocijaba de su triunfo'.¹⁴ Noting the contrast between Maria Bibiana and those who received her in the house of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, the journalist also emphasized Maria Bibiana's apparent ease in this elegant atmosphere: 'su rusticidad no le hizo anonadarse a la vista de los finos tapices, ni el rico mobiliario, diríase que si por salones semejantes no había transitado, si conocía las riquezas de Moctezuma o Netzahualcōyotl'.¹⁵

This is an example of an insidious nationalist discourse that contrasts and hierarchically opposes contemporary indigenous peoples to their forebears, on the one hand, and to their white counterparts, on the other. While Maria Bibiana has inherited the elegance and sophistication of her ancestors (Moctezuma and Netzahualcōyotl) which enable her to be comfortable among the urban elite, she herself is emphatically described as rural and rustic. These traits serve to mark her as other and to separate and estrange her from urban white society.

In another interview with Maria Bibiana published in *El Universal Ilustrado*, the writer emphasizes Maria Bibiana's reluctance to smile. He comments: 'Es muy joven, un poco delgada y pálida. Tiene una piel limpia y olorosa a jabón y una boca pequeña que no es muy amiga de la sonrisa.'¹⁶ His request that she smile is refused. 'Sonría usted un poquito Bibiana. ¿No sabe que así se ve usted mejor? . . . Ella me mira pero solo sonríe con los ojos'.¹⁷

She similarly denies the portrait artist she is posing for the pleasure of a smile. 'Sonría un poco', asks the artist. Maria Bibiana replies, '“No puedo, no me gusta enseñar los dientes.” Bueno, digo con suavidad, no los enseñe, pero sonría. Es usted media rebelde'.¹⁸ The journalist concludes that after a few days Maria Bibiana will surely be less hostile and be able to manage a smile for the public.

The Nation's Gendered Face

In marking the comportment of Maria Bibiana as equivalent to rural women's inherent modesty, the popular press reinforced various attributes such as the Indian beauty's becoming shyness or the indigenous woman's naturalness and made them available for decoding by the public. In these representations Maria Bibiana is pictured as a type and an ensemble of

characteristics rather than as an individual. These accounts are especially remarkable in that they reveal the extensively gendered nature of *mestizo* nationalism, particularly the narratives that weave together images of the past, sexuality, femininity, and race.

Clothing, ancestral place of residence, and demeanor aside, it was her physical characteristics and 'natural beauty' that marked her as the living representative of Mexico's past. In one such narrative, Maria Bibiana was 'objeto de miradas de todas las elegantes damas y caballeros allí reunidos. Que curiosidad se pintaba en los rostros delicados y los bellos de los invitados. Diríase que miraban una rara flor.'¹⁹ The description of guests as having gazed upon the 'virgen morena de la raza de bronce, simiente de la raza mexicana'²⁰—the 'virgin seed of the Mexican nation'—is symptomatic of the way in which two national concerns, the racial and sexual, were inscribed on her body. The construction of the beauty queen as an indigenous virgin is reinforced in an article entitled 'Indian Beauties in our History' (Bachiller, 1921). The author rhetorically asks how an Indian woman could be chosen to represent the entire nation: '¿acaso la belleza india es idéntica en las diversas razas aborígenes del país?'²¹ He concludes that Maria Bibiana is the natural heir of the long line of Indian princesses that existed in Mexico prior to the arrival of the Spaniards and during the first years of the conquest. Among those indigenous beauties he mentions the Princess Atzimba from Michoacan who captivated the Spanish conquistador Capitan Villadiego; the *capitan* subsequently died for her love. Thus, Maria Bibiana, as Atzimba, Xochitl, or Malintzin, 'muestran que en la raza autóctona han existido verdaderas bellezas, capaces de trastornar los cerebros de los españoles' (Bachiller, 1921: 22–3). Those women shared the fact that they were loved by the Spanish conquerors.

The appropriate physical characteristics that defined the beauty of the Indian were firmly established well before the contest began. According to a news article, the contest's organizers had intended to select a particular physical type that was identified with the Aztec race. Aztecs were both presumed to be the original ancestors of the Mexican nation and to exist in various parts of the country. Though difficult, if not impossible, to define Aztecs racially, the jury decided that Maria Bibiana was an ideal phenotypic example of that group. The jury selected Maria Bibiana from the other 10 women because she had 'todas las características de la raza: color moreno, ojos negros, estatura pequeña, manos y pies finos, cabello lacio y negro, etc.'²² Those traits that were seen as distinctive of Maria Bibiana were in reality traits that defined an ideal image of the *mestiza*, regardless of the region of origin: brown skin, black eyes, petite frame, delicate feet and hands, and black straight hair. And these physical characteristics were purposefully constructed according to the desires of white and *mestizo* elite in Mexico City.

Far from being unassailable, this image of the 'virgin seed' was subject to

criticism. The image of 'La India Bonita' as an icon of sexual and racial purity was fashioned in the city and emerged as the virgin kernel of the nation's genealogy. Accordingly, facts that contradicted that representation were deliberately erased from public knowledge. Some months after her selection as queen, *El Excelsior*, another newspaper in Mexico City, sent a reporter to Huauchinango, Maria Bibiana's hometown and discovered that she was a single mother and that her supposed racial purity was the subject of mirth among the townspeople (Reyes, 1981).

A National Beauty for the New Nation

'La India Bonita' played a particular role in the discourses about race and nation articulated after the revolution by a new crop of intellectuals. To a large extent, 'La India Bonita' nicely complemented the revolutionary nationalistic aesthetics that reached its peak during the 1920s, adopting Indianness and indigenous matters as emblematic of the nation. But what, if anything, was new in the discourse about women, in a place that so strongly elaborated its national and historical identity in terms of miscegenation? In this context what were the symbols and discursive strategies used by the new architects of post-revolutionary nationalist consciousness?

With regard to the first question, I situate 'La India Bonita' as one of the images mobilized to reinforce the gendered and racialized nature of the nation. As to the second question, the task of post-revolution intellectuals in promoting the new vision of the nation, their relationship to 'La India Bonita', in particular, and to Indians and women, more broadly, is most apparent in the case of Manuel Gamio, archaeologist, anthropologist, and member of the pageant's jury. Writing in *El Universal Ilustrado* about 'La India Bonita', Gamio highlighted the positive attributes that made her a candidate for a national symbol. Chief among those attributes was her ability to arouse, for the first time in history, the national sentiment of all Mexicans; that is, Maria Bibiana made the Mexican people aware of their shared, yet largely ignored Indian past. Gamio's argument, stated in the opening epigraph, is that while other national symbols have only appealed to the white minority the Beautiful Indian resonates with the 'suffering race' (i.e. the 'indigenous multitudes') in a way those other icons cannot (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 21).

In another discussion regarding Maria Bibiana's beauty, Gamio asks, '¿es en verdad una bella mujer, Bibiana Uribe, "La India Bonita", es representativa del tipo de hermosura femenina?'²³ He answers his own question by criticizing classical canons of beauty in Mexico. Previous beauty contests celebrated in the country have favored the 'Hellenic beauty type', Gamio says, but this is an imposition of the white minorities. Gamio argues the majority of Mexicans does not accept these standards because they do not correspond to *Mexican* ideals of beauty: the 'Hellenic type' does not match

the racial phenotype of the majority of the population: 'sería imposible esperar que nuestros indios y mestizos aceptaran tales cánones, porque no corresponden a su ideal de belleza'.²⁴ Gamio concludes that Maria Bibiana parallels any Greek Venus, because 'es una mujer Hermosa y encarna el tipo de belleza femenina en nuestro medio'.²⁵

Maria Bibiana, as she is portrayed in these excerpts, is meant to represent the Mexican woman, the desirable feminine subject, because her physical traits are acceptable for both the Indian and *mestizo* population. But she is also crafted as embodying the most desirable qualities for men: that is, she is attached to her traditions, but willing to change and accept modern aspects of urban life. In other narratives, she will never become so modern as to be a feminist. It is in this specific contrast between the feminine and feminist woman that 'La India Bonita' stands as a national icon, because she is portrayed as inherently non-feminist. Understanding the non-feminist nature of the Mexican woman requires moving beyond the particularities of the beauty contest and unpacking these discourses about nation and woman that took place both prior to and after the revolution of 1910. 'La India Bonita' played a particular role at the moment when feminism was openly discussed and equated with anti-nationalist sentiments in Mexico City.

Nationalism and Feminism

During the 1920s, feminism was a commonly used term in Mexican society, and yet, for some, it was still seen as a foreign idea, only found in 'modern' countries. At the same time that the arrival of 'La India Bonita' in Mexico City was being chronicled in *El Universal Ilustrado*, the magazine also published several articles on women's issues in which feminism was a common theme. For example, an editorial published in October 1921 sarcastically warned that

... nuestras pequeñas revoluciones mexicanas en que se ha hablado de repartir la tierra y cositas por el estilo, no son sino tortas y pan pintado en comparación con esto en que están participando una gran parte de las mujeres americanas.²⁶

That is, while Mexico had agrarian revolutions, the real revolutionary threat was to be found in the United States among women.

Comparing the women's question in the United States with that of Mexico's, he asserted:

En nuestro querido México tenemos la simpatiquísima plaga de los revolucionarios sistemáticos, que no duermen pensando reformar al mundo. Pero yo por experiencia afirmo que mientras ese revolucionarismo se concrete a los hombres, no tendrá nadie por que alarmarse y podremos estar seguros de que las cosas no pasaran a mayores. Pero pobres de nosotros el día en que se les ocurra a nuestras señoras comenzar a 'revolucionarse'.²⁷

Along the lines of these journalistic narratives, intellectuals such as Manuel Gamio also reacted negatively to feminism. In several essays, Gamio explicitly defined feminism as a threat to national cohesion and identity. Two ideas in particular which he developed in various publications give a strong sense of his thinking on the subject. The first idea was an essentialist vision of women as the bearers of traditional knowledge and the keepers of the soul of the nation. For example, in an article entitled 'Nuestras Mujeres' (Our Women), Gamio states: 'Nuestras mujeres indígenas no saben leer ni escribir, pero conservan mas intensa y fielmente que los mismos hombres, una gran herencia de hábitos'.²⁸

The second idea, linked to the first, identified three categories of women found in Mexico: servile, feminist, and feminine. Gamio's position was that the feminine woman was the optimal type of woman because she was the key factor for enhancing the harmonious 'desarrollo material e intelectual del individuo y de la especie'.²⁹ For the present purposes, it is important to focus on the contrasts drawn among indigenous, *mestiza*, and white women. In particular, he argued that indigenous women could never be contaminated by feminist ideals. In contrast to feminist women, the indigenous woman 'goza del supremo don del amor y puede aspirar a la suprema gloria de la maternidad',³⁰ whereas among the white race 'decenas, quizás centenas de millares de mujeres aptas para la maternidad y dispuestas al amor, vegetan sin embargo, miserable, ridícula, ignominiosamente célibes y enloquecidas por ver satisfecho el legitimo deseo de sus entrañas sedientas'.³¹

In this vein, the *mestiza*, 'La India Bonita', embodied the finest ideals of femininity. Though she came from an indigenous rural area and was clad in Indian clothing, Maria Bibiana could be taught to negotiate the modern city, learn Spanish, perform in public, and drink tea with urban sophisticates. What's more, she could accomplish all this and yet remain aesthetically and sensually acceptable as a beauty queen.

Preserving the Nation through its Women: Virgins and Feminine Women

Gamio's anthropological descriptions of the *mestiza* woman as the basis for forging the revolutionary nation, as well as his articles in the popular press on 'La India Bonita', both reproduce the new indigenist rhetoric of the Revolution. But if we move beyond the historical moment of his language and discourse, there is a clear continuity between Gamio's concerns and those of the Porfirian intelligentsia with regard to the woman question. In order to map those continuities I juxtapose a singular voice of the Porfirian period, that of Francisco Flores (1852–1931), with Gamio's discourse.

Flores was a well-known doctor whose various publications crystallized the Porfirian interest in public hygiene, female virginity, and racial purity, crucially the monograph *El Himen en México* (1885), which was a complex

study of the hymens of 181 women. The study demonstrated that the ring-shaped hymen was the most common among Mexican women. This text is emblematic of the ideology of the Porfiriato concerning nation and women, and Flores's inquiry into hymens was as much a national concern as Gamio's later efforts to delineate the ideal-type of Mexican woman.

Flores argued that his study of hymens would help legal medicine protect female virginity—'una de las joyas más buscadas por los hombres'—adding 'qué hay más bello que la blanca flor de la virginidad aún no invadida por el zafiro vicioso'.³² His study, together with other investigations on hygiene, prostitution, and sanitation, was designed and sponsored by the Mexican government to demonstrate the concerns of the Porfiriato with public health and welfare. The text was considered so important, in terms of demonstrating Mexico's scientific and cultural progress to other modern nations, that it was prominently displayed in the national pavilion at the 1889 World's Fair in Paris (Tenorio-Trillo, 1996b). These investigations demonstrated a moral anxiety with women's virginity as well as a historical concern with defining the nature—in biological/anatomical and cultural terms—of the Mexican nation. But, as importantly, these studies were examples of nationalist concerns elaborated in strict accord with universal scientific discussions about sanitation and public hygiene, as read through the figure of women. The language of science and the capacities of scientists were mobilized to articulate the nation state's concerns to a broad public; these were crucial elements in the project of nation-building at home and abroad.

For the Porfirian scientist, Flores, women were the basis of reform and regulation—that is, women's sexuality had to be controlled via medical oversight for the benefit of men. His anatomical and physiological measurements of women's hymens echo the biologicistic obsessions of the late 19th century to measure and type each part of the human body. But the fact that he selected hymens as the object of his typology tells us that not all parts of the human body were equally significant for the nation (Gilman, 1985; Laqueur, 1990). My reading of Flores's work is that he translates a patriarchal and religious (nationalist) concern with women's virginity and chastity into scientific language.

In view of the foregoing, it becomes apparent that the ideological distance from their predecessors that revolutionary intellectuals were so keen to promote was mostly rhetorical. For instance, Gamio's *Forjando Patria* was intended to disassociate the emergent revolutionary intellectual tradition from previous trends. But the link between Gamio and Flores is readily apparent, especially in the ways in which 'woman' is used to think the nation. Despite his stylistic flourishes and verbal pomposity ('our women', 'forging the nation', 'the bronze race') which contrasts with the earnest and sober scientific discourse of Flores, Gamio was as concerned with the place of the woman in the national project. Gamio offered *his*

scientific expertise to define 'las causas naturales que hacen de nuestra mujer uno de los tipos morales más apreciables y apreciados en el mundo femenino contemporáneo'.³³ Given his anxieties about ensuring the nation's well-being, it is little wonder that he reached the inevitable conclusion that the 'feminine' woman was the best hope for Mexico's future: 'Cuando México sea una gran nación lo deberá a muchas causas pero la principal habra de consistir en la fuerte, viril y resistente raza, que desde hoy moldea la mujer femenina mexicana.'³⁴

So the obsession with the woman question remained central to nationalist projects of either era. The revolutionary intellectual's construction of the *mestiza* as a natural woman was not only important as an ideological sign but also anchored debates on public policy. For instance, in 1923, alarmed by Mexico's slow population growth Gamio found the solution to the problem in the nature of indigenous women. In an article about celibacy and population decline, he blamed 'modern civilization'—i.e. liberating feminist ideas—for the shrinking numbers in Mexico's population.

Gamio noted that celibacy was extensive among the white middle classes and, as a consequence of women not fulfilling their sexual needs, there was a high incidence of 'fanatismo agudo, histerismo, perversión sexual, prostitución',³⁵ whereas the lower classes (indigenous people) lived a balanced life. Gamio's cure for Mexico's demographic problem was: 'imitemos al indígena en aquello en que es cuerdo hacerlo, hagámonos naturistas'.³⁶ For Gamio the *mestiza* woman would never betray the national project, because she remained faithful above all else to her biological instincts which were to love and care for her husband and children.

Conclusion

'La India Bonita' was the icon, par excellence, for the revolutionary nationalist project. Indigenous populations were seen as a resource to define the uniqueness of the nation, all the more so because Mexico's nationalists were also cosmopolitans keenly aware of international cultural and intellectual trends. In this context, the beauty contest embodied the revolution's success; it was a public performance of revolutionary elite power. 'La India Bonita' exemplified a revolutionary aesthetic based on the notion that 'indigenous is beautiful', and emerged as a defining symbol of the nation's uniqueness vis-à-vis the West. The woman was displayed as a model for the post-revolutionary nation, which was imagined as a perfect blend of modern (revolutionary and nationalist) and traditional aspects.

The figure of the woman used for revolutionary purposes maintains a disjunct continuity with that constructed by 19th-century Porfirian nationalists. The latter also utilized 'woman' to demonstrate the advanced character of the nation, for instance, through elaborately detailed studies of

female anatomy. Despite Manuel Gamio's and Francisco Flores's dissimilar approaches to the woman question, their respective visions of women relied heavily on universalistic categories ('feminine', 'nation') and unquestioned scientific premises. In the final analysis, despite the fact that both men wrote in the context of an independent and postcolonial nation, and in different eras at that, their views on women continued to be colonialist and masculinist. Their gaze appropriated women's bodies in the service of the nation.

Perhaps this long process of finding ways to become like the West does not need to be measured in terms of success and failure; the nationalist project may be best understood in terms of its relationship to a notion of modernity that is unstable, constantly shifting, and contradictory. The Porfirian elites of the 1890s had one model of the modern nation they wished to emulate—Europe embodied that entity. The 1920s revolutionaries rejected this model, and reconstructed a new Mexico according to their imagination of the nation's indigenous heritage. And yet, in both cases, 'woman' was the token that secured that passage to modernity.

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NOTES

1. 'El triunfo de La India Bonita ha emocionado a todos; a las minorías blancas por lo original del caso y por cierta piadosa simpatía hacia la raza doliente; esta última, a su vez ha vibrado entusiasta e intensamente al mirar enaltecida a la virgen morena, en quien las multitudes indígenas sienten que alienta su alma ancestral y palpita, transfigurada y florida, su pobre carne de parias' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 21).
2. Manuel Gamio was a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University, and directed the first archaeological excavation that used stratigraphy in the Americas. Gamio is often considered the 'father of Mexican anthropology' and also seen as one of the main figures behind the concept of revolutionary indigenism. See among others: Adams, 1960; Brading, 1988; González Gamio, 1987; Nahmad Sittón and Weaver, 1990; Strug, 1971.
3. The play was performed by one of the most popular and prestigious theater companies of the day (Compañía Fábregas), and it was considered one of the early examples of truly national theater during the 1920s.

4. General Porfirio Díaz's coup d'état in 1876 inaugurated the Porfiriato. Díaz governed Mexico for 35 years until the Revolution of 1910. His group of technocratic advisors (*los científicos*) who ruled the country were inspired by scientific, sociological and political doctrines of European ideologues such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. See among others: Buffington and French, 2000; Garcíadiego Dantan, 1996; Hale, 1989.
5. The intellectual tradition known as popular indigenism that informed the specific political practices during the Revolution has been widely documented, and I do not discuss it here in any detail apart from the specific examples of the beauty contest. Studies that examine the origins and development of popular indigenism are: Brading, 1984, 1988; Cawson, 1998; González Navarro, 1988; Villoro, 1979.
6. *Mestizaje* in Latin America represents the process of both racial and cultural miscegenation that began during the Spanish colonial period. Although ideas that pointed to *mestizaje* as the basis of Mexican national identity were already circulating in the early 19th century, the ideologues of the 1910 Revolution made explicit the link between the *mestizo* and national identity.
7. Her age is uncertain: here she was described as 18 but in an article also published in *El Universal Ilustrado* she was identified as a 16-year-old.
8. 'Has arrived to us accompanied by her grandmother, an Indian woman of pure "meshica" race who does not speak Spanish' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 11).
9. 'Legend of the beautiful prince Tonatiuh, who united his destiny with those of a plebeian woman' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 11).
10. 'Brought to an aristocratic palace, where delicate hands prepared her some tea in porcelain from Sevres' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 11).
11. 'Before a select audience, Maria Bibiana, received, on behalf of the indigenous class, the homage that the intellectual class offers to the Bronze race' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921a: 13).
12. A *huipil* is an indigenous piece of clothing that has become representative of Indianness in Latin America.
13. 'The contrast of her typical dress with the latest fashions was charming. Next to the short silk skirts there was her long and heavy *titixtle*, next to their delicate shoes, her naked feet' (*El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921): 2.
14. 'She was delighted with her triumph' (*El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921): 2.
15. 'Her rustic character was not inhibited upon viewing the fine carpets or the luxurious furniture; even if she had not been in similar salons before, she already knew the wealth of Moctezuma or Netzahualcóyotl' (*El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921): 2.
16. 'She is very young, fairly slim and pale. Her skin is clean and smells of soap, [but] her mouth is small and not prone to smiling' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921b: 26-7).
17. 'Smile a little, Bibiana. Don't you see that you look much better when you smile? . . . She looks at me, but only smiles with her eyes' ('Maria Bibiana Opina . . . por la Reina Mab', *El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921b: 26-7).
18. 'Smile a little bit', 'I can't, I don't like to show my teeth.' 'Well . . . don't show them, but smile, you are somewhat of a rebel' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921b: 26-7).

19. 'She was the object of the gaze of all the elegant ladies and gentleman that were gathered there. What expressions of wonder were painted on the delicate and handsome faces of the guests! It could be said that they were looking at a rare flower' (*El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921): 2.
20. 'The brown virgin of the bronze age, seed of the Mexican race' (*El Universal*, 4 Aug. 1921): 2.
21. 'Is the Indian beauty a unique one despite all the diversity of indigenous races in the country?' (Bachiller, 1921: 22-3).
22. 'All of the characteristics of the race: brown coloring, black eyes, small stature, delicate hands and feet, straight, black hair, etc.' (*El Universal*, 2 Aug. 1921): 1.
23. 'Is Bibiana Uribe, the Indian Beauty, really representative of the type of feminine beauty?' (Gamio, 1921: 19).
24. 'It would be impossible to wait for our Indians and *mestizos* to accept such canons, because they do not correspond to their ideal of beauty' (Gamio, 1921: 19).
25. 'She is a beautiful woman and embodies the type of feminine beauty in our environment' (Gamio, 1921: 19).
26. 'Our small revolutions that discuss distributing land and similar little aspects are insignificant matters in comparison with what most American women are participating in' (*El Universal Ilustrado*, 1921c: 24).
27. 'In our beloved Mexico we have the extremely nice plague of revolutionaries, who do not sleep for thinking of how to change the world. But my experience tells me that while revolution-ism remain a men's question, no one needs to be alarmed, and we can be sure that things are not going to change dramatically. But have pity on us the day our women begin to revolutionize themselves.'
28. 'Our indigenous women are unable to read and write, but they preserve more intensely and faithfully than even men the great legacy of cultural behaviors' (Gamio, 1916: 18).
29. 'Material and intellectual development of the individual and of the species' (Gamio, 1916: 119).
30. 'Enjoys the highest gift of love and she can aspire to the supreme glory of motherhood' (Gamio, 1923: 67).
31. 'Dozens, perhaps hundreds of thousand women who are apt for motherhood, and fully ready for love, vegetate nonetheless, miserably, ridiculous, ignominiously single, and insane for not having satisfied the legitimate desire of their entrails' (Gamio, 1923: 67).
32. 'One of the jewels most prized by men. . . . what is more beautiful than that white flower of virginity still unaccosted by the winds of vice?' (Flores, 1885: 22).
33. 'The natural causes that make our women one of the moral types most appreciable and appreciated in the contemporary feminine world' (Gamio, 1916: 120).
34. 'When Mexico becomes a great nation, it will be because of many causes, but the main one will be the strong, virile, and resilient race, which from this moment forward shapes the Mexican feminine woman' (Gamio, 1916: 130).
35. 'Acute fanaticism, hysteria, sexual perversion and prostitution' (Gamio, 1923: 67).
36. 'Let's imitate the Indian in those aspects that seem reasonable, let's become naturists' (Gamio, 1923: 70).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

APEN RUIZ is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. She is currently finishing her dissertation on the relationship between nationals and foreigners in the practice of Mexican archaeology (1890–1930). Her interests are the politics of archaeological practice, nationalisms, gender/feminism and science. She is also involved in an archaeological project in the University of Barcelona (Spain) that studies the impact of Phoenician colonial expansion on indigenous groups in the south of Spain. *Address*: Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin 78712, TX, USA. [email: apen@mail.utexas.edu]