Approaches to the Problem of Mexican Identity

ALBERTO RUY-SÁNCHEZ

Every nation has its own “tradicion of ideas” about its existence, its history, and its essence. Mexico is no exception in that perennial search for a national self. As with any other culture or nation, however, to write about a Mexican national self means also, somehow, to reinvent it.

Some ancient Mexicans, the Aztecs for example, made an effort to present themselves as the personification of Mexicanness. They believed, and made believe, that their empire was the natural extension of their essential nature and calling. Historians among the Aztecs even went so far as to burn earlier versions of Mesoamerican history in order to establish theirs as the only one.

Many people, in many countries, have harbored in their hearts that very same desire and have performed the same kinds of immolation of the past in the name of some glory for the present—and in the name of a future for their glory.

Perhaps humankind’s construction of an epic image of itself cannot exist without some sort of symbolic immolation. The heroic image of the self is always built over an ancient garden: it is a marble statue embedded in ground that was once fertile, a petrified flower that wants to live forever.

Any definition of a national self, even as the conclusion of a vivid chronicle, then, is a work of fiction; and more precisely, a symbolic work of fiction. But it is certainly a kind of fiction that humans need, or at least believe they need—which, in symbolic terms, is precisely the same thing. If we consider the symbolic dimension of our everyday lives, we are forced to treat all attempts at defining our national character as a work of symbols, as an elaboration of symbols.

Yet even to speak about the personal image of each one of us is already a complex problem. If I see myself in a mirror and try to describe my face, that description—even if expressed in the most detached and precise terms—is necessarily full of psychological dynamics, tensions, and pretensions. A great deal of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is based on the primal scene of the infant child looking at himself in a mirror for the first time. It is a problem that has been christened “the construction of the self.”

Obviously, the problem is all the more complex when someone looks at himself in a mirror and—based solely on that reflection—tries to construct the image of a national self. If an I speaking of an I is a complicated phenomenon (fraught with side effects and profound implications), consider how much more complicated it is for an I to speak of an Us.

The Search for the Ideal Mexican

There is a long tradition of inquiry in Mexico into the notion of an ideal Mexican. In this century alone, the tradition has given us—among the many books dedicated to Mexicanness, or Mexicanidad—two classics that are still studied, consulted, read, and quoted: El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México, by Samuel Ramos, and El laberinto de la soledad, by Octavio Paz. Together, they constitute two of the archetypical studies of the Mexican self, two approaches that are still obligatory references. I will comment on both.

Their dates of publication are significant. The essay by the philosopher Samuel Ramos appeared in 1934, in the midst of the nationalist euphoria Mexico experienced after the Revolution and at the onset of the populist government spearheaded by General Lázaro Cárdenas.

It is no coincidence that this sort of intellectual probing should have occurred at that time. Ramos’s reflection was plainly a nationalist attempt to gain insight into who “the Mexican” might be. But even if he accepted a nationalistic and highly mythological notion of the existence of a quintessential Mexican, he was certainly not the blindest of nationalists. In his book, Ramos reacted against the radical nationalism that wanted to spare the country from all foreign contact, which it considered damaging. Nevertheless, Ramos did argue in favor of keeping the country free of any foreign system or idea that could stop “the high impulses of the Mexican soul.” Though he failed to mention it, Ramos was referring to Marxism. He did not fit the stereotype of the leftist nationalist, as did Diego Rivera, for example, about whom Ramos was to write a book the following year, admiring the painter precisely on account of his Mexicaness.
The national euphoria soon diminished as the Mexican Revolution began to be seen as an increasingly petrified myth, an institution. Hence the time came to criticize the official versions of the national self as presented by Mexicans from the various artistic horizons, from mural painting and dance to literature and film.

Octavio Paz's essay appeared in 1950, at the end of this general nationalistic enthusiasm and at the dawn of a new period in Mexican culture: the decades marked by disillusion with the Mexican Revolution, and the resulting desire to situate Mexico alongside other nations and to propel the country into the international modernity of the times.

Time, however, is a strange thing. Its acids consume books and ideas to varying degrees. Hence the effects of time on cultural products recall Spinoza's aphorism on the relativity of life: "The same sun that melts wax solidifies clay." If Ramos's search seems somewhat dated, Paz's work is still alive, eternally criticized but nonetheless provocative. While a lapse of only 16 years separates their dates of publication, a century now seems to separate their respective aims and forms.

Like other philosophers—including Emilio Uranga and his *Análisis del ser del mexicano*—Ramos addressed the problem of "being Mexican" for his readers and in so doing, constructed a new psychological portrait of the Mexican based on the national mentality during the first half of this century. Paz, by contrast, proposed a moral critique of "being Mexican," a mythological and paradoxical portrait of the Mexican to be directed toward the intellectual climate of the second half of this century. Thus, while Ramos was looking backwards, Paz was staring straight ahead. Indeed, Ramos was closing an intellectual period, whereas Paz was opening up a new one.

It seems natural that a moral critique should feel closer to us than the psychological portrait. We are at the far edge of an era in which "being critical" has been a dominant intellectual value.

We can readily admit that the Mexican, whether Ramos's or Paz's, no longer exists, so rapidly has Mexico been changing. But maybe neither of the ideal Mexicans they portrayed ever existed. Maybe we will discover that, however eloquently, they were only discussing the perspectives and preoccupations of their times, along with an awareness of being different from their foreign neighbors, as they constructed their own personal images of Mexicanness. So perhaps the time has come to create a new, different portrait of the ideal Mexican, to view ourselves from the perspective of the close of the century—in short, to look into a different mirror in the hope of finding our plural image, an *Us* within the deepest vision of an individual *I*.

As a writer and editor involved in various fields of Mexican culture, observing the contemporary changes in the intellectual and psychological landscape, I am firmly under the impression that a new sensibility is beginning to emerge in Mexico. My points of reference are the early symptoms that are manifesting themselves in the visual arts, where—as we enter the final decade of this century—a new aesthetic has come to modify the artistic panorama of Mexico. For it has been in the visual arts that important cultural movements in Mexico have always first been given expression. It is there that they manifest their character.

The most diverse group of painters now share common concerns, pursuing a spiritual quest that in various ways makes painting, sculpture, and photography rituals of transcendence. Echoes and references to prehispanic rites abound, some of which are ahistorical fictions, pure inventions of the artists themselves. More intensely than ever before in this century, artists conceive of themselves as wounded souls. In this they follow Frida Kahlo, the visual historian of the "I-in-pain," the "I" equally repressed in the social epic of the 1930's and the neo-avant-garde abstractionist movement of the 1960's. There is a new concern for the populist feeling of traditional Mexico. But above all, for a large portion of the art world, there is a fresh interest in what it means to be Mexican and what, after all, is "Mexico." The search for Mexico's essential images has become a reinvention of those images by the artists who would pursue them. In sum, we are witnessing a search for what is most fundamental to art and to Mexico at one and the same time. This search is a deep expression of fantasy; it bursts forth in daily reality with the creative force of pure invention.

This new sensibility (which I have elsewhere called "the fantastic fundamentalism of new Mexican art") may well be the third great cultural movement in Mexico during this century. The two previous movements (the nationalism of the 1930's; the neo-avant-garde of the late 1950's and early 1960's) perfectly coincide with the books published by Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz. Seemingly, then, if this new sensibility eventually touches the field of philosophical inquiry, we should sooner or later expect to encounter a new portrait of the Mexican, a new examination of the problem of "being Mexican."

If there is one step that can be taken now in this direction, it is certainly not to make a simple list of Mexican "core values." That is a fiction that has outlived whatever usefulness it may have had. Even following in
the footsteps of Paz and Ramos, we have consistently moved ahead on blazing saddles. The world has changed—not just nations. And our consciousness of the nature of the world has also changed. We cannot pretend that the portrait of the Mexican, or that of any other nationality in our fin de siècle, is as solidly grounded in reality as any thinker may have believed it was, many years ago, when those two books were written.

As an indication of that change of consciousness, we now tend to feel that all the attributes that Paz and Ramos claimed for the "ideal Mexican" cannot be accepted without qualification. Where Paz has written, "Mexicans consider life a battle," we need to say, "Some Mexicans consider life a battle" (and the same holds true for each ascription he makes). It is significant that all these ascriptions can and must be understood in another, more complex and relative way. Interesting and appealing though they may be, these "core values" are not the heart of the book. If The Labyrinth of Solitude is still valid, it is precisely thanks to its complex understanding of Mexican life at its most symbolic—and not on account of a list of adjectives pretending to describe Mexican nature.

It is not a question of whether Paz's analysis is true or false. It is true insofar as it is taken in good faith and with a reasonable dose of relativity. The Mexico he describes clearly has become much more complex, both in real life and in our minds. It cannot be described now without taking note of a certain degree of heterogeneity, to the extent of growing beyond or even diminishing the notion of something called the Mexican.

One interesting aspect of cultural relations today is how developed countries like the United States continue making specific demands on countries like Mexico. This demand implies conforming to their idea of what constitutes the Other country. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, multiethnic, and multicultural—and increasingly less definable as one specific and linear culture—more and more Americans want to believe in a Mexico of one rigidly defined culture, instead of a complex plurality. For their own purposes they would rather see a primitive list of core values, what they want the other to be, and in this case, the ideal other is le bon sauvage. Increasingly, more and more Americans interested in Mexico want it to have the very unity of being and the solid identity they feel they themselves are permanently losing. Is this a mechanism of compensation? Is it a way of finding in the Other something that one can no longer possess oneself?

The mythic purity of cultures or races is less convincing now than it was in Ramos's day. We are all a mixture of races, and no purity is believable. As Henri Focillon wrote even then:

Nowhere in the universe are there greenhouses in which pure races may be found in flower. The most careful practices of endogamy do not prevent crossbreeding; the best-protected insular environments are open both to infiltration and to invasion. Even the constancy of anthropological indices by no means implies that values are changeless. Man works on himself. But he does not, it is true, rid himself of the age-old deposits laid down by time, and they are something that must be accounted for. What they constitute is a tonality, rather than an armature or a foundation. They introduce into the complex equilibrium of a culture inflections and accents similar to those that characterize a spoken language.

Something to be especially noted in this observation by Focillon is the relativity he underlines in respect to that dimension of identity he calls "a tonality, rather than an armature or a foundation." National identity, then, cannot be a founding whole of core values; or a moral armature. It is a gesture full of meanings, a vision that is different at the very outset from that of Ramos and Paz.

Let's briefly examine these two archetypal images of the Mexican looking for himself in the forest of images of the world.

Samuel Ramos's analysis is based on a psychological theory, namely, the notion proposed by Adler that the neurotic harbors equivocal ideas of himself—undervalues himself—and hence directs all his acts to demonstrate to others and to himself his greatness, his power. For Ramos, to be Mexican, to parade the commonplace of "the Mexican being," is an act of compensation. And that is the key concept in his portrait of the ideal Mexican. The development of this idea is rooted in Mexican history. And throughout this history, he seeks several basic "Mexican attitudes," such as self-deprecation and mechanical imitation.

Even in the establishment of Mexico's independence from Spain, Ramos sees the workings of an essentially Spanish value: individualism. "In America," he writes, "each one of the different colonies tended to be another Spain. When the revolutionaries raised a flag against Spain with the cry of 'mueran los gachupines,' Spanish psychology was expressing itself in that attitude of refusal. We did nothing but emancipate ourselves from Spain in a Spanish style." To achieve legitimacy, this kind of psychological analysis applied to a country needed to accept the notion of a parallel between individual and race, in the sense that races are also assumed to experience childhood, maturity, and senility. What we now call underdevelopment would accordingly be considered the extreme youth, or immaturity, of a society, of a culture, or of a race. Ramos argues that the Mexican belongs to a young race that needs to grow into maturity, and—he writes—"to learn how to
Thus, he explores the psychological doctrines revealed that the individual character needs to explore his childhood so as to seek an experience that gave a definitive orientation to his life. Thus, he explores the history of Mexico looking for a traumatic experience, which he finds in the Conquest: for the Indians, the humiliation of being conquered; for the descendants of the conqueror, the humiliation of not being true Europeans. The Mexican finds himself in the middle, and to be there is his destiny, for he is not really American and no longer Spanish. Thus the Mexican, the compulsive imitator, considers himself an inferior being. One concentrated expression of himself in the middle, and to be there is his destiny, for he is not really Mexican.

Ramos conceived his book as a therapy: he suggests that the young race of Mexico should be aware of its complex so as to avoid possible negative effects on its development. For Ramos, the Mexican resembles a developing child who feels an emptiness in his being that demands fulfillment; as a consequence, he now must begin to acquire the mature personality that he lacks. Mexican machismo is, for Ramos, not in fact a Mexican essence, but rather a pathology. Not an essential part of his being, it is instead a fiction created by the Mexican to compensate for the accidents of his history and his collective childhood.

After Samuel Ramos, many Mexican philosophers approached the subject of "the Mexican being." The Spanish philosopher José Gaos—who lived in Mexico, where he taught and wrote about the history of ideas—exerted an enormous influence. For the young Octavio Paz, however, the reigning interpretations were insufficient to explain the Mexican. Following the principles of psychoanalysis, under each accepted notion he looked for another existence. "There is an unknown person who dwells within each one of us," explains Paz, "and, in this sense, El laberinto de la soledad was an attempt to bring to light that unknown person who inhabits me. An attempt to unearth my remains and to look at myself, and through myself, to look at the face of my fellow men." The book was, in his own words, "a confession, a quest, and a declaration of love." Mexico was his object, his concern, his collective face in the mirror.

Whereas Adler and his theory of neurosis were the basic reference for Ramos, for Paz the Freudian principle of an unconscious existence was only a means to arrive at a moral and historical critique. The rich repertory of images, desires, hidden impulses, dreams, and inhibitions he finds buried in the soul of his "ideal Mexican" is simply the path toward a very personal approach to the history of Mexico. As he sees it, "History is situated between science and poetry. The historian sets forth descriptions as a man of science, but he has the visions of a poet... History paves the way to understand the past and, sometimes, even the present." At the beginning of the book, he says that the Mexican is not located in history; he is history itself. We are not simply the eyewitnesses of change; we ourselves are the changes.

During the time in which he wrote El laberinto de la soledad, some of the major intellectual influences on Octavio Paz were the French philosophers Roger Caillois and George Bataille, and particularly their teacher, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss. They wrote extensively about the meanings of the fiesta in traditional communities, and Paz identified their descriptions with his experiences in Mexico with the celebration of the Day of the Dead. These French thinkers had also examined the meanings of sacrifice, the difference between sacred and profane time, the importance of the ritual gift, the meanings of the ritual mask, and the phenomenology of loneliness. These are but a few of an entire gamut of analytical instruments that Paz integrated into his own examination of the Mexican, as any reader of his book will notice.

For Ramos, the Mexican hides behind a mask invented by his inferiority complex. For Paz, the Mexican does not hide behind a mask; he is a mask. And that mask is a totality of gestures to be deciphered. It constitutes a cultural and anthropological phenomenon.

It is important to note that this approach to cultural analysis implies that all world cultures are masks: that being a mask is not exclusive to Mexicans, but rather that all cultures don their own masks, or to be more precise, that each culture constitutes a different mask.

Thus, the same notion could be applied in the analysis of the culture and character of the ideal Canadian or the ideal American. What kind of mask does the inhabitant of the United States concoct? What kind of mask is fashioned by the inhabitant of Canada? Perhaps to believe that specific cultures can be seriously described in terms of values is a prominent feature of the Anglo-Saxon mask.

In a conception like the one described by Octavio Paz, values are masks. His methodological approach goes even farther: it suggests that there is much more at stake in the defense of "values," as any psychoanalyst would readily detect. Values are principally related to the dimension of the superego—the world of moral duties and laws—only one of the three Freudian dimensions in the individual psyche. From that perspective, a mask proves to be much more integrated and complete: it is an aesthetic

live instead of how to die." What he calls with great respect "the modern psychological doctrines" revealed that "the individual character needs to explore his childhood so as to seek an experience that gave a definitive orientation to his life." Thus, he explores the history of Mexico looking for a traumatic experience, which he finds in the Conquest: for the Indians, the humiliation of being conquered; for the descendants of the conqueror, the humiliation of not being true Europeans. The Mexican finds himself in the middle, and to be there is his destiny, for he is not really American and no longer Spanish. Thus the Mexican, the compulsive imitator, considers himself an inferior being. One concentrated expression of himself in the middle, and to be there is his destiny, for he is not really Mexican.
fixation in the world of beliefs and in that of the personal ritual duties within the community. It is simultaneously a surface reflecting from the dimension of the id, the world of instincts. As opposed to values, the mask speaks more deeply and eloquently about cultural character. Values constitute a mode of representation that fails to take on any symbolic nature. From its beginnings, the mask acknowledges its symbolic existence. The Anglo-Saxon who believes that he lives in a skeptical world of values, with no blemish of the id or strain from the instinctive forces of the unconscious, is simply hiding himself, his inner being, behind values: in short, symbols disguised as non-symbols.

As concerns values, when different people wish to share a common life, they do indeed construct common values. But it is inconceivable for entirely different cultures to share a common mask. To do so would be highly spurious and ultimately false, of no use at all for an authentic common life. What can be enacted, however, is a new ritual—I would even venture to call it a dance—in which different masks may well participate together. Not to avoid differences, but rather to invite them to participate in the choreography of an utterly new dance. Our new challenge (in North America and the world at large) is to share our differences, our national identities.

Sharing National Identities

For many years, efforts to understand what it means to be Mexican have been attempts to define a presupposed national essence. Being a writer, and not a philosopher or a sociologist, I have followed a different path. Even in my essays, I always appeal at first to situations and images, as opposed to concepts and definitions. These come later, if at all. Literature is a way to say things that can only be expressed in literary situations. That is why literature exists: its fiction tells us truths in its own ways. And the essay is a literary act in which an author essays himself, experiments with himself in a theme.

Maybe that is why, instead of discussing my personal idea of the essential Mexican and his core values—or my idea of the essential American or the essential Canadian—I would like to propose a principle of relativity regarding national identities.

Let us consider the classical theological image of the demon as multifaceted. In the Bible, the demon is asked, “What is your name?” He answers, “My name is Legion, I am many.” As our modern demon, national identity can also assume many bodies, many faces, and many personalities within each person. Which of these is chosen or worshiped by each group, community, or individual? Which side suits others, and which facets fail to harmonize with others?

From a cultural point of view, we are not only what our passports tell us we are. Each one of us is a kaleidoscopic identity.

To my mind, national identity is not an essence but a contrast, a situation. This is because we are also constituted by the ways others think of us as foreigners, by the ways we think of ourselves in our differences with regard to others, and by the ways we affirm, deny, extend, or lessen those differences. National identity is a geometry, an art of distances. And therefore it is a challenge of tolerance toward ourselves and others, toward the others’ closeness.

As a child living in a suburb of Mexico City, I experienced the phenomenon of the “distant neighborhood.” The family next door was American. Not far away lived a Swedish family, and next to them a family of Arabs. In all those houses lived children my age. But there was also the family of an old Belgian colonel; and several other families were of Spanish and French origin. There was an old village nearby, and that added another facet to my local gallery of particularities. Furthermore, my family was clearly identified as having come from the north (my mother and my father were born and raised in Sonora), and other families had come from Veracruz, Monterrey, Colima, Puebla, Yucatán, and Chiapas, or had moved out from Mexico City.

Suburbs like the one I grew up in are frequently human quilts. They are also places where people do not stay for long. More than towns, they are places of passage. It was evident that many prejudices regarding nationalities circulated in that neighborhood. Even the smallest problem between children or adults was immediately attributed to the participants’ national identity. For each family, the term was not prejudice but core value: different conceptions of what a family is, of what privacy means, of work and leisure, rights and duties, loneliness, and everyday life. There were different attitudes toward nature, race, religion, money, politics, health, food, music, adolescence, weapons. Within each family there were differences, of course. But even between the most contrasting families, there were also shifting alliances.

Anyway, disapproving judgments became the hinge for explaining everything in our life of different values. Some of the most common prejudices affirmed that Europeans in general were stingy with others and with themselves; Americans were spoiled and selfish; Mexicans, of course, were lazy and dirty; Arabs were too traditionalist, and they ate too much; the
Swedish were too cold and reserved; the Spanish were stubborn and disdainful; the French were just disdainful and dirty; people from Veracruz were too noisy; those from Puebla, too conservative; from Monterrey, greedy; and from Mexico City, vulgar and conceited.

There was almost never a recognition of positive national values. An emotive approach to another person, the beginning of a friendship, often started by establishing an exception to the rule. A child might say: "That American boy is not so selfish." Or a teenager might realize: "That Swedish girl is not so cold." And so forth.

Relativity is fundamental to seeing and understanding the map of values in which we lived: the American family was considered too liberal for Mexicans, who in turn were too liberal for the Arab family. At the same time, Swedes were too liberal for Americans. Everyone was too much of something.

Very soon I discovered that even if we were all foreigners in the eyes of others, we were more or less false foreigners. Once, when some Americans came to visit us, we introduced them to our next-door neighbors thinking that they had a lot in common: a national identity, a language. But our American neighbors were considered almost pure Mexicans by our American visitors. The same was true regarding all the national differences existing in our neighborhood. The Spanish were not considered Europeans by those who came directly from Spain, and even my northern family was not considered Sonoran at all by our uncles and cousins in that region. I experienced this relativity myself because I lived for more than two years in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora. While living there, I was never accepted as a member of a northern family. And coming back to Mexico City, the opposite happened.

This constantly equivocal situation exists when differences come into contact, be they of a national, economic, or sexual nature. National identity is also a movable feast. In any community, our values, even core values, are always shifting in the eyes of others. People always want to have, acquire, or get rid of some values, as if there were a stock market of national values. This is not so easy. And even if we want to think of our values as solid and immovable, they don't belong exclusively to any individual. Rather, they are valued in a group, and they only function in a collective situation.

Paradoxically, the best moments of that common life for me as a child were not when some people recognized in others a part of themselves, but when someone tried to share his or her particularity with others. The effort to share a difference was stronger and more binding than an established commonly held belief or attitude that differentiated two people from others: a French woman giving cooking lessons or recipes to her housewife friends, a child sharing his imported toys, teenagers exchanging new record albums. To share is one of the most difficult aspects in life; it is the main challenge posed to different national identities of those intending to forge a common life.

Naturally each family had a different history and evolution; but, again, it was interpreted as a result of each national identity: the American couple divorced after one of their sons died of an overdose of drugs and another committed suicide. Most of the families coming from different regions of Mexico went back. Even if one family became very rich and another very poor, national identities were considered to have played a role in that. From this point of view, national identity is also a destiny. An idea of past and future is implicated in the presupposed national values of each group.

From this kind of interpretation, it is very easy to deduce a doctrine like the one developed in the United States in the nineteenth century (but still active today under another name). I am referring to Manifest Destiny, which indirectly affirms that one nation has the right to invade another, to show it the proper path toward law, order, and progress, or democracy. Its logical complement is the idea of the other country—perhaps the neighbor—as an eternal rebel, potential invader, permanent menace. This is the other side of Manifest Destiny, and a historic dissonance between national identities thus emerges. It is at such a moment that the art of relativity, which should define a national identity as an art of contrasts and varying distances, becomes instead an art of arrogance.

My very small suburban situation, my travels, and the nearly eight years I lived in Paris taught me the absurdity of considering my national identity the only one of value. But it also taught me the absurdity of considering any other national identity the most desirable. How to be proud of what we are without turning that pride into arrogance or intolerance? How to fight against prejudices and stereotypes? How to accept our national identity with a certain degree of relativity?

Some of the answers to these questions are implied in the way we solve this additional question: how to accept the idea of the Other in our life? The Other, Otherness, is the radical limit of who we are. Then, how to accept our limits, demonstrated to us by the compelling existence of the Other? For many cultures, the Other automatically means savage or barbarian. This attitude has been so resistant and permanent that we still call the use of words derived from other languages a barbaridad, or "barbarism."
In this century, the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy responds to this permanent stereotype in his poem “Waiting for the Barbarians.” There a voice, in an ancient city, cries out, “The Barbarians are coming.” Everyone panics and waits and waits, and in the end, they, the citizens, and we, the readers, discover that the Barbarians are already in the city because, the poet says, the Barbarians are us.

How to accept the existence of the Other within us? How to accept the many voices each one of us utters? And by the same token, how to build a non-destructive image of the Other in our collective life?

Many years ago, when I was around twenty, I made a trip to the coast of Oaxaca. A beautiful unspoiled beach lay about half an hour’s walk from the closest village. It was a place of pilgrimage for many young Americans, and even more so Canadians, but for very few Mexicans. It was known as a nudist beach, which meant, in the terms of the post-hippie culture of the time, that it was considered a place of freedom, beyond the establishment’s reach. For many young Americans and Canadians, Mexico itself was precisely that: an escape from what they considered a rotten civilization, an imaginary island of ideal primitiveness. At the time, that idea seemed naive to me, but full of charm. I considered those post-hippies very innocent people, as I did the Europeans who believed that the world was done with in Europe, and that only in Third World countries was there hope for humanity. But my surprise had no limits when I discovered that those erstwhile hippies considered me, the Mexican city boy, not just very naive, but very primitive as well.

And Mexico had its preconceptions about me, too. Before arriving at the beach, I had a conversation in a small Oaxacan village with an old man, who praised me for speaking Spanish so well. When I responded that the praise was totally unmerited, that I was Mexican, he immediately affirmed, “Yes, you are a Mexican from the Mexico on the other side of the border.” “No,” I said, “I am from the Mexico on this side of the border.” He answered without hesitation, “Yes, but you say this side of the border because you are looking over from the other side.”

At that moment I understood that it was useless to insist on my Mexicanness because for him I was not a Mexican. I was a complete stranger speaking Spanish. The many cultural differences between the two of us were real and present, far beyond our common language. We were linked by words, but the meaning of our words set us apart. Even my strongest desire to lend precision to a very simple phrase was thwarted by the weight of cultural differences. For my interlocutor, the simple expression “this side of the border”—used by both of us—clearly described opposite sides of that border: same passports, same language, different identities.

A catalogue of differences inside any country, from races and regionalisms to historical and economic factors, has no limits. The more global, heavily populated, and comprehensive a national identity tries to be, the more ideological, and even mythical, it becomes. Even the idea of a nation as a whole, as an absolute coherent entity, is more or less always a kind of forgery. In fact, the cultural characteristics of only one region or one group almost always become emblematic of the nation.

In Mexico, many characteristics of a central region, Jalisco, with its tequila and charreada (rodeo around which a regional elite culture has evolved), are considered national ones, and they are not. I am no less Mexican because I don’t use a charro sombrero or because I am not short. In Spain, many years ago, someone told me, half jokingly, half reproachfully, that I was no real Mexican because I did not play the guitar and sing macho songs. For eight months of the eight years I lived in Paris, I stayed in the Mexican students’ house at the Cité Universitaire. I was practically forced to abandon it because I could not stand to wake up every day hearing the same songs, “Amorcito Corazón” and “El son de la negra,” rising up over the smell of cornmeal fried in oil, la fritanga. (By the same token, a Frenchman is no less French because he arrived late for an appointment the other day believing that I would arrive late because I am Mexican.)

All these misunderstandings with regard to national identity recall the story of the ivory noses that invaded New Spain during the colonial period. As it happened, a man lost his nose in a battle. Having seen the ivory figures made in the Philippines, he asked a merchant to have a nose made for him, what we now call a prosthesis. Delighted with the results, he ordered another one. The ivory artisan in the faraway Philippines, on receiving the second order, happily imagined an enormous market for noses in the Americas and made a hundred of them. Initially, he was not disappointed: the noses were so rare, so faithful to the idea of Oriental exoticism circulating in New Spain, that they sold well, particularly after the story of their origin became known. But subsequent large shipments of noses did not do so well, no matter how eager the artisan and merchant were to succeed with this lucrative product. Their idea of the nasal identity of Americans was, to say the least, excessive. Fortunately, there were no diplomatic implications involved in this misunderstanding, and so we don’t have in our history of exchanges with the Orient the War of the Noses.

How many times do we attribute “a certain need for noses” to other
nationalities? How many times do we attribute "a certain need for noses" to our own nationality? From a cultural point of view, "nation" means a need for coherence, a need for a nose sufficiently representative for everyone. Some historians assert provocatively that even the idea of nation is relatively new, a recent invention. Though it emerged to name a reality, in this century the term has usually become a modern ideology, an ideology used to replace the historical reality in the minds of the people. And more than once it has become the "fire in the minds of men" because the idea of war is of a piece with the idea of nation. After all, there is no nation without a proud readiness "to make its defense against any enemy." National anthems of many nations sing it loud and clear. And many times, for many people, a nation means a fortress.

In this epic state of mind, national identity is something that needs to be always, urgently, defended. A neighbor is either a menace or an ally. For people who think this way, we are what we were able to rescue from the dangers of life in the past.

In Mexico, many intellectuals are afraid of NAFTA, believing that the trade agreement is a menace to our culture, and especially to our language. They don't realize that our culture is already a mixture of cultures, that a quarter of the words in our language are of Arabic origin, that life is movement, and that true living culture everywhere changes a bit every day. Nor do they consider the fact that, in cultural terms, the value of each gesture changes and is always seen from different points of view simultaneously.

Those suffering from cultural panic in the face of change would do well to recall the story of the Jesuits in China, whose difficult mission was to convert the Chinese. They learned the language, they dressed like the Chinese, acted like them, lived like them. Some of the missionaries became respected in their Chinese communities, and a few even belonged to the Mandarin court. They translated the Bible in literal Chinese terms. Since there was no ideogram for God, they used the closest one: Heaven. After a few decades, an important part of Catholic theology was alive in China. The Jesuits were proud of the results of their mission and came back to Europe to show their work to the Western world.

They arrived dressed like Chinese, speaking with a strong Chinese accent, behaving and praying like Chinese. And they brought with them some brilliant young Chinese whom they had managed to convert. When they explained all their efforts and works and methods, instead of being received with the deep admiration of the Western world, they were accused of the heresy of having been converted by the Chinese. The truth is that they were not Chinese, but neither were they exactly what they were before; they had built a new religious culture, a third one.

We can never simply conserve our culture or merely adopt someone else's. We are always building a new culture based on the one we have, if we are lucky enough to still have one. And maybe it is a third one, or a fourth, or a fifth. In the case of Mexico, I do believe it is always in the process of creation. Ours is a syncretic culture—old, with millennia of history behind us and a long colonial past, young in the capacity to adapt, borrow, and internalize. Thus, in the more complex, pluralistic Mexico of today, more than ever we must reject attempts to locate an essentialist identity, whether based on core values or mestizaje or on a shared sense of collective lessons from the past. Rather, following Octavio Paz, we ought to accept the fact that Mexicans are not putting on masks, that they are masks, offering a totality of gestures to be deciphered. In this sense, as I have argued, all cultures are masked, including Canada and the United States. Each culture is an anthropological phenomenon, presenting masks rather than a list of core values.

I would like to end with a question that, in its own way, is a conclusion, or a paradoxical, never-ending conclusion to these reflections on the relativity of our national identities. Is it possible to build a new conception of identity that also assumes our natural Otherness, our multinational nature? If so, what is needed now in North America is a dance of the masks, based on listening, understanding, and complex signaling among the three. Our challenge is to share our differences and our national identities.