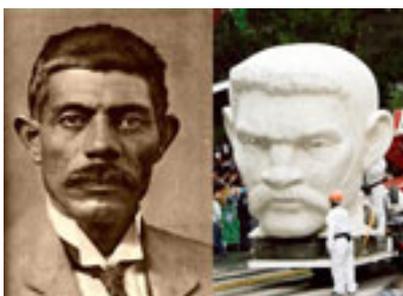




*El Coloso* presides over the great spectacle. Photo: Cuartoscuro

## Reaching into the Archive: State Depictions of Identity in the Mexican Bicentennial Celebrations

Jimena Lara Estrada



El Coloso (right); Benjamín Argumedo (left).

Photo: Julio Márquez / Archivo General de la Nación

On September 15, 2010, a crowd of more than 30,000 people assembled in the Zócalo, Mexico City's vast central plaza, to participate in the traditional *Grito*<sup>1</sup>, an event that marks the beginning of the Mexican War of Independence in 1810; every year, people gather to watch the president reenact the call to arms that mobilized the lower classes against Spain. To mark both the bicentennial anniversary of the independence and the centennial of the Mexican

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Revolution (1910)—which brought about profound political, agrarian, and social changes—the government, led by President Felipe Calderón, organized a massive event, investing 52 million dollars in the celebrations (Ballinas 2010). The crowd watched and cheered as a white male torso was slowly paraded down the emblematic Paseo de la Reforma. The feet, legs, arms, and head followed at a short distance, rolling toward the Zócalo, where they were laid down in front of the audience. The body parts, made of hollow plastic, formed a 70-foot figure of shining white faux-marble—christened *El Coloso* (The Colossus)<sup>2</sup>—clad in the uniform of a revolutionary soldier. As a closing act, accompanied by a spectacular musical score and elaborate lighting, a crew of construction workers supposedly representing Mexico's working class, assisted by a giant crane, lifted the pieces from the plaza and assembled them *in situ* on an empty platform. The audience watched the statue rise: first, to an awkward sitting position, then to be suspended in the air while the workers put together its lower half, and, finally, to stand on its own feet. The next morning, the statue was disassembled and discreetly stored in the back lot of a government building.

Who was that man? In 100 years of continuous tradition, the Grito had never included a physical representation such as *El Coloso*. For the first time, an unrecognizable figure of immense proportions had popped up right in the middle of the nation's center. As *El Coloso* was being assembled, the voice-over narration of the script explained that the statue did not depict a particular hero, but rather stood for: "the everyday man; the anonymous fighter who followed the nation's leaders into war."



El Coloso's head, torso, and feet.

Photo: Valeria Amezcua

The commentaries published in the days following the ceremony spoke of general confusion: clearly disturbed by the statue, the public was not satisfied with the official script, and were trying to identify the man depicted in such an oversized monument. As it turned out, *El Coloso* did portray an actual person. In an interview, the sculptor, Juan Carlos Canfield, admitted that he had based the sculpture on a picture of Benjamin Argumedo (1876-1916), a controversial general who had initially fought with the revolutionary army. Argumedo switched sides to fight against the rebels alongside the counter-revolutionary government of Victoriano Huerta and was later executed for treason by the triumphant revolutionaries. The enormous statue, the central focus of the most important national celebration in decades, represented a traitor.

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How did a traitor become the paramount representation of the national spirit of the Bicentennial? When asked about the reasons for choosing this particular figure, Canfield explained that he had looked through thousands of prints in the photographic archives of the revolutionary war in search for the perfect model: "[He is] a character that was sort of lost in history, but we didn't select him because of... his participation in the Revolution, but rather because of his physical appearance [as] a very strong man, with a moustache... [he looks] *super Revolutionary*."<sup>3</sup>



El Coloso being assembled in the Zócalo.

Photo: Valeria Amezcua

The sculptor's use of the historical archives inadvertently shed light on a forgotten image that suited the message that the government wished to broadcast. This was not linked to Argumedo's biography, which turned out to be far from laudable. Rather, the choice was based solely on aesthetic reasons, providing a prime reference for the national audience to identify with the national values celebrated in the Bicentennial. Canfield's description of his chosen subject is telling: the soldier's rugged *mestizo* features resonate with imagined ideal national subject.<sup>4</sup>

The *mestizo*—as an imaginary middle ground between white and indigenous subjects—renders visible those extremes from which it wishes to distance itself. As a subject, the *mestizo* performs complex cultural work: it stabilizes (at least enough for political purposes) the traumatic imposition of one culture over another, unifying irreconcilable opposites and producing an apparent harmony. The key to the efficacy of the figure of the *mestizo* is that it provides a tangible visual representation—for Octavio Paz (1985) "the Mexican is always male, always *mestizo*"—of difference, such that the physical depiction of race ideology became increasingly crucial to the production of a national identity. This process, which Claudio Lomnitz deems the "racialization of the category of citizenship," was essential to post-revolutionary nation building (2010, 23). In the aftermath of the Revolution, it was necessary to soothe internal racial and class divisions and unify the population under the illusion of an integrated society that transcended the opposition between *criollos* (of European origin) and *indios*.

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Photo: Roberto Gama Olvera

Indeed, Mexican identity has historically been constructed on characteristic aspects of the mestizo as a racial category, which simultaneously produces a carefully curated narrative of national memory. As Lomnitz emphasizes: "Mexico constructed a racialized image of the national subject based on true, specific historical references" (2010, 36). These references were given a predominant space in the official, "authorized" depictions of history. To support this identity construction, the post-revolutionary government gave predominant visibility to the aesthetics of hybridity, materializing them most notably on public buildings, commissioned to muralists such as Diego Rivera. For decades, the State worked forcefully to define clear categories and official histories, selecting what would be remembered and what should be forgotten. Slowly, an official archive was built from the accrual of the standardized textbooks, public buildings, and nationwide celebrations.

Such visual representations serve as vessels for a specific narrative. Building upon the Foucauldian concept of discourse, Paul Edwards explains how the multiple elements that create meaning are materialized in the form of a *support*, a physical object that is "at once studied and invented by the discourse that surrounds it" (1997, 38).<sup>5</sup> The support is what holds together the series of discontinuous segments, which are not inherently related, and more importantly, that may not necessarily be correctly interpreted by the public nor work smoothly as part of a larger political strategy. The purpose of the support is to interconnect those fragments in an attempt to stabilize them, concretizing the discursive segments.

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Photo: Valeria Amezcua

These discursive interactions work together in the production of what Foucault calls "an economy of discourses of truth" (1980, 93) that intertwine and complement each other, shaping in turn the expressions of power. They create a framework from which discourse is able to operate, and any image formed within that discourse will support that same economy.

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Within this economy, a narrative of identity is constantly negotiating the "characteristic amnesias" that, according to Benedict Anderson, estrange certain aspects and ensure remembrance of identity (2006, 204). The representations of nationality, from the end of the Revolution to the Bicentennial celebrations, assembled an overarching archive that contained national memory.

In the live, performative act of the 2010 Bicentennial, a new symbol was included within this matrix. El Coloso was not just an alien element, strange to the archive, it challenged the agreed-upon historical narrative. The enormous white man so theatrically constructed caused immediate confusion. The first disturbance was ignited by the insertion of an "everyday hero": an unknown man displaced the well-known characters, such as Emiliano Zapata or Francisco (Pancho) Villa, fully formed in their symbolic value, which were left out of their own commemoration. In choosing the anonymous Coloso over the many actors that in the past century had composed the national photo album, the government chose to ignore the historical archive. Once El Coloso's true identity was disclosed and the traitor came to light, the image became execratory; the discourse was punctured and the national dream suddenly deflated. What the script described as a "combative spirit that watches over us, proof of the ... capacity of our memory" suddenly became a very expensive farce.<sup>6</sup>



Photo: G. Emmanuel Hernandez

The irony of this representation, however, is that the entire aberration is an involuntary product of the same economy of discourses of truth that generates the national narrative and establishes its archival politics. When Canfield ventured into the archive and rescued a consciously discarded part of history, he destabilized the system. The anti-hero came back into the center solely because he fit the canonized aesthetic ideal of Mexican (mestizo) identity. Whether the sculptor chose to irreverently betray the commission he was given or the invocation of Argumedo was made purely on the basis of aesthetic preference does not really change things: El Coloso's scale, its whiteness, and its unashamed contradictions made the truth so bright that it became blinding. In this pivotal moment of historical commemoration of the Bicentennial, the supremacy of the image outweighed historical reflection, creating new tensions and ruptures in the national narrative.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Spanish for "cry" or "shout"; this is the vernacular term for the celebration of the declaration of independence.

<sup>2</sup>It is worth noting the ironic similarity of this name with that of Luis Donaldo Colosio, a presidential candidate slain during his campaign in 1994. The two figures share a strong physical resemblance, which further stirred the confusion—an official statement was issued denying the association. ("SEP: 'Coloso' no es Vicente Fernández." *El Universal* [Mexico], April 20, 2012.)

<sup>3</sup> My translation. Once Noticias. *Coloso Bicentenario*.

Accessed January 10, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz17wZ49xKs>

<sup>4</sup> I use the term "mestizo" beyond a process resulting of biological union (implied by other terms, such as cross-breeding or mixed-blood) but rather pointing to a cultural synthesis. For example, in *Unforeseeable Americas: Questioning Cultural Hybridity in the Americas*, Catherine Popueney-Hart (2000) points to Antonio Benítez-Rojo's observation of the "(ideological) preference for a homogenizing conception of the term" (44).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Edwards (1997) explores the Foucauldian concept of discourse in a way that is useful in understanding the Bicentennial narrative:

...discourse goes beyond speech acts to refer to the entire field of signifying or meaningful practices: those social interactions—material, institutional, and linguistic—through which reality is interpreted and constructed for us and with human knowledge is produced and reproduced. A discourse, then, is a way of knowledge, a background of assumptions and agreements about how reality is to be interpreted and expressed, supported by paradigmatic metaphors, techniques, and technologies and potentially embodied in social institutions. (1997, 34)

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting the original voice-over script that was read through the live broadcast (my translation):

Once unearthed, the rebuilt Coloso is housed in the main square to show that neither the dead nor the spirit of struggle must remain in oblivion. A giant stands up; it is the combative spirit that watches over us, proof of the strength within the sensible, and of the capacity of our memory. His thoughtful gaze observes the present and is, in turn, observed; his epic proportions speak of 200 years of history, the vision of those who look at the past from the present, the vision of hope. Mexico is symbolically reconstructed through the Coloso, as a proposal for a better future. These are pieces of a character that can represent Mexico, rescued from the past to be rebuilt in the present.

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