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Educating Mexico in Emilio Fernández's *Río Escondido* and  
Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán*

David Scott Dalton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Educating Mexico in Emilio Fernández's *Río Escondido* and  
Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán*

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Master of Arts

Following the bloody Revolution of 1910-1917, Mexican leaders took a great interest in rebuilding their devastated, war-torn country. In an attempt to further national unity, the post-Revolutionary regime sought to construct a unified, national identity. Many officials, such as José Vasconcelos, Mexico's first *Secretario de Educación*, viewed education as one of the keys to redeeming the nation. These government officials, empowered by their ideals and their sense of civic duty, worked to extend educational benefits to even the most overlooked segments of Mexican society. This thesis will examine two fictional texts that consider these efforts to transform and unify the nation through education in the post-Revolutionary years. Emilio "El Indio" Fernández's film, *Río Escondido* (1947), and Rosario Castellanos's novel, *Balún Canán* (1957), document the results of this federal intervention on behalf of its citizens in frontier towns far from the nation's capital. Nonetheless, Fernández and Castellanos provide very different appraisals of Mexico's post-Revolutionary education agenda. I view *Río Escondido* as official discourse because it lauds the national government initiatives to extend learning to all Mexicans and suggests that education will redeem the Mexican people. In *Balún Canán*, on the other hand, those in power utilize the education system to maintain control in society. Thus the novel criticizes failures within federal policies to provide education to less privileged sections of society. Despite their differences, both texts speak to a reality that Mexico dealt with during the mid-twentieth century when it attempted to solve its problems through education.

Keywords: Balún Canán, education, Emilio Fernández, maestro rural, official discourse, redemption, Río Escondido, Rosario Castellanos, rural school

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## INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN MEXICAN SOCIETY

Two important Mexican texts from the mid-twentieth century—Emilio “El Indio” Fernández’s film *Río Escondido* (1947) and Rosario Castellanos’s first novel, *Balún Canán* (1957)—present very different depictions of the success of education in improving the nation’s social conditions. In *Río Escondido*, a dedicated *maestra rural* enters the small, fictitious pueblo of Río Escondido, Chihuahua, and leads the townspeople to overthrow the local cacique through sheer strength of will. In *Balún Canán*, the *hacendados*—Ladino men who control society—utilize local schools to exacerbate inequality between Indians and whites as well as between Ladino men and women. Despite the fact that both works tell of a Mexico that attempts to confront problems such as discrimination, the tenor of each text is remarkably different. While both uphold the importance of education in strengthening Mexican society, *Río Escondido* is generally optimistic about government attempts to implement rural schools, while *Balún Canán* is pessimistic and critical of the school system. This thesis aims to present Fernández’s film as official discourse—a term I will define in greater detail later in this introduction—that posits that education will lead to the emancipation of the Indian, and ultimately to Mexican greatness. In contrast to the official view, Castellanos’s novel exposes failures within society that impede the success of educational projects. Because these texts communicate very different ideas regarding the success of the school in mid-Century Mexican society, they prove valuable in understanding the varying opinions that existed throughout Mexico as the nation struggled to define its identity following a violent Revolution.

Both texts are grounded in the historical and social reality of a nation that only a few decades earlier had endured a violent and transformative armed uprising. The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 had left the nation fragmented and polarized. The foot-soldiers of the movement had fought under several different caudillos, ranging from Álvaro Obregón and Venustiano Carranza to Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Each of these revolutionary leaders embodied a distinct worldview, a fact that only exacerbated social fragmentation. Following the war, the government had to seek unity as it attempted to reconstruct. Thomas Benjamin states that government leaders' "objective was not simply to repair the damage left from nearly ten years of political upheaval and civil war but to reconstruct the nation on a new basis, to regenerate Mexico and its people" (467). One of the most important means of achieving this end would be the construction of a social reality in which each citizen viewed him or herself as Mexican first—a fact that would preclude ethnic, regional, and even gender differences. Thus the state determined to teach Mexicanness,<sup>1</sup> or a combination of symbols and attitudes that constituted national identity, to its citizens. By unifying around a national ideal, those in power hoped to quell the tensions that continued to linger throughout the country.

It was in this climate that José Vasconcelos (1882-1959), published his seminal essay, *La raza cósmica* (1925). This work discussed world history as a series of assertions of authority of one race over another. Vasconcelos's text referred to the years of European imperial power as "la época del blanco" (33), which was doomed to eventually end. In his view, the qualities of the white race would eventually be transferred to the mestizos, who would also incorporate the positive attributes of their indigenous past. Through this fusion of races, the Mexican philosopher concluded "Ilegaremos en América, antes que en parte alguna del globo, a la creación de una raza hecha con el Tesoro de todas las anteriores, la raza final, la raza cósmica"

(54). However, this could not happen, according to Vasconcelos, until Mexican Indians were instructed in the science of the white European. Thus Mexico would be redeemed through incorporating the strengths of the previously successful race. In other words, the country would achieve salvation only through a dedicated program of national instruction based upon North American and European models. Vasconcelos's writings would eventually serve as the blueprint for the federal government's attempt at regeneration. This movement then, aimed to go much further than simply instilling certain academic capabilities in the nation's population, and it hoped to present a national ideal that would save the nation's soul. Thus the ideal of national redemption was presented.

Thomas Benjamin recognizes the great importance of education in Mexico's quest to regenerate following the Revolution. He states,

The new Mexican citizen would be formed in the government school. "To educate is to redeem," a slogan of the time stated. Educators sought to redeem the child, the adult, the Indian, the woman, the peasant and the worker, the nation. The program of redemption included not only the three Rs. . . . Community activism, patriotism, and citizenship were also stressed." (479)

While the exact meaning of redemption remains slippery, its basic kernel presupposes an educated public. The Mexican government would need to teach its citizens if it hoped to assist the nation in fulfilling its cosmic destiny. Under these circumstances, the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) was established in 1921. This governmental ministry would take charge of promoting education throughout the nation, even—or perhaps especially—to segments of society that previously had not enjoyed academic opportunities. José Vasconcelos served as the first director of the SEP, and his racial ideology played an important role in how education



was implemented. Upon its creation, the SEP received the mandate of “saving Mexicans” (Benjamin 478). This salvation would occur through education that promoted the official doctrines of the state. Thus education was key to regenerating the nation and redeeming its people. The SEP undertook numerous projects aimed at uplifting its citizens; however, one of the most interesting initiatives it undertook was to promote the government’s official ideology through artistic texts that would educate the Mexican people about their nation’s past and future. The works that presented the government’s views about national history soon became known as official discourse.

The notion of official discourse—which is crucial to this thesis’s central argument—has two key components. Firstly, it is official, or government sponsored and/or approved. Secondly, it is a discourse, which Lydia Alix Fillingham’s discussion of Michel Foucault defines as “anything written or said or communicated using signs” (100). Thus government-sponsored communications that present the ideology of the state are official discourses. One clear intervention of official discourse in post-Revolutionary Mexico began in 1921 when Vasconcelos “commissioned artists to paint public walls to reflect his philosophical idealism and refine the public’s aesthetic appreciation” (Benjamin 482). Mary Katherine Coffey recognizes several interpretations of this new artistic movement: one “celebrates muralism as a proletarian art form, an avante garde practice that sought to bring the values of the recently fought Revolution to the people,” while another holds that muralism ultimately just communicated the government’s official discourse (16). She ultimately sides with Octavio Paz and other art critics somewhere in the middle. She asserts that the movement started as a means of glorifying national heroes, but as the muralists—and the SEP who funded them—recognized the power of their messages, their artwork became more and more propagandistic. Regardless of these varying

interpretations of the exact intentions of the artists and the government that funded their work, these murals were part of the post-Revolutionary government's attempt to create a national identity, and, as such, they can be associated with the nation's official discourse.<sup>2</sup> They presented the ideology of the government through a medium widely available to the Mexican people.<sup>3</sup>

Following the muralist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, the SEP began to invest in film to promulgate its redemptive message. The decision to turn to the silver screen seems quite logical; unlike murals which are anchored in a specific location with limited—albeit numerous—spectators, film could reach across the nation, or even the world. The first SEP-sponsored film, Paul Strands's *Redes* (1935), tells the story of an indigenous fishermen strike in Veracruz (Tuñón, "Emilio Fernández" 179-80). This was one of many motion pictures that would communicate official discourse and champion indigenous rights, with the goal that Indians would then incorporate themselves in Mexican society at large. Indeed, Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema (1936-1956) would produce numerous didactic films—several funded by the SEP—that promoted the statist ideology.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps no director had a greater impact on Golden Age film than Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, whose film *Río Escondido* was "perhaps the quintessential example of the Fernández-Figueroa style" (Ramírez-Berg 14). El Indio's importance to this movement will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter. In this way, film followed in the footsteps of the muralist movement, promulgating official discourse with the goal of constructing a new, post-Revolutionary nation.

This draws to mind Benedict Anderson's discussion of a nation as an "imagined . . . community" where "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). One important facet that Anderson recognizes in establishing this community is national literature. However, stories, images, and films go beyond simply creating a feeling of camaraderie within a

nation. J. Hillis Miller asserts that “fictions may be said to have a tremendous importance not as the accurate reflector of a culture, but as the maker of that culture. . . . Fictions keep us in line and tend to make us more like our neighbors” (69). This seems particularly true for Mexico, where those in power hoped to create and utilize a national narrative to construct a unified people. It was through both art and film that Mexico educated its citizens—especially its Indians—about how to be “authentically Mexican.”<sup>5</sup> However, not all texts from this time period represent official discourse. As Miller also notes, “narratives are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized” (69). Indeed, many works did begin to question official discourse, particularly in the 1950s and beyond. Perhaps equally important to the preponderance of works of art and film that presented the official discourse is the fact that many authors began to produce literature that questioned the claim that Mexico was being systematically redeemed. Rosario Castellanos was one of numerous authors, such as Juan Rulfo, Elena Garro, and Carlos Fuentes, who began to challenge the redemptive rhetoric of the post-Revolutionary government. Rather than perceiving a redeemed or changing nation, they saw that many of the same problems that had traditionally faced the country continued long after the conflict’s end. While these authors presented a very different discourse from government-sponsored texts, they, too, played an important role as Mexico grappled with its identity. Many of their works communicated a discourse of failure that rejected the notion that Mexico had benefitted from official policies. Rather than praise idealist thoughts and intentions, they focused on serious shortcomings in society, and, perhaps more importantly, within the post-Revolutionary government itself.<sup>6</sup>

Miller states that “narratives reinforce the dominant culture and put it in question at the same time” (70).<sup>7</sup> This thesis, then, will investigate how *Río Escondido* “reinforces” the official

ideology, while *Balún Canán* “put[s] it into question.” These texts prove interesting particularly because they share numerous similarities despite the difference in the discourse they communicate. For example, the film and novel both tell of pueblos situated in some of the remotest regions of the nation. *Río Escondido* takes place in the nation’s northernmost outposts in a town near Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua while *Balún Canán* is set far south of the capital in Comitán, Chiapas. Both texts deal with a Mexico riddled with problems such as caciques and/or *hacendados* who victimize Indians through rampant discrimination. Nevertheless, Fernández’s film suggests that government policy can redeem even the farthest corners of the nation, while *Balún Canán* emphasizes serious failures at all levels of society as the federal government tries to effect change in unfamiliar regions that lie outside of its sphere of influence. The success of the nation’s educational effort lies at the heart of both of these texts and the message they communicate. Thus they essentially evaluate the SEP’s—and by extension government’s—success in providing adequate schooling to the most downtrodden segments of the population. While *Balún Canán* and *Río Escondido* present strikingly different interpretations of the Mexican condition, they ultimately contribute important voices that evaluate Mexico’s progress decades after the Revolution concluded.

The body of this thesis is divided into two chapters. The first will discuss *Río Escondido*’s optimistic vision of the program of the rural school movement as an example of official discourse. Indeed, the film’s message reflects that of an unidentified SEP assistant minister that Benjamin quotes:

To integrate Mexico through the rural school—that is, to teach the people of the mountains and the faraway valleys, the millions of people that are Mexicans but are not yet Mexican, to teach them the love of Mexico and the meaning of

Mexico. . . . Our little rural school stands for Mexico and represents Mexico in those far-off corners—so many of them that belong to Mexico and are not yet Mexican. (480)

This film presents an imaginary Mexico in which the entire pueblo of Río Escondido learns that they are “buenos mexicanos” as a result of the government’s educational program. This in turn leads the people to conclude that they should oppose the abuses of the local cacique.

The second chapter discusses the failure of education in the novel *Balún Canán*. Castellanos’s novel criticizes the results of the SEP’s efforts to mandate changes in the educational system during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. However, it does not criticize this progressive president, but rather takes issue with certain aspects of government policy. Firstly, it points out the failure of the inspections system in which SEP officials would observe classes in various schools in rural areas to make sure that they were up to government standard. Later it criticizes the government’s practice of simply decreeing rural schools for indigenous students, and the practice of teaching in Spanish rather than Tzeltal, the local indigenous language. Also, it shows how local governments—both among white Ladinos and the Mayan population—frustrate attempts to establish functioning schools. Following these two chapters, my conclusion will attempt to reconcile the differing messages of both Fernández and Castellanos. Ultimately, Fernández’s work is mythic and breaks with reality. Castellanos’s text, on the other hand, is based on a reality that the author lived in which government oversights and individual corruption impeded attempts to educate the people of Chiapas. Indeed, the novel at no time suggests that education will pose problems for Mexico; instead it suggests that the attempts to establish and monitor schools have failed. In other words, while *Río Escondido* presents a world in which the government provides a redemptive education to its people, *Balún Canán* suggests that education

did not reach many sectors of the population specifically due to government, individual, and societal incompetence at the national, local, and individual levels.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term *mexicanidad* or *lo mexicano* (Mexicanness), according to Dolores Tierney, refers to “idealized representations of Mexican nationalism” (1). Tierney goes on to assert that, in film, Emilio Fernández was “regarded as one of the foremost purveyors of *lo mexicano*” (1). Rick A. López’s chapter “The Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts: Two Ways of Exalting Indianness” discusses ways in which the Mexican government created and promoted a pre-Columbian identity that uplifted the indigenous peoples through these idealized notions of history. While López’s chapter does not deal with film, it does provide information on official attempts to define *lo mexicano*, showing that government utilized numerous types of media to present its message.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous murals communicated official discourse; this thesis deals particularly with Diego Rivera and his murals, *México a través de los siglos* (1935) and *La maestra rural* (1932). Both of these works are further analyzed in the following chapter. However, for a more in depth knowledge of key murals in this movement, see José Clemente Orozco’s *Cortés y la Malinche* (1926). This mural presents Mexico’s genesis, which is mythically rooted in the relationship between Hernán Cortés and his indigenous lover, la Malinche. See also David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *Del pofirismo a la Revolución* (1958) for a narrative of Mexico’s suffering under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and the revolutionary movement that followed. Mary Katherine Coffey discusses the various ways that critics and scholars have interpreted the muralist movement in Mexico. For a more in-depth discussion of Mexican muralism, and the project that accompanied it, see “Muralism and the People: Culture, Popular Citizenship, and Government in Post-Revolutionary Mexico” (15-17).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Katherine Coffey observes that “any discussion of the effects of Mexican

muralism on the public sphere . . . needs to consider how the murals were and were not available to the public” (11). Admittedly, muralist art was confined to those people who lived in areas where this artwork was visible, which suggests that their effect was diminished outside of Mexico City. Nevertheless, Coffey goes on to assert that this artwork had left an important mark with palpable political results. See “Muralism and the People: Culture, Popular Citizenship, and Government in Post-Revolutionary Mexico” (11-13) for a brief discussion about the effects of muralism in Mexico.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Knight states that “images and allegiances drawn from a (partly mythic) past helped shape discourse, policy, and political affiliation, and did so across a wide ideological spectrum” (398). This is an important key to understanding the overall muralist—and later film—movements and their relationship to Mexican culture at large. See Knight’s “Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico 1910-1940” (394-98) for a deeper understanding of post-Revolutionary Mexico’s usage of art to reach the masses.

<sup>5</sup> This is another term that refers to Mexicanness. The “authentically Mexican” referred to objects from Mexico’s culture, landscape, or history that deserved to be highlighted in the popular consciousness. See endnote 1 for works to refer to for a deeper understanding of this term.

<sup>6</sup> The post-Revolutionary government already recognized problems in society; indeed, one of the reasons why it championed educational operations was to resolve these issues. Thus, if these authors were to only recognize failure in society, their texts would not have been as critical. However, in asserting failure within the very government that professed change, they were making serious claims.



<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Miller recognizes this ability to both uphold and question as qualities that can occur within a single text or narrative. However, his observation holds equally true when discussing how two different works can relate to a dominant culture.

## THE REDEMPTIVE TEACHER: EMILIO FERNÁNDEZ'S

### *RÍO ESCONDIDO*

Emilio Fernández's film, *Río Escondido* (1947), evokes the mythic imaginary of post-Revolutionary and mid-century Mexican thought. The film's protagonist, Rosaura Salazar (María Félix), represents a legion of educators who preach salvation to the indigenous peoples living in the nation's farthest corners. Her character harks back to a movement that began in the years immediately following the war. Stephen E. Lewis, while discussing the post-Revolutionary educational campaign, notes that the government called "Missionaries of Indigenous Culture and Public Education," who "were expected to impart a message of redemption to Mexico's indigenous population" which was "overtly secular, emphasizing community development, modernization, and incorporation into the mestizo mainstream" (180). Although the creation of this army of *maestros rurales* had several aims, one of the most important was to teach and uphold a state ideology. Two key points to this official discourse were "to improve the conditions of the masses while avoiding the benefit of the small landed aristocracy" and "to acknowledge the demographic profile of the nation as mestizo, the brand of nationalism proper to the Mexican Revolution" (Acevedo-Muñoz 58-59). However, Rick A. López notes that "mestizaje presented a distinct problem. The worthiness of the European side of this equation seemed self-evident. But the indigenous side still needed validation" (36). This reconciling of Mexico's pre-Columbian history would come through mass education that trumpeted the values of the nation's indigenous past. As more and more Mexicans accepted their heritage, the country would grow more unified, which would lead to the nation's redemption.

While the use of *maestros rurales* was important to achieving the aforementioned unity,

the state also turned to artwork such as muralism—and later film—to educate the masses. Perhaps the three most important muralists were Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. These men, along with several other, lesser-known artists, presented images that communicated nationalist messages that “encoded the history, experiences, traditions, and culture of peasants, workers, Indians and artisans” (Rochfort 43). Desmond Rochfort notes that by the 1930s, the muralists’ main focus was “an interpretation of the national past and future” (51). Rochfort’s observation alludes to the fact that muralism aimed above all to create a new identity that would help Mexico achieve a great future. Even depictions of the past and present generally had a tie to that which had not yet come to pass. *Río Escondido* fits clearly into this movement because it, too, aims to train the people to create a better nation for upcoming generations.

The opening credits signal the film’s indebtedness to muralism as they are accompanied by the etchings of Leopoldo Méndez—another key artist of the movement—that foreshadow key events that will transpire in the movie. However, perhaps the most important way in which *Río Escondido* builds on the aforementioned tradition is in its aesthetic quality, and that came primarily as a result of the cinematography of Gabriel Figueroa. Matthew J. K. Hill asserts that Fernández and Figueroa collaborated in “more than twenty films” and that “of all the members of Fernández’s filmmaking team, it is the figure of Gabriel Figueroa who stands out as *the* crucial element in bringing El Indio’s vision to life” (6, emphasis in original). Indeed, Charles Ramírez-Berg asserts that Fernández’s favorite cinematographer “[copied] certain techniques” of the muralists, frequently utilizing the traditional symbols of Mexico to frame his shots (15, 17). Similar to the muralists that inspired them, Fernández and Figueroa convey a discourse of redemption in which the filmic text itself serves as the primary teacher and the audience plays the role of an attentive pupil. Interestingly, *Río Escondido* not only teaches its audience of

salvation; it also champions education, showing that only through this means can Mexico truly regenerate.

Perhaps the deepest tie between *Río Escondido* and muralism comes through Diego Rivera, whose murals—and more importantly, whose ideas—are portrayed prominently throughout the film. Fernández’s work shares an intertextual relationship with Rivera’s mural, *La maestra rural* (1932), which depicts a woman who teaches several children while armed revolutionaries patrol in the background. Rivera’s mural creates an imaginary of a militant teacher who stands against the forces that oppose Mexico’s security. Through juxtaposing a *maestra rural*—a woman who stands at the fore while soldiers fight in the background—the image affirms the importance of the teacher as greater even than the revolutionary who gives his life for freedom. *Río Escondido* upholds this mythic, idealized teacher through the tenacious Rosaura Salazar, a teacher who, above all else, hopes to redeem her people by sharing a decidedly pro-indigenous ideology. In its support for education, the film corroborates the project of the muralist movement in that it suggests an intrinsic connection between education and the values of the Revolution.

*Río Escondido*’s beginning further develops its connection to Rivera’s muralism after the credits when it shows Rosaura Salazar in the Zócalo running late for an important appointment with a man identified as “el Presidente de la República.”<sup>1</sup> While Rosaura has already agreed to the role of *maestra rural*—a fact that suggests that she has accepted the official stance on the importance of education—the sequence that follows shows how her convictions are strengthened through viewing official discourse. A narrative voice that identifies itself as “la historia” speaks as Rosaura views these works of art, telling her of Mexico’s great past, its present troubles, and its triumphant future. Julia Tuñón interprets this narrator to be the murals of

Diego Rivera that “take on a voice of their own” after Rosaura enters the Palacio Nacional (“Emilio Fernández” 185). Despite seeing numerous important historical objects, Diego Rivera’s mural *México a través de los siglos* is what most captivates the young schoolteacher. The narrator states “ésta es la historia de tu pueblo. . . . He aquí nuestro origen.” Rivera’s mural presents a “heroic history of good and evil” (Rochfort 51) in Mexico. Rochfort notes that in this painting, the good defend Mexico from violation, while the bad oppress and exploit. However, perhaps most importantly, *México a través de los siglos*—and indeed much official discourse—“renders into the realm of myth every event and personage” (Rochfort 52). The mythic qualities of this mural are particularly clear in its depiction of indigenous peasants as exploited beings. Rivera’s work insinuates that national redemption will come about after the defeat of the bad—those who disrespect the Indian population, and by implication Mexican peoples and customs—at the hands of the good. This dualistic depiction of Mexican reality informs Rosaura’s own interpretation of Mexican society, and she later communicates a similar discourse to her students.

This highly intertextual presentation—in which Rivera’s mural is depicted on the silver screen with a voiceover narrating and interpreting his work—serves to glorify those who struggle against oppression in present-day Mexico. Both mural and film juxtapose current events with epic moments from the nation’s history in such a way that current challenges comprise yet another chapter in Mexico’s historical narrative. One particularly important issue that the mural addresses depicts a post-Revolutionary Mexico in which *campesinos* clamor for land reform. The image emphasizes the importance of education as it shows these revolting peasants reading manuscripts—perhaps manifestos—even as they demand social justice. Thus the film’s inclusion of this section of the mural affirms the thesis that the people’s liberation and their education go hand in hand. The implicit message is that Rosaura, upon deciding to serve as a *maestra rural*,

will help these peasants to achieve the liberation that they so desire. This scene proves particularly interesting because it not only shows the importance of what Rosaura will teach, but also because it shows her reaction to the message she bears. In a liminal moment, this artwork presents Rosaura with a vision of the big picture. Her service as a teacher will ultimately uplift the downtrodden segments of the nation. Therefore, Rosaura has a position of great historical importance within her nation, a fact that is highlighted artistically as she leaves the room by ascending the nearby steps to the next floor. Hill notes that “as she is running up the stairs, with the mural to her right, it becomes difficult to distinguish Rosaura’s figure from the band of Aztec warriors painted at the head of the stairs” (39). This blending with historical figures communicates the idea that Rosaura’s modern-day endeavors are no less defining of the Mexican national character than those of the pre-Colombian peoples who compose the nation’s cultural foundation. Indeed, the film goes on to assert that the importance of the *maestros rurales*, such as Rosaura, extends beyond even that of Mexico’s most renowned political leaders. After ascending the stairs, Rosaura enters a room that contains the portraits of the men who have served as Mexico’s president. “La historia” speaks once again, announcing that “aunque este cuarto tenga las imágenes de algunas de las personas más ilustres del mundo, ninguna de ellas fue mayor que tú.”

Even the current president views Rosaura’s mission as paramount to Mexican success. As previously mentioned, Rosaura receives her assignment not from a government bureaucrat, but from Miguel Alemán himself. The fact that the president takes personal interest in the endeavors of the *maestros rurales* underscores the importance with which the film imbues their work. The president’s respect for educators is made even more obvious when Rosaura arrives late for her meeting. To her dismay, she watches as her colleagues leave their appointment with

Alemán, while several young doctors prepare for their audience with Mexico's chief executive. However, upon hearing that one teacher did not make it to the previous meeting, the president decides to speak first with Rosaura, thus causing the doctors to wait in the lobby a little longer.<sup>2</sup> Once they are alone in his office, the president charges Rosaura with the task of teaching in far away Río Escondido, a fictional town near Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Throughout the rest of the film, Rosaura faces many hardships, and it is through the certainty of her importance within Mexico's history that she manages to redeem her "pueblo". While a bit long and disjointed, this beginning is crucial to the film's message because it presents Rosaura's work as historically necessary to Mexico's success.<sup>3</sup> Not only does the movie communicate these ideas to the audience, but Rosaura herself is converted to this ideology.

Given the short amount of time that Rosaura spends at the Palacio Nacional, she has not gained any additional academic knowledge. Instead, this sequence shows her internalizing the mythic values of Mexican history. The instruction Rosaura receives through the murals can best be understood metaphorically; rather than focusing on facts, it emphasizes mythic beliefs. *México a través de los siglos* presents the genesis, present, and ultimate redemption of the Mexican people through their images. Thus its message transcends such ideas as mathematics and reading and concerns itself more with rebuilding Mexico. Rosaura has clearly taken this ideology in, and it helps her remain strong along the way. However, the importance of the education extends even further in this film. Rosaura's internalization of the doctrines she has acquired through viewing the murals facilitates her worthiness to act as a liaison between the state and the people of Río Escondido. In creating a Messianic figure whose ability to save her people resides in her knowledge—and implementation—of government ideologies, Fernández's film becomes a clear example of official discourse.<sup>4</sup>

*Río Escondido* is important among Golden Age films precisely because of how concretely it defines Mexico. Carl J. Mora refers to it as “an outstanding example of official interest in filmmaking” (78). The reasons for this assessment are clear; the movie communicates official discourse in asserting that education will lead to Mexico’s liberation and ultimate redemption. Many critics have noted the importance of both Emilio Fernández, and his cinematographer, Gabriel Figueroa, in creating a national mythology. Charles Ramírez-Berg asserts that “Fernández’s project as a filmmaker had always been to create a uniquely Mexican cinema” (14). Indeed, Both Fernández and Figueroa took their roles as mythmakers seriously; John Mraz goes as far as to say that “making nationalist movies was Fernández’s obsession” (108). Fernández himself seems to have recognized his role as national mythmaker and once stated famously “sólo existe un México: El que yo inventé” (qtd. in Taibo 51). Both Fernández and Figueroa took a great deal of inspiration from the artwork of the muralists, and Fernández once affirmed “these are the things that Diego Rivera created in painting and I in cinema” (qtd. in Tuñón, “Emilio Fernández” 185). In many ways, *El Indio*’s assessment of his own work rings true. Just as Rivera’s covered the nation’s walls in mythic artwork, Fernández’s films immersed the nation’s silver screen with mythic movies.

Indeed, much of the redemptive nature of Rosaura’s character comes across simply through her performance in a highly mythicized world. Because so much of the film’s message is tied to the plot, a short synopsis of the film’s major characters and events will help to establish Rosaura’s Messianic role. *Río Escondido* presents a dualistic society that is made up of “good” and “bad” Mexicans. The bad strive to oppress the masses while Rosaura proclaims that the good try to move towards progress and “modernity”. In a particularly telling scene, Rosaura reveals the scope of her intentions, telling her indigenous students that they will redeem “*Río Escondido*,



México y el mundo.” The film centers on the idealistic teacher, Rosaura Salazar, played by María Félix, arguably the biggest star of Mexico’s Golden Age of film.<sup>5</sup> While Rosaura originally wanted to serve her nation as a medical doctor, a heart condition disqualified her from this career path. As a result, the idealistic Rosaura decides to become a teacher. After receiving her assignment, Rosaura heads to the faraway and isolated northern town of Río Escondido. On her journey to this pueblo, Rosaura chances upon Felipe, a young medical doctor who is now giving service in rural Mexico as a prerequisite to certification. Felipe will give service in a nearby village, and his proximity will prove useful to Rosaura in the near future. When she arrives at Río Escondido, she meets don Regino, “an ex-villista gone bad” (Mora 80), who opposes education in his town. Indeed, Rosaura learns that don Regino has taken the former *maestra rural*, Mercedes, as his mistress and turned the schoolhouse into a stable for his horses. When Rosaura arrives announcing her government mandate to teach, don Regino replies “aquí no hay más presidente que yo.” He does not accept the official ideology; instead he subjugates the indigenous townspeople, whom he refers to pejoratively as “la indiada” and treats them as little more than animals to be owned, herded, and exploited.

Just as it seems that Rosaura might fail in her attempts to open the school, Río Escondido is hit with a smallpox epidemic that infects many residents, including don Regino. The medical student, Felipe, is brought to town to cure the ailing cacique. Felipe sees the opportunity to help Rosaura, and gives don Regino an ultimatum. He will only heal the cacique if he agrees to two conditions: he must allow Felipe to vaccinate everyone in the town, and he must reopen the school and permit Rosaura to carry out her mandate. Don Regino has no choice but to accept these terms, and shortly thereafter Rosaura takes her position as the town’s *maestra rural*. However, don Regino makes several sexual advances—including a time when he attempts to

convince Rosaura to move into one of his home as his mistress. Rosaura continuously rejects the cacique, and, over a short period of time, an antagonistic relationship develops between them. Although don Regino is obligated not to interfere with Rosaura's teaching, their differences lead to a power struggle that culminates in the cacique's attempt to rape her and chase her out of town. Rosaura shoots and kills him in the altercation. Shortly thereafter, however, Rosaura, who already ails from the aforementioned heart condition, suffers an attack that will lead to her death. As such, the film's protagonist gives her life for the cause of bringing salvation to Mexico's marginalized masses. The film's thesis rings clear: education will catalyze the efforts needed to regenerate. Indeed, it romanticizes Rosaura's personal sacrifice, elevating her role as educator to the most hallowed of positions in the nation. Her determination to teach leads to the people's liberation, a fact that cements her role as a mythic Messiah figure.

The film frequently juxtaposes education with heavy doses of religious imagery. Through this means it suggests a state that serves as an omnipresent, quasi-divine entity. The implicit comparison holds that both God and government wish the best for their numerous indigenous children, which then explains why the state has embarked on a project of education for the masses. These qualities fit the film into a movement that "portrayed Mexico's indigenous peoples as pure and simple, like children who had to be led to . . . consciousness by the intellectual elite" (Hershfield, "Screening the Nation" 268-69). The teacher, Rosaura—who conducts official state business—serves as an intermediary between the people and their government in a top-down fashion that resembles a Catholic saint's intercession between man and Divinity. Also, similar to how a faithful woman or man may achieve canonization through miraculous accomplishments and devotion to the Church, the *maestro rural* achieves an analogous status through acquiring, upholding, and internalizing the redemptive rhetoric of the

official discourse. Thus the first step in Rosaura's quest to achieve this quasi-sainted persona is to become converted to official teachings. While on the one hand this is obvious—every teacher must gain knowledge pertaining to that which he or she will teach—the film emphasizes this process, taking the time to show the sublime effect of the muralist movement on Rosaura's consciousness.

Fernández represents Rosaura's unique strength and devotion through Mercedes, Río Escondido's previous *maestra rural*, who ultimately fails to uphold official teachings and gives in to external pressures. She cedes to don Regino's *machismo*, allowing him to take her as his lover and to convert the schoolhouse into a stable for his horses. Her sexual impurity symbolizes her contamination; it disqualifies her from serving in the quasi-religious role of teacher. Her decision leaves the town with no one to teach them the alternatives to *caciquismo*, which dooms them to suffer longer at the hands of a strongman. Thus, rather than act as a sort of saint who imparts the state's redemptive message, Mercedes comes to represent the mythic prostitute, la Malinche. When Rosaura arrives in Río Escondido, she speaks out against don Regino's abuses of power. From the moment that Rosaura meets the local cacique, his fear of teachers and school in general is revealed. He refuses to allow classes because he knows that educated students will pose a threat to his power. Despite claiming that he is the ultimate authority in town, don Regino laments the federal government's opposition to him when he is in private. One of the most obvious manners in which the state opposes the cacique's authority is through the work of its *maestras rurales*.

Don Regino has previously contained the threat of federal intervention through education by seducing the female teacher with material favors and a sexual relationship. That is a pattern that he will try to repeat with Rosaura. However, unlike her predecessor, Rosaura takes her role

seriously, and, as such, develops saintly attributes throughout the film. Generally dressed in a *rebozo*, her physical appearance draws comparison to the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the Virgin does not wear a *rebozo*; however, she does wear a *manto*. In both cases then, these female figures wear clothing that covers her head and part of their face. Indeed, Rosaura effectively wears the twentieth-century equivalent to the aforementioned *manto*, a fact that creates a visual connection between them. The similarities between these two female figures extend beyond physical appearance and into their redemption of the native population. Rosaura appears to the Indians with a message of salvation resembling that which Mexican Catholic tradition holds that the “Virgen Morena” delivered to Juan Diego. The legend of *la Guadalupeana* holds that the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego, telling him that he—and the indigenous people in general—should convert to the Catholic faith. As proof of her visit, she gave Juan Diego roses, despite the fact that no such flower existed during the time of year that she appeared. Rosaura’s very name alludes to the aforementioned legend and the flowers that Juan Diego received. Although Rosaura, like the Virgin of Guadalupe, bears a redemptive message, the teacher’s concerns are primarily secular in nature. Nevertheless, she defends her ideals with a religious zeal that parallels that of the Virgin.

Throughout the film Fernández develops numerous qualities in Rosaura that equate his protagonist with *la Guadalupeana*. An early resemblance to the Virgin is seen when Rosaura discovers three distraught children who witness the smallpox-induced death of their mother. The sight of the suffering orphans awakens her own maternal instincts. Rosaura takes these children as her own, effectively becoming a mother while at the same time maintaining her virginity—a fact that harks back to the Immaculate Conception so important to Catholic tradition. This proves particularly important because just as Catholicism venerates the Virgin for giving birth to the

Savior of the world, Rosaura becomes a mother figure to these children who, in their potential, hold the keys to Mexican salvation. The children recognize Rosaura's holy, motherly mantle as well. During a class discussion, the camera rests on one boy's drawing of her that clearly resembles the Virgin of Guadalupe (Hill 45).

Despite—or perhaps because of—her maternal role, Rosaura avoids sexual relations of any sort throughout the film. In the words of Joanne Hershfield, “Rosaura must sacrifice all personal attachments and remain a virgin for the good of the nation” (*Mexican Cinema* 70). Perhaps the clearest example of Rosaura's sexual purity is seen in the moment that don Regino attempts to seduce her. Following the blueprint of his *conquista*<sup>7</sup> of the previous teacher, don Regino tries to win over Rosaura. He offers her comfortable accommodations, a place for her newly adopted children to stay, and even a full tank of water at all times—he has his own private well while the rest of the town gets drops from a public well. However, Rosaura decries him for subjecting her to the “humillacion más grande de su vida.” Rosaura's virginity is not limited to resisting the advances of vile men such as don Regino. Even Felipe, the young doctor, confesses his love with no results. The fact that no man, good or bad, can seduce Rosaura emphasizes her typology with the Virgin and her redeeming nature in Río Escondido.

The inhabitants of Río Escondido need Rosaura to save them from the hell in which they live. After getting off the train from Mexico to Ciudad Juárez, the teacher stands alone in a barren desert. From this point forward, Rosaura will have to travel on foot. This scene captures the essence of Mexicanness as Figueroa frames María Félix with a cactus while numerous enormous clouds fill the background.<sup>8</sup> Because these two objects—clouds and cacti—were such important symbols in Mexico, Fernández and his team artistically capture the moment in which Rosaura enters the untamed desert of Mexico with a mandate to educate. As she walks across the

desert, it becomes clear that something is fundamentally wrong. The clouds, while beautiful, are dark. Later on, Rosaura appears to descend a barren hill, masterfully filmed, as if literally descending into hell. The film technique in this scene is important because, while it appears that Rosaura is moving downward, this is nothing more than the effect of a diagonal camera angle that Ramírez-Berg asserts “foreshadow[s] the oppressive, unbalanced social order she [Rosaura] is entering” (20). What the *maestra rural* finds upon arriving in Río Escondido is not an improvement. The parched, untamed desert that she has crossed proves a metaphoric introduction to the oppressive rule under which the town’s people live. Ultimately, Rosaura’s only means of restoring order is to share her knowledge of the national myth and thereby prick the collective sense of justice. Throughout the film, Rosaura shows the people their latent potential while she unmasks the oppressors as the lackeys of the failed experiment of *caciquismo*. She does this primarily through her stage in the classroom.

Hershfield notes that “the schoolroom in *Río Escondido*, presented as the space of Mexico’s future, is displayed as a space controlled by a woman” (*Mexican Cinema* 70). This positive relationship to Mexico’s future suggests that this space will prove the salvation of the Mexican state. Throughout the film, Rosaura imparts revolutionary ideals in the schoolhouse knowing she is safe from don Regino’s meddling. The cacique recognizes the threat that this poses, and for this reason he refuses to allow Rosaura to start teaching classes when she arrives. If he permits Rosaura to go about her mission, the status of his “prerevolutionary social order”<sup>9</sup> will come into question. Indeed, he only allows her to begin her operation after Felipe’s ultimatum. Rosaura takes advantage of don Regino’s concession and shortly thereafter classes start. Not only does Rosaura begin teaching the students, but she takes the schoolhouse as her own personal residence, a fact that elevates it from a simple building to a holy edifice. It is not

by accident that it is in this space that the children will receive the knowledge necessary to save the pueblo, and, by extension, the nation and even the world.

It is within the schoolhouse that Rosaura trains the indigenous masses to overcome problems supposedly inherent to their race.<sup>10</sup> One particularly telling scene occurs as Rosaura teaches in this space for the first time. She stands before the children and glances momentarily at a picture of a drunken Indian dressed in a sarape and a straw sombrero with the caption “esto se acabó” (Hill 48). After reading this poster, Rosaura plunges into her lesson, realizing that she is not only saving the Indians from don Regino, but also from themselves.<sup>11</sup> Rosaura’s treatment of the Indian underscores an important inconsistency in Vasconcelos’s ideology that fueled *indigenismo*. The movement, “part of the postrevolutionary state’s paternalistic attempt to . . . correct glaring social imbalances and inequalities” (Lewis 179), on the one hand reified the indigenous past, but on the other it hoped to eventually do away with present-day Indians. Tuñón recognizes that Fernández converts his Indians “into an ideal, a symbol of purity and dignity despite their defeat” (“Femininity” 86). However, despite the Indians’ goodness, the film suggests that they have clear defects particular to their race that only the state and its emissaries can reverse. Thus they have to overcome their particular weaknesses before they can be saved. Lewis points out that “Vasconcelos’s education policies suggested that Indians could, in fact, shed their ‘Indianness’ and join the cosmic race” (179). Thus the film views the Indians as an important figure not because of who they are presently, but because they are “mestizos in embryo” (Hill 41).

In order to achieve the desired mestizo identity—and by extension modernity—the students will have to shed both their biological race and their culture. Rosaura proclaims that many obstacles stand in her students’ way of reaching this end. However, the most serious

impediment that she can think of is “la ignorancia que les venda los ojos;” she then states “vamos a arrancar esta venda.” While Rosaura refers particularly to the Indians’ submission to *caudillismo*, the school also must teach the Indians how to overcome their own childishness and become “hombres y mujeres útiles.” As proof that these children can serve their country successfully, Rosaura points to a photograph of Benito Juárez, stating “ésta es la mayor prueba de que México puede levantarse y alcanzar la más alta luz.” In another lecture she goes as far as to remind them that Juárez “era indio como ustedes.” The underpinning argument of these statements, of course, holds that this former indigenous president is proof of the latent potential of all of Mexico’s Indians.

While Rosaura affirms Juárez’s greatness, Hershfield notes that the teacher “leaves most of the troubling aspects of Juárez’s politics out of [her] history lesson” (*Mexican Cinema* 73). According to John Cockcroft, Juárez’s government aligned itself with “commercial *hacendados*, manufacturers, miners and bank-merchant[s]” (80).<sup>12</sup> Cockcroft goes on to claim that during Juárez’s presidency “the proletariat still experienced . . . exploitation” (81), a fact that would eventually cause many of the grievances that led to the Revolution. Not surprisingly, Rosaura remains silent regarding these historical points. Instead of mentioning these issues, Rosaura describes Juárez as an example of the “buenos mexicanos” that each of the children should seek to emulate. Thus the message she shares is highly mythic; when actual facts stand in the way, they must play a subservient role to the values she attempts to instill.<sup>13</sup>

In an attempt to inculcate the official discourse, she tells the students of their great worth—both individually and collectively—shedding tears for effect as she does so. After realizing she has gotten carried away in her lesson, Rosaura returns to the basics stating “tenemos que empezar. . . . Dónde empezó Juárez. Esta es la primera letra del alfabeto. Se llama



‘A’. Repitan.” This scene underscores the mythification of such simple processes as learning how to read. Rosaura refers to learning the alphabet not only as the beginning, but as where Juárez began, a point that indicates that her goal goes beyond simply teaching her students to read and write. Certainly, the “Three Rs” (Benjamin 479) remain an important part of her calling, and Brígido even points out to don Regino at one point that Rosaura has been a huge success, getting the children to “silabear”. However the ability to read and write serves as a vehicle that will help these Indian children to learn, understand, and—most importantly—internalize official ideologies, which will then lead to Mexico’s redemption. Similar to Juárez, these students will take the alphabet and use it in ways that will benefit the nation. Thus academics, while important, take a backseat to the more pressing aim of inculcating the national myth in the students through a process similar to Rosaura’s at the film’s beginning.

In one particularly important scene Rosaura presents the children with a worldview that pits “los buenos mexicanos”—people like Rosaura and her students—against “los malos mexicanos.” Perhaps the biggest single problem with the “malos” is that they oppose the egalitarian and *indigenista* policies of the national government. While Rosaura never explicitly equates don Regino with “los malos mexicanos” in this scene, Fernández and Figueroa use filmic techniques to leave no doubt that he is one of the worst. Unbeknownst to Rosaura, don Regino stands outside the door, eavesdropping on her lesson. The camera switches between the cacique and the students in the classroom as Rosaura tells them that it is the job of the “buenos mexicanos” to teach the “malos mexicanos” how to be “buenos.” This shows another redemptive quality of education. Not only does it give the Indians confidence, it also can train the bad opponents to recognize the error of their ways and to repent. Despite the school’s ability to convert, this sequence also shows that don Regino is beyond saving. Given his antagonism to the

state's mission—and the people's cause—don Regino proves his own position as a true enemy of Mexico.<sup>14</sup>

One of the students asks what to do should the “malos mexicanos” refuse to change their ways. At this point, Ponciano, a young boy, stands up and answers “se les quiebra y así se acaba la rabia,” a response that gets a good-natured chuckle out of his companions. However, Rosaura responds in all seriousness that “la solución de Ponciano Tetelqui es un poco bárbara, pero a veces necesaria.” At this point, Rosaura crosses a boundary in her role as *maestra*. While her acts have affirmed a dualistic worldview, she has not championed the violent removal of oppressive authority figures until now. Even her reification of Benito Juárez lacks the Manichean qualities of her most recent lesson. The first day's lecture on Juárez simply tells the children that their status as Indians does not preclude them from importance in society. While it uplifts the indigenous peoples, it does not explicitly recognize a system of good and evil, much less a common enemy. However, this latter speech inculcates in the children that they can justifiably fight against those who oppress. Thus education does not simply give children interesting philosophical views with no real connection to society; instead it provides them with the ideals *and* the tools to truly progress. The significance of Rosaura's lesson resonates clearly with don Regino, who walks away from the school without announcing his presence. He saunters away while a melodramatic score in the background communicates to the audience that Rosaura has in effect declared war. Don Regino does not enter to challenge Rosaura's teachings, yet another fact that underscores his recognition of his own impotence on Rosaura's turf.<sup>15</sup>

Although don Regino controls all of the surrounding land, his power withers as he nears the school. One scene that clearly proves this occurs when he enters as Rosaura teaches class. He does this in an effort to offer an apology even if it is *de dientes afuera*, and to convince her to

marry him. While he may not recognize his blunder at first, don Regino has committed a serious taboo in interrupting the teacher as she administers truth to her students. Rosaura barely allows her antagonist to speak. First she demands that he remove his hat, a request to which he obliges. Later she unmasks him as the embodiment of the “malos mexicanos,” charging that he has gravely offended her. She then tells him that he is not welcome in her home, sending him out. Despite this affront to his *machista* character, don Regino does not lay a hand on her at this time. This peculiar behavior on the part of don Regino underscores the mythic importance of the schoolroom space. No physical entity stands between don Regino and beating Rosaura into submission. Despite being the lone *macho* in the room, all he can do is hang his head and leave.

The school’s preeminence and sovereignty supersedes that of even the church. While Rosaura can humiliate don Regino with apparent impunity in the classroom, the local priest has suffered at the cacique’s hand for quite some time, even while in the church building. At one point, Brígido and several others of don Regino’s men enter this space on horseback—a fact that emphasizes the Church’s failure in opposing the town’s *caudillismo*. While the priest never overtly supports don Regino’s oppression, he never foments resistance among the residents of the town, either. When he sees don Regino’s lackeys abusing the people of his town, he simply asks “¿qué puedo hacer yo?” Clearly disenchanted, he seems to have given up on Mexico’s future. Mora notes that “the village priest . . . heretofore powerless against the cacique, gains heart from Rosaura and Felipe’s courageous example” (80). Thus even religion can be saved, and Rosaura’s message redeems the Church and the priest. Only after seeing Rosaura in action does the priest make the church into a space that serves the people.

This proves particularly important given the film’s historical referent. While the action takes place in the 1940s, it harks back to the educational system that existed under Lázaro

Cárdenas (1934-1940), which incorporated numerous “socialist schools” (Benjamin 485). These were vocally opposed in Catholic circles; indeed, Benjamin asserts that during this movement “Mexico was close to having another Cristero war” (486). Precisely for this reason, it is important to consider Fernández’s treatment of the Church. On one level, he subjugates it to the school; only when the priest acts in accordance with Rosaura’s desires does it adequately serve the people. In this way, one may read the filmic text as a criticism of the Catholic Church’s intervention in society and as a suggestion for how this institution may repair the damages it has supposedly inflicted. However, the Church also plays an important mythic role in the Mexican psyche, a fact that the film emphasizes. Hill notes that “although El Indio was not especially enamored of the Catholic Church and its beliefs, or even religion generally, he saw . . . something authentically Mexican and fundamental to the nation’s cultural experience” (36). Thus the redemption of the Church becomes important not only because of the tensions that have existed previously between it and the state, but because it embodies the authentic culture of the masses. Given this association with “los buenos mexicanos,” the Church too can be saved through the work of a determined *maestra*.

The religious leader’s redemption occurs after don Regino gives the order to gather “la indiada” for vaccinations following Felipe’s ultimatum. The film presents disconcerting images of don Regino’s lackeys as they round the people up, lassoing frightened Indians and dragging them to the center of town. Later, don Regino’s right-hand man, Brígido, shoots a terrified native as he attempts to flee. He later brags to his boss that he killed “tres o cuatro”—ironic given the fact that Felipe wants to give the vaccinations in an attempt to save lives, not end them. As Rosaura sees the mayhem before her, she approaches the priest, begging him that he “haga algo.” When she sees that the priest does not know how to oppose don Regino’s acts, she has him ring

the church bell. The Indians immediately calm down and walk towards the sound in an orderly fashion, thus abruptly ending the carnage. At this moment, the priest recognizes his personal ability to stay the hands of murderers and to help the people of his town. He never forgets this throughout the duration of the movie. While this scene may not present a realistic course of events—a group who flees from death will not suddenly cut short its flight simply because someone rings a church bell—it reverberates at a mythic level. The Indians' faith keeps them pure; when Rosaura encourages the priest to ring the bell, the chaos ends, and the people receive the vaccine they need. Despite the fact that Rosaura does not play the principal role in this altercation, she catalyzes the action that causes the mayhem to die down, once again asserting her own key role in the process.

Brígido expresses his surprise at the orderly fashion in which the Indians assemble after the priest and Rosaura intervene. While he and his compadres have tried to round up the people like cattle, this duo of a maestra and a priest has shown that the Indians can be treated as human beings. This scene demonstrates how the Church can help the Mexican masses to achieve the state's—and people's—goals. As previously discussed, the official ideology held that the indigenous peoples lacked the tutelage necessary to represent a powerful force at this point. It is important to note, however, that the Church, when left to its own devices, has failed the people of Río Escondido. Only after Rosaura—an educator bearing a clearly secular yet mythic message—arrives can the priest become a force for good. She instills in him the importance of uplifting the Indian, a fact that not only saves the inhabitants of Río Escondido, but also the priest and even religion.

When coupled with Rosaura's understanding, the Church instills the order necessary for the Indians to face the threats that lie in their path—smallpox at this point, don Regino later on.

In this case the Church ends an episode of cacique barbarity. Nevertheless, Rosaura and the priest are only able to save the Indians at this point due to their simplicity. While ringing the bell does successfully end the chaos, it also underlines the fact that the Indians are not thinking for themselves, a fact that prompts Brígido and don Regino to compare them to “borregos.” The Indians simply give in to a preprogrammed response and move towards the church building when it sounds. Clearly the Indians still need to receive the lessons Rosaura will shortly provide. Despite the fact that Rosaura and the priest exploit the people’s ignorance, they do so in order to achieve a benign end. Thus the film seems to justify their actions. Interestingly, the person who comes out of this experience having learned the most is not an Indian, but the priest, who realizes he truly can make a difference.

The priest’s recognition of his own potential signals a shifting in the balance of power in Río Escondido. He now speaks for the people and no petty strongman can silence him. The clearest proof of this occurs when don Regino takes the priest aside, requesting the clergyman’s blessing in the cacique’s goal to seduce and marry Rosaura. However, the priest refuses to support the cacique’s request, a fact that prompts don Regino to mention Rosaura’s surprising ability to change the people of his town. He states, “hasta usted que no era ya más que un desgraciado borracho, lo hizo otro.” The priest then affirms Rosaura’s effect in the pueblo when he says “si antes fui todo eso que usted ha dicho, fue por culpa de usted y me avergüenzo. Pero ahora sé cuál es mi deber.” Don Regino hits the priest in the face at this point, but the priest does not give in.<sup>16</sup> He, too has internalized the official discourse through Rosaura’s proselytizing. This alliance between the Church and the school remains a key component throughout the film. Indeed, the filmic text shows that the ultimate key to Rosaura’s success comes through her ability to uplift the individual—such as the priest—and ensure that every resident of the town

adopt values conducive to Mexican progress.

Despite *Río Escondido*'s focus on individuals, many have criticized Emilio Fernández for his generalized depiction of indigenous peoples as a homogenous mass. Fein recognizes Fernández's "sentimentalized treatment of stereotypical Indians and glorification of state authority" (123), while Hershfield says "his representations of these people, especially Indian women, were highly ambiguous" (*Mexican Cinema* 52). This holds true to a certain extent in *Río Escondido* as well. The film's Indians—particularly the adults—play an important, albeit anonymous role on the periphery, frequently serving as plot, and even framing elements. However, perhaps more troublesome, the movie suggests that Rosaura embodies the collective will of the people, thus making it unnecessary to introduce any specific adult Indian characters.<sup>17</sup> Despite this tendency to focus on the collective rather than the individual, Rosaura affirms the importance of each young student in her classroom by calling them by their corresponding names. Thus despite their small parts, the sublime role of each one of these *mexicanitos* in expanding the greatness of their homeland rings clear.

The significance of each child becomes all the more key during the altercations that lead to the film's climax. After Rosaura denounces don Regino in front of her students for attempting to defile her, the public well dries out. Don Regino remains unaffected because he enjoys a private well of his own. At first Rosaura—oblivious to don Regino's control of the village's water supply—does not understand. However, when she arrives to teach her class, she notices that Ponciano is acting strangely. The priest tells her the young boy is clearly drunk; in the absence of water he has turned to drinking *pulque*. The scene continues as Rosaura sees several women performing a ritual dance off in the distance, carrying an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and begging that she provide them with water. During this performance, the child

gets up in his drunken state and moves rhythmically with the music to enter the schoolhouse. This scene personalizes a collective problem. Not only has don Regino withheld water from an unknown—albeit majoritarian—*pueblo*, he has left an innocent child with no other option than to turn to alcohol. This draws attention to the poster of the drunken Indian that the film presents before Rosaura's first lesson. Indeed, this scene suggests that the oppression that Indians have suffered has brought problems such as drunkenness on their population. The mothers of these children invoke deity, particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe, in hopes that water will return to their well. Interestingly, water comes by the hand of Rosaura, whose character represents the saint the women invoke.

The tension reaches fever pitch after don Regino murders Goyo—a student at her school and one of the children she has adopted—when he attempts to fill a pitcher of water from the forbidden well. Rosaura refers to don Regino as a “bestia” and resolves to give Goyo a funeral in the schoolhouse, outside of don Regino's jurisdiction. This includes the ringing of bells, the playing of wind instruments, and a great deal of singing throughout the night. Even the cinematography honors this young boy snatched from life before his time. Figueroa frames the scene masterfully with Goyo's casket serving as the focal point. The implicit message of the frame is that the authentically Mexican, non-cacique, people mourn Goyo's fate.<sup>18</sup> This service also forces don Regino to recognize, and even suffer the consequences, of his barbarity. Whereas Brígido murders numerous Indians without reproach as the film begins, don Regino cannot get away with killing a mere indigenous child at this point. Clearly the inhabitants of Río Escondido have internalized Rosaura's teaching. When the cacique can no longer stand the racket of the memorial service, he tells his cronies “ya no aguanto esa maldita campana. Voy a hacer que entierren a su desgraciado muertito ahora mismo.” Once again, Rosaura thwarts don Regino's



power from inside of the schoolhouse. When he demands that she end the funeral service, Rosaura refuses, reminding him that he is to blame for Goyo's demise. The music continues and don Regino returns to the bar.

Perhaps equally important to Rosaura's stubbornness is the company that she keeps during the service. Several indigenous women stand stoically, creating a frame for the image, while others play music and participate in other ways. These women also stand up to don Regino, even if they do so only as anonymous shadows standing behind Rosaura. Thus the women who serve as framing devices also represent a unified resistance against *caciquismo*. This solidarity underscores the fact that Rosaura's influence goes beyond merely inspiring the children of her classes. While she has never taught a class with Indian adults, her effect has reached them indirectly through their children. Hill refers to the children as "extensions of their parents" (48). Thus mythic knowledge is passed not only from parent to child, but also from child to parent. During this altercation the Indians begin to awaken and stand against don Regino more explicitly. Clearly Rosaura's work inspires them to join together in opposing the cronyism that has overrun their town.

Rosaura's success with the Indians and her opposition to don Regino lead the cacique to the conclusion that she must be removed. He and his men, all in drunken stupors, go to her home at the schoolhouse, where don Regino enters in what results in an attempt to rape her.<sup>19</sup> This scene proves highly important because don Regino—a prerevolutionary cacique in the years following the Revolution—attempts to destroy Rosaura in a space that represents Mexico's future. The men watch from outside of the school, when suddenly a shot rings out. Don Regino stumbles outside, while Rosaura follows him and shoots him as he hits the ground. This scene once again emphasizes the symbolic roles that these characters play. Rosaura kills the cacique in

as a result of don Regino's attempt to steal her virginity, which is a key component to her saintly aura. Don Regino, on the other hand, pays the ultimate price for attacking a teacher in the schoolhouse. It is not by coincidence that Rosaura's triumph occurs on school grounds. Fernández's decision to film the cacique's downfall at the school not only recognizes that education fosters resistance; it also artistically shows how a flawed system of the past is disintegrated in a space that looks toward the future.

However, the victory of the people of Río Escondido is not yet complete because the cacique's henchmen remain in the town. Upon witnessing their leader's death, don Regino's men hesitate, uncertain as to whether to avenge their leader or flee. However, they soon realize that the indigenous masses have armed themselves with torches and surrounded them. The men attempt to flee, but their exits are cut off. The masses converge upon them, and almost certainly execute them. The camera pans out during this scene, so it is difficult to see the actions any one individual. However, the triumphant march that plays in the background and the fact that we never see the cacique's lackeys after this moment make it very clear that both don Regino and his men are defeated on school grounds. This sequence proves Fernández's thesis that education will solve Mexico's problems and cements the school's importance in leading its people to revolution. Don Regino and his lackeys represent more than just *caudillismo* in the film; they are those forces that stand in the way of Mexico's redemption. Thus this scene's symbolic meaning runs much deeper than simply overthrowing cronyism in one isolated part of the nation. It is in this educational space that Mexico is regenerated as new ideas replace the failures that have gone before.

In order to emphasize its mythic message, the film shows Rosaura seal her mission with her life. This exceptional female protagonist suffers from a stress related heart attack after the

altercation, which results in her passing away shortly thereafter. Even on her deathbed, Rosaura continues to exemplify Mexican values, and at no time does she give up on educating her fellow citizens. While lying on her deathbed, she dictates a letter to the president, who promises to send another teacher to Río Escondido. The fact that the president responds to a letter from a *maestra rural* in faraway Río Escondido, Chihuahua once again underscores the gravity of the work that Rosaura does. Even the president, a man with numerous burdens, knows her by name and responds personally to her worries. The message is clear: the paternalistic state cares for its children in every corner of the country, and the practice of assigning *maestras rurales* is undertaken so that the people can learn to redeem themselves. One key aspect of the mission of the *maestras rurales* is underscored through Rosaura, who recognizes the needs of her people and speaks to the president on their behalf. This method of communication between the *maestra rural* and the president once again mirrors the process in which Catholic Saints intercede between people and deity. Clearly, the teacher plays an essential role as a representative of the state as the federal government strives to carry the benefits of the Revolution to even the most distant corners of the Mexican nation.

The film emphasizes the teacher's importance through Felipe, who cares for Rosaura in her last days, and even tries to substitute teach for her. This results in a student charging into her home wearing *burro* ears and crying. He says "¡el doctor nos está matando! Ya alíviase, señora pa' que nos dé la clase." Felipe follows the child stating "perdóname, Rosaura. Creí que podría improvisarme de maestro. Pero hasta ahora me doy cuenta de que para ser maestro hay que tener manera de santo." Felipe's admission that he will equal Rosaura underscores an educator's unparalleled importance and Rosaura's saintly role. Felipe has already proven himself to be among the best of the "buenos mexicanos." He has saved the people from disease and given

Rosaura the revolver that she has used to defend herself from don Regino. However, not even Felipe can duplicate Rosaura's capacity to teach despite his own years of service and study. Rosaura admonishes the boy, telling him that the doctor did not mean to offend, and the youngster agrees to return to his class. This admonition proves to be the last of Rosaura's life; shortly afterwards she dies and her *pueblo* buries her outside of the *escuela rural*. The final image of the film shows her gravestone while a triumphant march plays in the background—the same one that is heard previously during the opening credits and while don Regino's men are overthrown.

Despite its sad ending, *Río Escondido* ultimately communicates an optimistic message. Rosaura gives her life for her people, and through her sacrifice, Río Escondido is saved. Rosaura's redemptive qualities are intrinsically connected to her embodiment of education. While the knowledge she imparts to the people of Río Escondido includes academic aspects such as learning the alphabet, the most important message she bears refers to the mythic nature of Mexicanness. This becomes particularly clear as Rosaura leaves out some important facts in her lecture about Benito Juárez because they would interfere with the ideology she wishes to impart. Instead, education aims to share the ideal of national identity, a subject that Rosaura champions with passion. Throughout the film she clamors for indigenous rights. Her strength of will fortifies the village society. The Church can once again serve the people and each individual learns and understands his or her own noble role in the town and the country. Through her efforts, the people recognize their latent power and don Regino is overthrown. This signals at least one step towards redemption because Río Escondido, one expects, will now enjoy a local government that will respect the Indian and oppose *caciquismo*. Thus this film's message upholds the official ideology of mid-century Mexico and suggests that education—carried by the very best

representatives—will save the nation through inculcating Mexicanness in the country's citizens. Ultimately, the film asserts that the current education system will endow the masses with the tools and the attitude necessary to move beyond current pitfalls. Once these setbacks are overcome, the people of Mexico will form part of the cosmic race, and in the words of Rosaura, they will redeem their local pueblo, "México y el mundo."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While the president's name is never mentioned, Fein asserts that Miguel Alemán himself made a cameo in the film. This underscores the movie's relationship to the official government discourse (127).

<sup>2</sup> *Río Escondido* frequently references the interplay between doctors and educators. While the film makes it clear that doctors fulfill important functions, the teacher plays an even more crucial role. Doctors concern themselves primarily with treating physical ailments, which is truly a noble endeavor. However, teachers cure the collective soul as they lift the Indians out of ignorance and show them how to become authentically Mexican. The doctor's ultimate subservience to the teacher in no means lessens what the medic does; instead it serves to elevate the educator.

<sup>3</sup> At least one commercial version of this film has edited this opening sequence out, presumably because someone found it long-winded or uninteresting. However, in doing so, that version fails to contextualize the film within the muralist movement, which in turn weakens the movie's message.

<sup>4</sup> *Río Escondido* belongs to a more extensive tradition in Mexican cinema that communicates the government ideology. Federico Dávalos Orozco claims that, "beginning in the mid-1930s, the Mexican state was interested in employing the great influence of cinema to create not merely propaganda films but also those with social content for a mass audience" (30). Therefore, numerous movies attempted to carry out a similar agenda of mass education during Mexican cinema's Golden Age. While Mexico's film industry dates back to the nineteenth century, its Golden Age of film began with the release of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* in 1936 and

lasted until 1956. Alma Guillermoprieto asserts that while much of the subject matter of Golden Age movies told “lies on a silver spoon” (11), these films “defined a nation” (8).

<sup>5</sup> John Mraz discusses the importance of the great movie stars during Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema. He affirms that María Félix was the highest paid actor or actress in Mexico during these years. For more on María Felix’s career see Mraz’s *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity* (148-51).

<sup>6</sup> Rosaura is not the only female character to wear a *rebozo*; indeed, Mercedes also wears one. Admittedly, the decision to depict women wearing *rebozos* goes beyond attempting to look like the Virgin of Guadalupe. However, Rosaura’s physical appearance still reflects that of Mexico’s most popular saint. Indeed, Mercedes’s character is one who should have been sainted; similar to Rosaura, she bears the redemptive message that can potentially save the people of Río Escondido. The fact that she does not do this, then, shows what she has given up as a result of her illicit relationship with don Regino. Thus if Rosaura is a type of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mercedes is a fallen saint, a fact that is emphasized through the fact that she, too, invokes the vision of the Virgin.

<sup>7</sup> I use this term because of its dual meanings in Spanish, and its important association with a *chingón* such as don Regino. On the one hand it refers to the manner in which don Regino continues to oppress the people of his town, while on the other it refers to his ability to successfully woo the previous *maestra* sexually. In both cases, the term “conquistar” reflects his *machista* attitude.

<sup>8</sup> Symbols such as clouds, the terrain, the maguey and the nopal were seen as distinctly Mexican and “as extraordinary a feature of the national landscape as the Mexican people

themselves” (Ramírez-Berg 19). Thus Fernández and Figueroa employed their usage frequently throughout their works, often using them to frame scenes and give them an aesthetic quality as they attempted to define Mexicanness in the post-Revolutionary society. See Charles Ramírez-Berg (18-20).

<sup>9</sup> Joanne Hershfield states that the people of Río Escondido have not yet benefitted from the Revolution. It takes a teacher to achieve that for them. See *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman 1940-1950* (63).

<sup>10</sup> Remember that this is an elitist, top down process. See Joanne Hershfield “Screening the Nation” (268-69).

<sup>11</sup> See Matthew J. K. Hill (48) for a more in-depth analysis of this scene.

<sup>12</sup> See Cockcroft (80-84) for a more complete summary of Juárez’s presidency.

<sup>13</sup> This same observation holds true for Fernández. The audience that views this film receives the same incomplete history lesson as Rosaura’s students. Indeed, not only is Rosaura’s speech decidedly one-sided, but so is Fernández’s treatment of Juárez’s presidency.

<sup>14</sup> This scene also serves as a foreshadowing of the altercation that will occur later between Rosaura, a “buena mexicana,” and don Regino, a “malo mexicano.” It is clear at this point that negotiation will not resolve their differences peacefully.

<sup>15</sup> One might note that don Regino actually does go into the church shortly after this scene to pray. The local priest views him with surprise—apparently don Regino has not spent much time in this space previously. While one may assert that the cacique makes an attempt—albeit failed—to change his ways after having heard Rosaura’s class, his actions immediately following this prove just how short-lived any contrition would have been. In the following scene,



he interrupts Felipe—who is teaching the women of Río Escondido how to avoid cholera and other water-borne sicknesses—and tells him to leave the pueblo. The fact that this action immediately follows don Regino’s supposed act of penitence shows that any thoughts of repenting were probably insincere.

<sup>16</sup> This scene helps to establish the school as a greater sanctuary from the cacique than even the Church. Don Regino hits the priest inside of a church, while he does not dare to attack Rosaura in the schoolhouse until the end of the film—and only in a drunken rage.

<sup>17</sup> The fact that Rosaura’s embodiment of the will of the people results in no major indigenous adult characters demonstrates how the “glorification of state authority” and the “sentimentalized stereotypical Indians” that Fein discusses are two sides of the same coin.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Ramírez-Berg (20) for more information regarding the ideology inherent in the cinematography of Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa. While Ramírez-Berg does not specifically deal with this scene, he explains that both men consciously used the camera to convey messages of national unity.

<sup>19</sup> Various interpretations exist to this scene; Chon A. Noriega and Steven Ricci (93) suggest that don Regino succeeds in raping Rosaura. However, there is both evidence that Rosaura is raped and that she is not. When don Regino enters the schoolhouse, Rosaura screams. Later she cries “suéltame” in a helpless and miserable voice. The uneasy expressions on his lackeys’ faces shows that they, too, believe that don Regino is sexually assaulting her. However, despite this evidence, we also hear a gunshot and seconds later Rosaura walks outside fully clothed, thus suggesting she was not raped. Nevertheless, after an injured don Regino staggers out of the schoolhouse, Rosaura shoots her assailant multiple times—even after he lies dead on

the ground—which suggests vengeance more than self-defense. Slavoj Žižek makes a similar observation about an ambiguity in *Casablanca*. Žižek suggests that the film gives contradictory signals with regard to Rick and Ilse’s possible affair near the end of the movie. He points out that, for the Big Other, Rick and Ilse clearly do not have a censored relationship, while in the minds of the audience they most certainly do. In *Río Escondido*, it would seem that don Regino paradoxically both does and does not rape Rosaura (83-84).

## FAILURE EDUCATING IN ROSARIO CASTELLANOS'S *BALÚN CANÁN*

Rosario Castellanos's semiautobiographical first novel, *Balún Canán* (1957), shows the ineptness of the federal government in promoting education in the furthest corners of the nation. Chiapas, the state in which the novel takes place, historically has been the center of great racial tensions between the indigenous Mayan population and the land-owning elite of Ladino heritage. Additionally, this southernmost state has also been home to serious gender-based discrimination. The racial component of these struggles comes as a result of centuries of forced labor in which "the state's economic and political institutions were built on the backs of the highland Maya" (Lewis 188). This historical backdrop proves particularly important because the novel is set during the *sexenio* of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), the post-Revolutionary president who Castellanos asserts did more than any other to oppose social "certidumbres que se habían apoyado durante siglos" ("Destino" 205). These "certidumbres" refer particularly to the proper role of both race and gender in the nation. Castellanos expressed a deep admiration for Lázaro Cárdenas, who challenged the privileged landed class to which her family belonged. She states: "fue este el primer nombre que escuché pronunciar a mis mayores con espanto, con ira, con impotencia" ("Destino" 205).<sup>1</sup> Her novel presents a nuanced appraisal of government policies, particularly with regards to education. By the novel's end, it is clear that despite the government's endeavors, the state ultimately fails to better the scholastic opportunities of the Indians and Ladina girls of Chiapas. Government impotence is due, in large part, to the special

interests inside of the region that manipulate new laws so that no meaningful education reform can occur.

At the outset of *Balún Canán*, the education system serves as a tool<sup>2</sup> to uphold and maintain the *patriarcado*.<sup>3</sup> Ladino men of “legal birth” attend the best schools, while Ladina women go to second-rate institutions where they barely learn “los rudimentos del alfabeto y las cuatro operaciones” (Castellanos, “Destino” 207). This continues until the onset of puberty, at which point young Ladina women graduate and spend their lives at home. However, despite the limited educational opportunities available to Ladina women, society still offers them more than it does to the Tzeltal Mayans, who have no scholastic options whatsoever. The fact that Ladina women receive more education than their indigenous peers, but less than Ladino men reflects how both gender and race inform the life experiences of various social and gender classes in Castellanos’s Chiapas.<sup>4</sup> As Castellanos mentions in an article that she wrote in 1974, a respectable woman in this society would have “un hijo cada año” (“Destino” 207). After giving birth, the mother would instill in them the superiority of Ladino society. Helene M. Anderson observes that “systems of exploitation . . . are encapsulated in the structure of the family, for their efficiency depends to a great degree on the dose of dogmatism that can be inculcated in its dependent members” (26). This suggests that women play the crucial role of justifying and teaching the *patriarcado* to their children from a young age. Thus a woman’s education prepares her to accept masculine dominance and the processes of the community at large—a fact that will be discussed in greater detail later. Indians, on the other hand, are denied an education—which keeps them from learning Spanish—in an attempt to maintain racial segregation. The result is that the Mayans live alongside the Ladinos, but given linguistic and cultural barriers, neither society can fully integrate with the other.<sup>5</sup> While Ladino *hacendados* learn Tzeltal, they only do

so with the aim of perpetuating a dualistic system and exploiting their indigenous workers. Thus the education system, almost as if by design, maintains the current power structures.

It is against this backdrop of racial and gender division that the federal government aims to change the rules in Chiapanecan society by inspecting existing schools among the Ladinos and establishing new ones among the Mayan population. While its official expectation is to permit both Ladina girls and indigenous children—presumably of both genders—to receive an education, the underlying hope of the Cárdenas government is to topple the current social hierarchy. While the SEP probably sees both of these goals as inextricably connected, the *hacendados* find ways to permit the existence of clearly incompetent schools that effectively allow them to maintain their privileged positions. These token gestures on the part of the land-owning elites undermine federal credibility as they lay bare government's inability to orchestrate real change. In the end, despite the ostensibly enlightened policies coming from Mexico City, Comitán is never truly redeemed.<sup>6</sup> Rather than catalyze a “raza cósmica” in which both sides are ultimately reconciled with each other, Comitán remains fundamentally fragmented through race and gender.

Two of the three sections of *Balún Canán* communicate the idea of a broken society through the eyes of its principal narrator, a young Ladina girl of seven years, whose life experiences very closely mirror those of Rosario Castellanos herself. Sandra Messinger Cypess discusses the importance of the use of this young female narrator stating “the young girl exhibits restrictions that are physical, temporal, and mental; that is, she has neither the chronological years from which to contribute breadth of experience, nor the physical mobility . . . to go beyond the limits imposed by her status as a seven year old girl” (“Narrator as Niña” 71-72). Thus this narrator proves a useful device in communicating the social hierarchies that abound. Cypess also

notes that “the first person narrator is not only a young girl, but equally important . . . the young girl is never named in the text. While all other major characters are clearly and purposefully named, only the niña and her Indian maid are left nameless” (“Onomastics” 83). She adds “although we may assume that the ‘I’ has a given name, it is never mentioned at any point in the novel, so that she remains anonymous in all its implications of a lack of individuality, of non-belonging to a family, place and position in society” (“Narrator as Niña” 76). Indeed, the young protagonist’s lack of belonging becomes an important theme throughout the novel.

While the young protagonist is generally ignored both because of her gender and her age, she has also internalized a rigid worldview that understands and accepts social hierarchies as natural. In an ultimately failed effort to assert her own importance in society at the beginning of the novel, she states:

No soy un grano de anís. Soy una niña y tengo siete años. Los cinco dedos de la mano derecha y dos de la izquierda. Y cuando me yergo puedo mirar de frente las rodillas de mi padre. Más arriba no. . . . *Miro lo que está a mi nivel.* . . . Y a mi hermano lo miro de arriba abajo. Porque nació después de mí, y cuando nació, yo ya sabía muchas cosas que ahora le explico minuciosamente. (9, emphasis mine)

Her reference to the stature of her father, César, alludes not only to his physical height, but also his position as patriarch in the family. Indeed, not only does she note her father’s superiority, but she also suggests that she—at least currently—deserves a higher position than Mario, her four-year-old brother, given her superior knowledge. Thus, despite the fact that she suffers marginalization throughout the novel, she too attempts to assert herself in the rigid society, and is, therefore, hardly a passive victim.

The young female protagonist’s equation of knowledge with social status and power

underscores the importance of education in the Chiapanecan society. Those who matter must receive a good education. However, this option only pertains to males; as the girl soon learns, women cannot share information with men. Indeed, in the aforementioned scene, Mario humbles his older sister's illusions through his indifference to her knowledge. In an attempt to show her brother how much more she knows than he, the young protagonist says "Colón descubrió América" (9), probably one of the few facts she has learned at her school. To her surprise, "Mario queda viéndome como si el mérito no me correspondiera y alza los hombros con gesto de indiferencia" (10). Apparently episodes such as this have happened before, because the girl goes on to say "una vez más cae sobre mí todo el peso de la injusticia" (10). The girl's recognition of "injusticia" merits a closer analysis because Mario does not simply shrug off this new knowledge due to a puerile lack of interest. Joanna O'Connell explains that Mario's "refusal to take what she [the young girl] says in the way that she means it is a refusal to speak with any authority to him; because he is the male child he has already learned from others a sense of his importance, one that entitles him to refuse to be inducted into communities through (female) speech" (89).

However, this scene does not only show the gender divisions in society. Douglas J. Weatherford notes its importance in laying out the framework of both sexual and racial discrimination when he states that the girl "learns that she is privileged because of the color of her skin yet second-class because of her gender" (37). In stating that Columbus discovered America, the young girl adopts a European worldview that does not give importance to the indigenous communities that already lived on the continent long before European explorers set foot there. Thus this short relation eloquently exposes the discriminatory nature of the society. Indeed, understanding this hierarchical structure helps to understand the educational opportunities available to each resident of Comitán. Privileged society's ambivalence towards

the history of the millions of Indians who lived in America prior to Columbus's "discovery" mirrors its appraisal of those currently living in the indigenous farming communities surrounding Comitán. The Mayan population does not have equal importance to whites in either time period. Castellanos masterfully crafts this segment in such a way that it provides information crucial to understanding race and gender relations throughout the novel in only a few short words. The message resounds that white Ladino males control this society.

Thus the society that the Cárdenas government inherits in Chiapas provides its residents with an education system that favors Ladino boys. Ladino males are ensured better educational opportunities primarily through strict segregation, both sexual and racial, in which each Ladino attends his or her corresponding school, while the Indians start working in the *hacendados'* fields at a very young age. The intricacies of Ladino education are shown through the Argüello family, in which each member receives different schooling based on a combination of gender and legality of birth. Priscilla Meléndez, noting serious inequality within the Argüello family, states that "Zoraida, Ernesto, Matilde, y como veremos adelante la propia niña, se encuentran en un tenso vaivén que los obliga a luchar por ocupar un espacio y poseer una identidad que los legitimize psicológica, familiar, y socialmente dentro de un mundo que los desprecia y hostiga" (352). It is not by accident that these characters do not receive the same educational opportunities as César—and presumably Mario—despite the fact that they all belong to the rich and important Argüello family.

César frequently brags that he attended a university in France. While he may not use what he learned abroad in his daily life, the importance of this education lies in its prestige. However, Zoraida, the young girl's mother, probably has attended only a few short years of primary school, because women in this society do not study more than that. This explains her ignorance in such



areas as politics, astronomy, and family budgeting. Nevertheless, despite a minimal education, the people in power would consider Zoraida's school experience successful because she "agrees unquestioningly with the ideas of patriarchy" which "define her as woman in terms of her childbearing capabilities" (Cypess, "Onomastics" 87-88). Both Mario and the young girl receive very different educations as well. Speaking of Mario, Cypess notes in another study that "it is he who will carry the family name, he who has a determined and valued position in society" ("Discourse as Power" 8). As such, Mario must receive a university diploma, if only—as in the case of his father—for the prestige it will bring. The text also reveals the educational experience of two other members of the young girl's extended family. Matilde, a spinster, learns to read and write from her aunt, Francisca—another *solterona*—in the rancho Palo María. Ernesto, Cesar's bastard nephew, attends a boys' school, but he cannot fully participate in classes because the mothers of the children of legal birth "se protestaban que sus hijos estuvieran revueltos con un cualquiera" (120). The fact that various members of the same bloodline receive such different academic treatment is a testament to the rigid hierarchies that determine people's opportunities.

An interesting case of a character who receives a better education than one of his peers based—at least partially—on his parentage is the son of don Jaime Rovelo, a neighbor and good friend of César.<sup>7</sup> As a Ladino male, don Jaime Rovelo's son receives many more opportunities than he would had he been born female, Indian, or—perhaps most importantly—a Ladino bastard. The most striking proof that the school system has favored don Jaime Rovelo's son comes through his rivalry—very possibly one-sided—with Ernesto. As previously mentioned, Ernesto faces opposition to his admission to the Catholic school for boys. At one point, Ernesto notes that "el señor cura no quería admitirme en su escuela, porque era yo hijo de un mal pensamiento" (120). However, Ernesto seems to have performed quite well in the early years of

grade school despite the ostracization that he faced there. Ernesto's mother notes that her son "tenía buen entendimiento" from the earliest years of his childhood (221), and reveals that her decision to enroll him came because of the potential that she saw in him. She recounts that he would return home from school happy and full of knowledge and new words that he had learned (222). Indeed, Ernesto laments that "yo era más listo que ellos, yo me sacaba las primeras calificaciones, pero al fin del año el premio no era para mí. Era para el hijo de don Jaime Rovelo. Porque yo soy un bastardo" (120). Ernesto ultimately is forced to leave the school when his mother becomes ill and he takes a job as a newspaper carrier to provide for them. Thus any opportunities that Ernesto had fade away while the rich son of don Jaime Rovelo continues studying and ultimately becomes an influential lawyer in Mexico City.

One of don Jaime Rovelo's son's most controversial opinions deals with the education of the nation's indigenous peoples; he claims that establishing rural schools specifically for Indian children will benefit the nation. However, the influential lawyer himself is a product of the favoritism running so rampant in his hometown. Ernesto makes it clear that much of his antagonist's success comes not as a result of his superior intellect, but because of the circumstances of his birth. While this privileged status does not preclude the Mexico City lawyer from bringing about positive change in society, it does appear to have left him with certain blind spots. For example, while *Balún Canán* documents official efforts demanding that Indians and Ladina women receive better opportunities, at no time does it mention a similar campaign on behalf of the bastard sons of Ladino men. This oversight is ironic given the fact that don Jaime Rovelo's son would have spent a few years in the same classroom as Ernesto, who was forced to sit in a corner, away from the other boys. Despite his experience attending school with Ernesto—who never met his potential as a result of his parentage—don Jaime Rovelo's son focuses his

efforts on people he has never met. Even so, the successes of government education programs are moderate at best. The indigenous schools that it decrees ignore the linguistic barriers of a Spanish-only classroom, a fact that greatly hinders the success in that school. Similarly, the SEP fails to provide Ladina students with a better alternative to the failed school that they currently attend. Indeed, the first case of governmental failure regarding education occurs at the young protagonist's school, an all female institution where the curriculum is truly a farce.

Castellanos suggests that the government fails to improve female schools because it does not attempt to correct the view that women should not think. Helene M. Anderson notes that in Castellanos's Chiapas "a man generally counts on a woman's ignorance and innocence so that she may depend on him and be grateful to him for revealing life to her" (27). Castellanos shows this reality through the Argüello family, which proves a microcosm for the division between male and female in Comitán. The young girl is not allowed to think for herself; instead she must show—or at least feign—interest in the world of male hegemony. In one particularly telling moment, the family goes to watch Mario and several other boys fly kites. As the young girl watches with other girls "desde nuestro lugar" (22), she feels a breeze on her face and begins to understand the importance of the wind. Not only does it pull the kites across the sky, but it has run across her face and her lips since her childhood. As her mind begins to make impressive connections, her mother suddenly interrupts her, stating "pero qué tonta eres. Te distraes en el momento en que gana el papalote de tu hermano" (22). The young girl learns here that she does not have the right to think, particularly if it hinders her from viewing a male in his moment of glory. Interestingly, Zoraida—who chastises her daughter from a position of power—reveals her position as victim at the same time. In effectively forbidding her daughter from thinking, Zoraida affirms a system that allows her husband to demean his wife when he loses patience with her.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the young girl can only share her discovery with her indigenous nana—a person more marginalized than herself. When the nana learns that the young girl has discovered the wind, she simply replies “eso es bueno niña. Porque el viento es uno de los nueve guardianes de tu pueblo” (22). The fact that this affirmation can only come from the nana underscores Helene M. Anderson’s observation that curiosity is generally discouraged in Ladina sectors.

Because Ladino society devalues the education of its women, the young narrator attends a small, unaccredited school that in effect achieves the aforementioned goal of ensuring feminine ignorance. Despite her age, and lack of experience, the young girl recognizes problems with the institution. For example, she notices that the lack of organization is such that “nadie ha logrado descubrir qué grado cursa cada una de nosotras. Todas estamos revueltas” (13). They learn how to read, but little else, and the young girl explains that the female students remain enrolled for years until “de pronto, sin que ningún acontecimiento lo anuncie, se produce el milagro” in which a girl is asked to draw a “mapamundi,” an act that formalizes graduation from the school (13). This experience seems magical to the young girl, in part because of her age. In her essay “El hombre del destino,” Castellanos notes that this process of graduation would come about with “los primeros signos de la pubertad” (206). Weatherford notes that “the real requisite for passing is not superior knowledge nor completion of required courses, but rather the onset of puberty and menstruation” (38). This proves particularly important because menstruation marks the initiation from childhood to female adulthood. In removing the newly menstruating girls, the school affirms that education and academics lie outside of the sphere of feminine influence. The Ladinas of the community will acquire what little formal knowledge they do learn as pre-pubescent children. Thus the school does not produce scholars nor intellectuals. Ultimately, it aims to socialize the girls as to their proper role in society,<sup>9</sup> producing women capable of

perpetuating the Ladino ideology in their children and the status quo in their future homes. The young girl recognizes the lack of academic rigor associated with graduation, pointing out that these new adolescents simply draw “unos continentes más grandes que otros y mares que no tienen ni una ola” (13). This description underscores the young girl’s frustrations; her school does not encourage her curiosity nor her artistic tendencies.

The teacher, la señorita Silvina—whom Castellanos refers to as “la amiga” in “El hombre del destino” (206)—deserves a large portion of the blame. Despite a clear lack of credentials, she continues to head the class. Rather than wanting to teach the girls information that will allow them to discover new opportunities in life, she desires only to maintain her job and to preserve the current society that abounds in Comitán. During a recess, while the teacher observes her pupils “con mirada benévola,” another woman from town begins to speak with la señorita Silvina with apparent urgency (14). The teacher suspends recess and tells the girls:

Queridas niñas: ustedes son demasiado inocentes para darse cuenta de los peligrosos tiempos que nos ha tocado vivir. Es necesario que seamos prudentes para no dar a nuestros enemigos ocasión de hacernos daño. Esta escuela es nuestro único patrimonio y su buena fama es el orgullo del pueblo. Ahora algunos están intrigando para arrebatarla y tenemos que defenderla con las únicas armas que disponemos: el orden, la compostura y, sobre todo, el secreto. Que lo que aquí sucede no pase de aquí. (14)

The young girl states that “confusamente, de una manera que no alcanzamos a comprender bien, la señorita Silvina nos está solicitando un juramento” (14). The teacher’s lack of clarity, which has always played an important role in the school’s formation of its students, now poses a serious problem to the school’s continued existence. The teacher’s string of words proves important

because they identify an adversary as well as a course of action to defend the school from those who would do it harm. While the teacher never mentions this to the girls, the “enemy” refers to those people within the government that would hope to shut down the school’s operation due to its illegality—a status that all private schools received at this time. The teacher’s solution is for the girls to remain silent so as not to give the government inspectors any excuse to close the school.

However, despite her “juramento,” la señorita Silvina’s previous lessons ultimately prove the school’s downfall. After a few days, the girls receive the undesired visit, an inspector with the SEP. In the moments before the visitor enters, the teacher gives them a few last-minute instructions, reminding them to use “muchísima discreción” (48). However, the SEP inspector—who has probably already checked numerous schools just like this one—quickly secures control of the situation. After the inspector announces his identity, the teacher tells the children to stand and “saluda[r] al señor inspector.” The young female protagonist, however, observes that “él la detuvo con un gesto y nosotras no alcanzamos obedecerla” (49). The visiting bureaucrat then demands documents, which the teacher does not realize she is supposed to have. She attempts to justify the school’s operation through her family’s historical position as educators. The inspector simply replies “y desde tus abuelos todas las generaciones han burlado la ley. Además no concibo qué pueda enseñar usted cuando la encuentro tan ignorante” (49). After issuing this harsh rebuke, the SEP inspector goes on to discredit the teacher in front of her students. Ironically, the government seems to take advantage of the local social hierarchy at this point. His masculinity gives him a clear position of power over la señorita Silvina. Indeed, the teacher not only is a woman, but a *señorita*, or an unmarried woman, a fact that relegates her to a position below even other women in Comitán. Neither she nor the students are capable of standing up to

him. While the inspector publicly ridicules the teacher, he too fails to produce a preferable alternative, and the female students are the ones who truly suffer.

The young girl has previously noted the complete lack of discipline and organization in her class, but until this moment, *Balún Canán* remains fairly ambiguous as to the exact nature of a typical school day. While no one knows “qué grado cursa” (13), it remains a possibility that the girls at least do a fair amount of learning in the most basic areas such as rudimentary math, reading, and writing. However, the SEP inspector discovers that the classes lack any logical organization; indeed, it would appear that the school only barely manages to teach even “las primeras letras y las cuatro operaciones” (49). Given the role of women in society, many Ladino men probably see this as a good thing; the women learn just enough to understand their society, but they do not attain enough knowledge to second guess their husbands. Thus in failing its women, the school actually supports the *patriarcado* that the federal government now aims to topple.

The SEP instructor demands to see the notebook of one of the girls. Upon opening it, he discovers three different lessons, or associations of ideas—“Lecciones de cosas,” “Fuerzas y palancas,” and “Historia y calor”—with no correlation whatsoever (50). When he comes across “Fuerzas y palancas,” the SEP instructor states “¡Vaya! Le aseguro que en la capital no tenemos noticia de estos descubrimientos pedagógicos. Sería muy oportuno que usted nos ilustrara al respecto” (50). After this, he goes on to ask “¿reúne el edificio las condiciones sanitarias para dar alojamiento a una escuela?” (50). The teacher replies that it clearly does not. At this point the inspector has identified several areas where the school is at odds with the law. The teacher charges tuition while the state claims to offer education for free; untrained and undereducated herself, la señorita Silvina cannot impart knowledge to the girls, and the building looks like it

will fall down any day. Once again, this shows the low esteem of female education in Comitán; even the schoolhouse, which la señorita Silvina has recently identified as the “orgullo del pueblo,” is an afterthought. The town does not give the girls a building or a curriculum conducive to scholastic achievement.

However, despite these serious problems, the inspector does not announce his decision to close the institution until he verifies the role of religion in the school. When he asks “¿no rezan todos los días antes de empezar y terminar las clases?” (51), one of the students answers in the affirmative. The young protagonist describes this student as “gruesa, tosca, de expresión bovina. De las que la maestra condenaba—por su torpeza, por la lentitud de su inteligencia—a no dibujar jamás el mapamundi” (51).<sup>10</sup> The SEP instructor then states “todo lo demás podría pasarse. Pero esta es la gota que colma el vaso” (51). He then announces his decision to close the school, apparently due to its overtly religious practices. This action recognizes the strong, anti-clerical sentiments during the *cardenista* years.<sup>11</sup> Given that the justification for closing the school is based on its religious practices rather than its academic incompetence, it becomes questionable as to whether or not the SEP inspector truly has the girls’ best interest at heart. La señorita Silvina takes the school’s closure hard; however the text makes it clear that she is unqualified to teach the class. Indeed the teacher’s lack of pedagogical skills has created the conditions that have led her students to speak to the SEP inspector, even when their education will suffer as a result.

When the teacher asks the girl “de expresión bovina” why she answered the SEP inspector’s question, the student responds “usted me enseñó que dijera siempre la verdad” (52). The school has created students that know little about the world, and who have been programmed above all to defer to Ladino males. This allows men—such as the SEP instructor in



this case—to consistently have power over them. Indeed, when this girl has to choose between appeasing a complete stranger that is a man, or “la amiga” who teaches her every day, she opts for the man. This altercation with the SEP inspector shows one of the serious pitfalls to an education aimed at communicating absolutes rather than tools to think and to determine the proper course of action in a given situation. The “niña de expresión bovina” has learned an absolute in her school, which is that she should always tell the truth. However, in this case, a man is asking for information that will only be used to close down her school and strip her of any educational opportunity. Indeed, the text seems to portray the SEP inspector’s behavior as an abuse of power, a fact that strengthens the argument that the girl should not answer his question. It is particularly important to note that this student has never been asked to lie to this figure—even in this emergency—but rather her teacher has requested that she not speak. However, despite her teacher’s supplications for silence, this student volunteers any and all information when asked because telling the truth—especially to a male authority figure—has become automatic, even if it may bring about negative results. Thus the scene emphasizes that the girls’ school has created deferential women that are trained to always answer a man truthfully, even when the truth will empower masculine oppression of women. Although the government proves effective in identifying and closing failing schools, it demonstrates much less competency in establishing new educational options for the displaced students.

After her school is closed, the narrator states “como ahora no voy a la escuela me paso el día sin salir de la casa. Y me aburro” (54). This proves particularly unfortunate for this young girl, who displays a real desire to learn. Due to her thirst for knowledge, she sneaks into her father’s library and grabs a small manuscript that she doubts anyone will notice. She has to sneak outside and hide under a fig tree before she feels comfortable reading. The story she reads

recounts the conquering nature of her ancestors and their brutal treatment of the indigenous peoples. Interestingly, she also learns that an Indian has dictated this history, and in a very real way it serves as a legal document asserting the rights of the Mayan people to the land. As she reads, “una sombra, más espesa que la de las hojas de la higuera, cae sobre [ella];” she looks up to see her mother’s angry face. Zoraida states “no juegues con estas cosas. . . . Son la herencia de Mario. Del varón” (58). Once again the girl finds herself at odds with her family, which opposes her innate curiosity. At the same time, this confrontation underscores the state’s failure to this Ladina girl. While her school certainly has problems, it clearly provides more opportunities to learn than her home. However, the government does not provide a new teacher nor does it send someone to build a new school; instead it contents itself to simply close the failed institution. This leaves the young girl even farther behind academically than if the SEP had kept classes open. Ironically, the government becomes an unwitting accomplice in the continued subjugation of Ladina women in Comitán.

The young protagonist’s experience reading this forbidden document serves to reveal the rigid structure that maintains the current society. Cypess asserts that Zoraida, in refusing to let her daughter read the manuscript, “interrupts and dispossesses her of the power of that discourse” and that she “accepts the rules of the patriarchal society that her daughter has begun to question” (“Discourse as Power” 9). Cypess further indicates that reading this text “is the exclusive right of the male in their patriarchal society” (9). Women and Indians under no circumstances should be permitted to read this manuscript or similar ones due to their polemic nature. Speaking of this indigenous document, Meléndez asserts that, ironically, “el padre de César lo mandó a escribir con un propósito legitimizador” (349). Indeed, in a later conversation, César mentions episodes from this same document to Ernesto, bragging of his ancestors’ decision to take upon themselves

“la tarea de [azotar]” the Indians (76).

However, Meléndez also points out that “el propio narrador/escritor indio entremezcla la genealogía de oprimidor con la opresión que la familia Argüello infligió en su raza, transgrediendo el supuesto esquema armónico de los orígenes y la legitimidad de los ladinos” (349). Thus this text, if read by the indigenous slaves on César’s *finca*, could serve a revolutionary cause. Edith Negrín Muñoz asserts that the text primarily “les hace recordar a los indios una especie de paraíso perdido tras la llegada de los españoles,” as well as the “posibilidad de reunirse” (64), something that could lead to solidarity against their oppressors.<sup>12</sup> While this recognition of latent revolutionary potential refers particularly to the Indians, the message of this indigenous manuscript could easily be adapted to the needs of Ladina women. Helene M. Anderson notes that oppression is what “binds together the themes of the woman and the Indian” (25), and this manuscript presents knowledge that could undermine César’s influence either with the women of his family or the Indians of his *finca* if these groups were to recognize their common plight against the *patriarcado*. These troublesome details most certainly inform César’s desire to withhold the information in this document from the people under his dominion—particularly the Indians who work under his command and the women of his own family. Through withholding knowledge from both, César protects his own position of power within the family, and by extension, society.

Given their stake in perpetuating both indigenous and white female ignorance, it comes as no surprise that local leaders generally oppose education reform. Thus, while the government passes new legislation that clearly supports the indigenous population against the *hacendados*, these decrees prove easily manipulated. The *hacendados*, who have enjoyed greater power than their indigenous counterparts since colonial times, will not amend their behavior in any

substantive way even as the government demands changes.<sup>13</sup> The land-owning Ladino men's resistance to change comes through clear, especially regarding legislation about indigenous rights. Rather than accept new state criticism and laws as a means to achieve an ultimately enlightened society, the privileged sector of Comitán simply sees a new set of rules they will have to maneuver around in order to maintain their ranches. Thus while these laws may prove a nuisance to land-owning whites, they hardly represent imminent change to Comitecan society. Due to its inability to anticipate the reactions of the Ladinos to new laws, government policies are doomed to frequent failure.

César understands the relationship between new legislation and existing power apparatuses, referring to it as a “jugada” (44). A clear case of manipulation occurs when don Jaime Rovelo visits César with what he views as terrible news: *hacendados* are now required to ensure that Indian children in their ranches receive an education “estableciendo una escuela y pagando de su peculio a un maestro rural” (44). Whereas don Jaime Rovelo sees this as the beginning of the end, César simply states “¿te acuerdas cuando impusieron el salario mínimo? A todos se les fue el alma a los pies” he then reminds his friend “hemos encontrado la forma de no pagarlo” (44). Afterwards, César notes that the law does not declare that “el maestro rural tenga que ser designado por las autoridades. Entonces nos queda un medio: escoger nosotros a la persona que nos convenga” (44). If the government requires that he contract a *maestro rural* César will do so in order to avoid confrontations with the law. However, he will not allow the Indian children on his ranch to learn enough to pose a threat to his power. Instead he uses his new teacher to further socialize the indigenous children as to their proper role in Chactajal in a process similar to the recently closed girls' institution in Comitán.<sup>14</sup>

The *hacendado*'s reluctance to establish a better academic situation lies in the fact that he

understands that his “poder ilimitado . . . proviene de la inferioridad de la dependencia, de la incapacidad y de la ignorancia de los oprimidos” (Umanzor 80-81). Because of this, César and other men of his position jealously attempt to keep the Tzeltal Mayans as uneducated as possible. After the government decrees that they hire *maestros rurales*, the best way to maintain an ignorant indigenous population comes through contracting incompetent teachers who perpetuate the current system through keeping the oppressed ignorant. Ideally, these teachers will achieve the *hacendados*'s ends without understanding their own role. César decides to hire Ernesto, an obviously unqualified teacher and a man he knows he can control given Ernesto's lower position in society. While discussing César's decision to give his nephew this job, Iris Yolanda Reyes-Benítez says,

La corrupción de César es obvia. Por un lado pretende burlar la ley y seguir explotando a los indios sin que el gobierno lo sancione y sin que éstos se alcen; de otro lado, desea utilizar los servicios de Ernesto, aunque para eso tenga que disimular sus verdaderos prejuicios de clase. Lo que puedan aprender los indios es secundario. Es más, no le conviene que sepan más de lo deseado, pues la educación es peligrosa y podrían rebelarse en su contra. (255)

In an effort to control his newly acquired teacher, César deliberately sends mixed signals. Occasionally he affirms Ernesto's status as an Argüello, such as when he initially offers him the position. However, César always reminds his nephew of his own superiority. Through both humiliating and praising his *maestro rural*, César is able to produce the results of poorly run classes that he wants. Upon arriving in Chactajal, César takes Ernesto out to see his ranch. Ernesto interprets this as an induction into the family fortune. Finally, he believes that the Argüellos have recognized him. However at the end of the day they arrive back at the stable on

horseback and stop in front of a closed gate. After a brief pause, César impatiently asks “¿qué esperas para bajar y abrir?” This shatters any illusions that Ernesto may have had of finally being recognized as part of the family.

While César dismisses any possibility of Ernesto’s status as an Argüello in the previous exchange, he fully endorses it when attempting to convince him to take up the farce in the first place. When his nephew states “no hablo tzeltal,” the *hacendado* quickly replies “no necesitarás hablarlo. Vivirás con nosotros en la casa grande” (53). Thus César diverts Ernesto’s attention away from his lack of qualifications and points out the perks of living in the big house of the Argüellos. Interestingly enough, Ernesto’s inability to speak Tzeltal does not pose a problem according to official law, either. Indeed, in speaking of the historical failure of the rural school movement in Chiapas, Lewis asserts that one of the greatest pitfalls to success was the Spanish-only classroom. He points out that Mayan people “had every reason to distrust monolingual ladino teachers and a curriculum that either ignored or attacked their culture” (188). Thus, while the state viewed the *maestro rural* as an important actor, the Indians were quite skeptical. Castellanos’s novel recognizes the difficulties inherent to teaching children in a language they do not understand.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, *Balún Canán* levies harsh criticism on these monolingual schools through the disastrous results of the class that Ernesto teaches. The government’s ambivalence to the language barrier also provides César with the ammunition necessary to uphold the letter of the law while fortifying his own position of power in society. In providing a teacher who will not speak Tzeltal, César acts well within the norm; however, this move ensures that the indigenous students will not receive the benefits that the state purportedly aims to bestow. César has to exercise caution when he hires Ernesto; while he has chosen his nephew because of his incompetence and because he can control him, César needs Ernesto to believe he has been

chosen based primarily on merit, and perhaps the family connection. When César's offer proves too good to refuse, Ernesto accepts.

Ernesto does not agree to his teaching position with illusions of carrying out a sublime ideological function. Rather, Ernesto seems to have only his own situation in mind and views his new indigenous pupils as inferior beings to be tolerated rather than taught. Indeed, Ernesto shows his racist ideas on numerous occasions. At one point, shortly after arriving at the Argüello estate in Chactajal, César states: "Ahí están las indias a tu disposición, Ernesto. A ver cuando una de estas criaturas resulta de tu color" (78). The novel's narration then reveals that "a Ernesto le molestó la broma porque se consideraba rebajado al nivel de los inferiores" (78). Despite the fact that he is a bastard, Ernesto still esteems himself above the Indian. Ultimately, Ernesto's decision to take the position of *maestro rural* is based on self-interest. His uncle has offered him a new job "más fácil y mejor pagado" (53), and he quickly takes it. Ernesto's reasons for accepting César's proposition stand in stark contrast to the imaginary promoted in the official discourse of the *maestro rural* who takes the position with the goal of redeeming Mexico. Because Ernesto's motivations are self-serving, real teaching is something that he attempts to avoid rather than embrace. Ernesto's attitude plays out perfectly for César, who has just upheld the law and ensured his estate through hiring an unqualified teacher. Because his nephew dropped out of elementary school himself after only four years, César ensures a dysfunctional classroom. This in turn ensures that the Indian children on his ranch will not learn anything that may threaten his ranch.

César's decision to hire someone who does not speak Tzeltal shows that he recognizes the fact that one of the most important distinctions between the Ladino and Mayan societies is linguistic in nature. In the words of Helene M. Anderson "language is also a structure of power"

(30). The hegemonic society operates in Spanish while the Mayan tongues are stigmatized.<sup>16</sup> Ladina women generally do not learn Tzeltal, with Francisca and Matilde proving notable exceptions. Additionally, the society does not allow Indians to speak Spanish—much less read it—without explicit permission. One important scene in the novel occurs when the young narrator goes to the *feria* and an indigenous, Spanish-speaking man buys a ticket for the Ferris Wheel. The man in charge says “oílo vos, este indio igualado. Está hablando castilla. ¿Quién le daría permiso?” (38). After referring to him as “Anticristo,” the workers put the Mayan man on the ride without buckling him in, which almost leads to his death (38-39). The young girl who narrates this scene reasons “el español es privilegio nuestro. Y lo usamos hablando de usted a los superiores; de tú a los iguales; de vos a los indios” (38). This linguistic institutionalization of separation cannot remain intact without an educational apparatus to perpetuate it. Thus society segregates Ladinos and Indian children, allowing Ladinos to attend schools while denying that from Tzeltal boys and girls. Through this means, Chiapanecan society manages to perpetuate the linguistic divide across generations, which in turn ensures that power remains in Ladino hands.

The aforementioned educational system leads to an interesting case of Orwellian “doublethink” among the Ladinos regarding their Tzeltal counterparts. On the one hand, many Ladinos—such as Zoraida—view them as foolish brutes, while on the other, they fear the knowledge that Indians may one day attain. *Balún Canán* very clearly deconstructs these mutually exclusive views of the Indian through Zoraida’s character in two narrations that occur within a few pages of each other. While complaining about the Indians, she tells Ernesto “ellos son tan rudos que no son capaces de aprender español . . . y todavía hay quienes digan que son iguales a nosotros” (94).<sup>17</sup> Later that same day, they receive a visit from Felipe, an Indian from Chactajal who has become converted to the land-reform policies of Lázaro Cárdenas. This



indigenous leader immediately demands—in Spanish—that César provide a teacher for the Mayan children that live under his care. Felipe’s attitude troubles Zoraida; the omniscient narrator interprets her thoughts saying “¿qué desacato era éste? Un infeliz indio atreviéndose, primero, a entrar sin permiso hasta dónde ellos están. Y luego a hablar en español” (95). In this case, Zoraida is shocked not that Felipe would speak Spanish, but rather that he would dare to do so in front of the Argüello family without permission. Thus in one part she claims that Indians are incapable of learning Spanish, while just hours later she expresses indignation that the Mayan Felipe would dare enter her house speaking Comitán’s language of power. Clearly her two beliefs cannot both be true, yet she seems to hold both ideas as fact. The close proximity of these two events serves to deconstruct the linguistic binary that runs rampant in Comitán.

While the Ladinos may feel that they own the rights to the Spanish language, Castellanos shows that they do not. Indeed, given the opportunity, Indians can learn just as much as a Ladino, a fact that the text emphasizes once again with Zoraida when she thinks “y a decir estas palabras como ‘camarada,’ que ni César—con todo y haber sido educado en el extranjero—acostumbra emplear” (95). Thus Zoraida recognizes that perhaps Felipe speaks a more elevated form of Spanish than her own highly educated husband. This indigenous potential to acquire the language and use it to subvert César’s power is what requires the *hacendado* to proactively maintain the ignorance of those of his ranch even while complying with the law and providing a *maestro rural*. When Felipe demands that César provide classes, the *hacendado* replies that he has already brought a teacher, but that he sees no school for him to teach at. If the Indians want classes, they will have to build a school on their own.

The means by which César upholds the minimum requirements of the law—both by contracting a man who will perpetuate the linguistic gap between the two cultures and by

refusing to make Ernesto give classes because no school has been built—underscores the biggest hurdle that government policy must overcome. Any attempt to empower the downtrodden by necessity siphons authority away from those sectors of society that have traditionally held the most influence. It is a difficult order for the government to simply wrest the land from the *hacendados* because they, understandably, oppose such an action. Ladinos such as César soften government orders and continue to cling to power. This reality frustrates indigenous reformers, such as Felipe, who desire substantive changes in how society operates. However, even these rebellious Indians who champion education do not embody the redemptive ideals of the official discourse. Frequently they prove just as bad as César or any other person currently in power. In an interview, in which she critiques *indigenista* art, literature, and film of the mid-twentieth century, Castellanos states:

Uno de sus defectos principales reside en considerar el mundo indígena como un mundo exótico en el que los personajes, por ser las víctimas, son poéticos y buenos. Esta simplicidad me causa risa. Los indios son seres humanos absolutamente iguales a los blancos, sólo que colocados en una circunstancia especial y desfavorable. Como son más débiles, pueden ser más malos—violentos, traidores e hipócritas—que los blancos. . . . Es necesario describir cómo esa misera ha atrofiado sus mejores cualidades . . . no se puede convertir impunemente a un personaje blanco en villano, ni a uno indígena identificarlo *a priori* con la bondad. (qtd. in Carballo 422-23, emphasis in original)

*Balún Canán* recognizes this ultimately very human nature of the Indian. In doing so, one of the ideas that it discounts is the relatively simplistic idea that if the Tzeltal population can overthrow the land-owning elite that life will automatically improve in Comitán.

According to Simone Weil, a French philosopher whom Castellanos frequently read and cited, at best, revolutionary changes in government “drive out one team of oppressors and replace them with another” and perhaps “even to change the form of oppression” (*Gravity and Grace* 69).<sup>18</sup> Thus the government intervention in *Balún Canán*, far from presenting a reconciliatory philosophy that will bring the Tzeltals and the Ladinos together, proves a divisive force that sides with the Indians against their white masters. Throughout Castellanos’s novel, it becomes clear that the very groups who are liberated through government policy simply become the newest oppressors later on. This is particularly clear in the case of Felipe, who has already learned to read and write in Spanish. While he champions the cause of the poor Mayans, the text also shows that he does not respect the human dignity of the white population:

Felipe estaba riendo a carcajadas. Su mujer lo vio con espanto como si se hubiera vuelto loco.

—Me estoy acordando de lo que vi en Tapachula. Hay blancos tan pobres que piden limosna, que caen consumidos de fiebre en las calles. (99)

The fact that he takes joy in the starvation and suffering of Mexican whites make it clear that Felipe is no liberating Messiah. Indeed, his discrimination also extends beyond whites to the women of his own race, a fact that is emphasized as he abuses his wife, Juana. Clearly Felipe does not represent a good alternative to white *caciquismo*. Instead he embodies a new form of oppression in which, using the terminology of Octavio Paz, he is the “chingón” (see *El laberinto de la soledad*). Interestingly, Felipe has become the man he is through education. However, the knowledge that he acquires does not redeem him, rather it leaves him filled with hate.

Felipe’s treatment of his fellow Mayans shows that he has learned how to leverage his knowledge against their ignorance. In one telling scene, he tricks numerous other indigenous

men into assisting him in building the school. He does this by telling them incorrectly that he has revealed their names to César as his confidants. By using his knowledge of both Spanish and Tzeltal as a means of manipulating the Indians, Felipe employs a practice that mirrors the strategies of *Balún Canán's* other bilingual male leader, César. Certainly his reasoning differs greatly from that of the *hacendado*; while César wishes to oppress the Indians, Felipe claims to want to liberate them. Nevertheless, the similarities in the methods of these two antagonistic characters lend credence to Weil's statement that in revolution one form of oppression will generally replace another. After deceiving his fellow Mayans into helping him, Felipe watches proudly as the school is finished and César is forced to start sending his *maestro* there every day. However, he does not realize that César has supplied a teacher that will, by design, run a second-rate classroom.

When Ernesto realizes that he will have to teach, he refuses at first, stating “no quiero, no sé. Y usted no puede obligarme” (97). However, César tells him “aquí no eres tú quien va a disponer nada, sino yo. Y si mando que desquites tu comida dando clases, las darás” (98). This becomes an important conversation because once again it establishes a hierarchical “chingón” and “chingado;” César's will trumps Ernesto. This results in an institution that not only reinforces the interpellation of Tzeltal children as inferiors, but also that of Ernesto as a second-class Ladino.<sup>19</sup> Neither César nor any other self-respecting *hacendado* would ever stoop to the level of teaching Indian children. Instead, they bring someone else who will simply maintain appearances. This way they remind everyone, both teacher and student, of their proper caste, and through this means they continue to increase their power in society. Interestingly, Ernesto never realizes that he is supposed to be a mediocre teacher. César frequently probes him about how classes have gone, and Ernesto deliberately gives enigmatic responses. While Ernesto believes

that César wants to ensure the quality of his classes, César's true interest in the school lies with the contentedness of his Mayan workers. As long as Ernesto keeps the indigenous children ignorant and their parents contented, he is fulfilling his purpose; thus his very failure is equated with success in César's eyes.

Ernesto's first class proves César's savvy. The Indian students speak Tzeltal while their Ladino teacher speaks Spanish, a fact that dooms any meaningful communication from the start. However, Ernesto does maintain the semblance of an educational environment; he stands at the fore and speaks to the students, even reading them a few jokes in Spanish. Despite having no clear lesson plan, Ernesto manages to assert that the school is a place of reading and perhaps even learning. He fails to communicate adequately with the Mayan children, but he does uphold the written law. This fact underscores the problematic relationship between education and redemption in *Balún Canán*. When those in power can usurp the school system, it no longer can serve as a tool for uplifting the masses. Instead, it becomes just one more mechanism through which the elite can institutionalize their legitimacy. César's skillful manipulation of the federal mandate becomes all the more apparent when Felipe arrives unexpectedly and observes the class. Ernesto hopes that Felipe will recognize this farce for what it is and release him from his duties. However, Felipe's reaction proves much more telling. Despite the fact that Ernesto recognizes his own futility, Felipe comes forward at the end of class and expresses a deep satisfaction "de que se estuviera dando cumplimiento a la ley" (142).

This exchange between the Indian and the bastard underscores the means through which the Ladino *hacendado* continues to play those beneath him against one another. Not only does he control Ernesto, but he also fools Felipe into thinking that real progress is occurring in these students' lives. Felipe expresses a great deal of hope in his school despite having just viewed a

clearly subpar session with the supposed teacher. This blind faith on Felipe's part, coupled with Ernesto's ignorance gives César the power he needs to maintain the system of oppression that has plagued Chactajal for centuries. Weil refers to power apparatuses as a "plaything" (*Oppression* 69); clearly this is the case with César. Far from being an agent for salvation and change, education once again serves simply to uphold the status quo. The practices of *cardenismo* have not accomplished all of the goals they had aimed to achieve. As long as Ernesto upholds the semblance of teaching, César remains secure. The government has no case against him, and the Tzeltal population will not receive the knowledge necessary to catalyze an insurrection.

Unfortunately for César, Ernesto does not maintain appearances forever. When he learns that Matilde, with whom he has had an affair, has aborted his child because she does not want a "bastardo" (156), he arrives drunk to the classroom and begins to talk. A common Mexican *dicho* states that "sólo los niños y los borrachos dicen la verdad." Castellanos seems to agree with this expression and allows her inebriated protagonist to offer important truths. The first thing that Ernesto does is affirm the futility of the program he leads. He states:

Estamos perdiendo el tiempo de forma miserable, camaradas. ¿De qué nos sirve reunirnos todos los días? Yo no entiendo ni jota ni tilde de la maldita lengua de ustedes y ustedes no saben ni papa de español. Pero aunque yo fuera un maestro de esos que enseñan a sus alumnos las tablas de multiplicar y toda la cosa, ¿de qué nos serviría? No va a cambiar nunca nuestra situación. Indio naciste, indio quedás. Igual yo. (158)

In making this statement, Ernesto demonstrates his misunderstanding of the role of this school in maintaining César's *hacienda*. While he understands that he will never help these Indian children

to make something of themselves, he never seems to understand the *hacendados*' "jugada". César's plan backfires as Ernesto begins to arrive drunk to class habitually after falling into a depression. On one occasion, he even hits a child, a fact that the student's mother, María, decries. This provokes the mother to ask "¿para eso nos sacrificamos mandando a nuestro kerem a la escuela?" (174). This leads to more altercations between César and the Indians on his property. The disagreements come not because Ernesto fails to teach the children, but because of his violent acts while in a drunken rage.

One can surmise that education as currently constituted in Chiapas does not bring about salvation in *Balún Canán*.<sup>20</sup> Despite an apparently well-meaning government effort to extend opportunity to the nation's most helpless people—such as the Tzeltal population—the government ultimately cannot ensure that the Indians will receive an adequate educational experience. Instead, it simply creates new bureaucratic requirements that the *hacendados* must meet. However, as evidenced through César's manipulation of the law, simply creating new legislation does not ensure that the underlying objectives will be met. The same can be said for the girls' school. The SEP audits the teacher and the class and determines the school unsuitable and decides to close it. However, while he proves effective in closing down failing institutions, the inspector never presents the students with another opportunity. Thus government intervention actually worsens an already serious problem for female scholastic opportunities. In the case of Ladina girls and indigenous children of both genders, then, official policy comes under scrutiny as it fails to regenerate Mexico.

The failure of government policy in redeeming the nation comes through most clearly—ironically—as the Argüello family loses its rights to the ranch in Chactajal following an indigenous rebellion. This revolt does not come about through Ernesto's effective inculcation of

official teachings, nor does it represent a moment of national redemption. As viewed through the official discourse, national redemption presupposes unity between Mexicans of all colors—something that comes about as people of different backgrounds identify themselves first and foremost as Mexican citizens. However, Castellanos shows that many of the Maya of Comitán do not realize they live in a national entity known as Mexico, which means that they certainly do not identify themselves as Mexican. While the Tzeltal rebellion may end the oppression of the Argüello family, it ultimately does little to promote the people’s identification with a national ideal. Indeed, the polarized movement increases divisions as it pits the residents of Comitán against each other along racial lines. The failure of education in redeeming the Indians is most clearly outlined in Felipe’s character. While he has gone to school and learned to read and write, he never discusses an idealistic future or Mexican redemption. His jubilant treatment of poor Mexican whites in the center of the country underscores his own racial prejudices that erase any hopes of national unity. Thus even the monumental achievements of the Mayan peasants in overthrowing their master is a movement tinged with failure rather than salvation. This fact emphasizes how shortcomings in individuals—as well as those in educational policies—stand in the way of Mexico’s redemption.

Castellanos’s novel criticizes the governmental policy in which “the key to indigenous incorporation was the inclusionary Spanish-only schoolhouse” (Lewis 179). While the SEP’s policies may ostensibly have had the end goal of integration in sight, the difficulties in Ernesto’s classroom recognize serious problems with educating students in a language that they do not understand. Ladino men take advantage of educational institutions throughout the novel, even after the government has attempted to interject itself in the conversation. As they undermine the attempts at educational reform that aim to improve equality, the *hacendados* in *Balún Canán* call



into question the mythic power that the official discourse attributed to education. Redemption is conspicuously absent throughout the novel. No character, not even the university-educated César or the bilingual Indian, Felipe, achieves any sort of salvation through their learning. Prior to government intervention, the Ladina girls go to a clearly less advanced school than Ladino boys, while the Tzeltal children do not attend school at all. Government intervention leaves Ladina girls with fewer opportunities than before, while the indigenous children start attending clearly subpar institutions. This suggests that the official discourse has misled the Mexican people in their promises of a redemptive education. The novel's most educated characters have not been redeemed, and high-quality schools remain inaccessible to the more marginalized sectors of society. The final portrait of education in Castellanos's novel is a politicized institution that suffers due to failure at the national, local, and individual levels.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While Cárdenas played a key role in promoting education for males and females, Ladinos and Indians, gender issues played a secondary role in his overall goals for Chiapas and for the nation in general. Friedrich E. Schuler's chapter "Mexico and the Outside World" discusses the many facets of Cárdenas's regime—particularly the goal of agrarian land reform, a project that aimed to take land from elite families and redistribute it to Mexican peasants (520-32). It is this issue that lies at the heart of Ladino disagreements with the Mexican president throughout the novel. In many senses, education is a peripheral issue in that it serves the purpose of alerting the indigenous masses as to the exploitation of land-owning Ladinos with the hope that the Indians will then demand their land.

<sup>2</sup> Luis Althusser discusses the importance of education in socializing each member of society as to his or her role in society. This occurs especially to "ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or mastery of its practice" (133, emphasis in original). For a more in-depth reading on the role of education in preaching the ruling ideology, see "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (132-34). One of the key ways in which a society produces and reproduces its ideology is through the interpellation of its subjects according to their position in society. For more information regarding interpellation in the state, see "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (170-77). This proves particularly true in the text of *Balún Canán*; each person receives the education that his or her birth allows, and each person's education is supposed to fulfill the role of subjecting him or her to the ruling ideology. On the same token, each individual is interpellated according to characteristics that they receive at birth such as gender, race, and parentage. This interpellation is then reflected in the education that is allowed to each individual.

Thus the education that people do—or do not—receive in Comitán tells them how they can act in the local economy, but it does little in the way of liberating them.

<sup>3</sup> This term refers to the system in Comitán in which land-owning, Ladino males of European descent control society. This hierarchy relegates Ladina women to second-class status, while indigenous men suffer racial stigmatization. Indigenous women suffer “double oppression” as both “Indian and woman.” For more discussion about this term, see Helene M. Anderson’s article “Rosario Castellanos and the Structures of Power” (30).

<sup>4</sup> In her article titled “*Balún Canán: A Model Demonstration of Discourse as Power*,” Sandra M. Cypess mentions numerous “strategies of power” at work in Chiapas. This list includes “Ladino—Indian. . . . Man—Woman, parent—child, brother-sister, Spanish-speaker—Tzeltal-speaker, hijo legítimo—ilegítimo” (2). In each of these divisions there exists an oppressor and a victim. Interestingly, all of these binaries—with the possible exception of that between parent and child—the privileged caste receives a markedly better education than the person of the victimized class.

<sup>5</sup> Joanna O’Connell notes that the inability to communicate is particularly harmful for the women of both races. As she states, “women shared certain situations as women, but were divided by class and ethnicity in ways that made it almost impossible to communicate or unite” (24).

<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that *Balún Canán* dismisses the redeeming value of education, Castellanos seems to see a redemptive quality in education in her own life. In the conclusion to this thesis I will discuss the author’s article, “Teatro Petul” which tells of her time working for the Institución Nacional Indigenista (INI), where she promoted education in indigenous

communities.

<sup>7</sup> While he plays a small but important role in the overall novel, don Jaime Rovelo's son is never named. This may be due in part to an estrangement that has occurred with his father over their disagreement in the political sphere. Juan Pablo Gil-Osle affirms this strained relationship stating "ya no entiende, como la clase alta de Comitán, que los indígenas sean sus esclavos. Esta desotrificación de los tzeltal supone para la familia Rovelo que su genealogía se acabe como factor definitorio de su identidad ante la masa indígena o no hacendada" (299). Thus don Jaime's son—and don Jaime himself—lose their very name in Comitán based on their disagreement regarding indigenous forced labor. It is interesting to note that each character, including Ernesto, when referring to this character, calls him "el hijo de don Jaime Rovelo." Thus not even the characters of the novel know him by another name, a fact that emphasizes both father and son's loss of identity.

<sup>8</sup> The existentialist and feminist Simone Weil greatly affected Castellanos's works. See Weil's *Gravity and Grace* (49-50) and *Oppression and Liberty* (69). Here Weil discusses the nature of oppression, suggesting that victims frequently seek to humiliate people lower than themselves. Through becoming victimizers they gain "importance" (*Gravity* 50), which improves their self image. We see a similar situation in Comitán where victimizers, the narrator's mother in this case, can later become victimized. It is key to note that Zoraida affirms the system that allows her husband to degrade her when she victimizes those beneath herself. This leads to a society of dubious morality. Immanuel Kant, in discussing morality, postulates the Categorical Imperative, which states that people must "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (qtd. in Johnson). A society

that creates victims and victimizers is therefore immoral. Thus the hierarchical system of “chingón” and “chingada” is fundamentally flawed.

<sup>9</sup> Luis Althusser claims that educators play an important role in subjecting their students to the “ruling ideology,” despite the fact that they may not even recognize it. In his own words “(the majority) do not even begin to suspect the ‘work’ the system (which is bigger than they are and crushes them) forces them to do, or worse, put all their heart and ingenuity into performing it. . . . So little do they suspect it that their own devotion contributes to the maintenance and nourishment of the ideological representation of the School” (157). Thus the school and the teacher play a direct role in the continuing oppression of Ladinas and Indians in Comitán, even when they do not realize the role that they play.

<sup>10</sup> The young girl’s observation here proves quite interesting in detailing the school’s true mission statement. As mentioned before, the privilege of drawing the “mapamundi” occurs after the first menstruation (Weatherford 38). The teacher’s condemnation, then, may very well refer more to the girl’s belated passage through this first important initiation—even if she will eventually do so—than due to her “torpeza.” As previously mentioned, the school’s principle aim is to create women who will uphold the current economic system, not well informed, thinking girls. A slow menstruation may indicate future problems to initiate fully into feminine society, a problem that would concern the teacher far more than stupidity.

<sup>11</sup> See Alan Knight (395-99) for a more in-depth discussion of the perception of the Catholic Church both during and following the Mexican Revolution. For a discussion of anti-Catholic tendencies during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, see Thomas Benjamin (483-485).

<sup>12</sup> The potential to unite the Indians against the land-owning elites refers specifically to a

section in the document in which the indigenous narrator discusses the collective predicament of all Indians on the ranch. Negrín points out that the narrator speaks specifically of congregating as a group. See (Castellanos, *Balún Canán* 58).

<sup>13</sup> We see a similar case of Ladinos playing the system with regard to female education as well; the landed elite simply do not send their daughters to any school once they recognize that they cannot reopen the girls' school.

<sup>14</sup> See Helene M. Anderson (24-25) for a more in-depth analysis of the shared fate of Ladina women and the Mayans in this pueblo. Both are oppressed, and neither can share information about this suffering with the other group due to institutionalized linguistic barriers.

<sup>15</sup> Castellanos very probably lived many of the linguistic problems that *Balún Canán* criticizes during her time working for the INI. Her article "Teatro Petul" discusses the importance of educating the Mayan people in their own language rather than attempting to teach them in Spanish.

<sup>16</sup> Two major linguistic Mayan groups live in the region of Chiapas that Castellanos describes in *Balún Canán*: the Tzeltal Mayans, and the Tzotzil Mayans. While both ethnic groups suffer similar oppression at the hands of the Ladinos, *Balún Canán* discusses the plight of the Tzeltal people.

<sup>17</sup> This relation also underscores the fluidity of the social hierarchies in Comitán; at this moment Zoraida is inclusive with Ernesto despite his status as a bastard because neither of them are Indians. However, in another section she thinks "bastardo tenía que ser" (115).

<sup>18</sup> See Joanna O'Connell, *Prospero's Daughter* (238-39) for examples of instances in which Castellanos cited Weil in her writings.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the novel never recognizes female students in the indigenous classroom. This may underscore the fact that Ernesto never attempts to get to know any of his students, or it may signal that government endeavors have only attempted to help indigenous males while leaving Indian women in the background. It may also signal Mayan cultural practices of excluding women.

<sup>20</sup> The term Balún Canán should be understood with both of its meanings in this sentence. On the one hand *Balún Canán* refers to the title of Castellanos's novel. However, it also is the name of Comitán in Tzeltal. Thus, the observation that education does not bring about salvation in Balún Canán refers both to the novel and to the city in which Castellanos's first novel is set.

## CONCLUSION

Both Emilio Fernández's *Río Escondido* and Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán* consider the role of education in post-Revolutionary Mexico. Up to this point, this thesis has shown how "El Indio's" film communicates official discourse, while Castellanos's text presents a discourse of failure. Despite this difference, both present a similar vision of Mexico, and both acknowledge the existence of powerful historical actors who oppress the people at large. In *Balún Canán*, these oppressors are the *hacendados*, while in *Río Escondido* the people suffer at the hands of a cacique "who may not be a *hacendado*, but is at any rate an incarnation of the barbaric Mexican type" (García 156). Given that both works share this backdrop, it is of no small importance that Fernández's film comes across as optimistic while Castellanos's novel does not. As mentioned throughout this thesis, the difference ultimately lies in each text's representation of official policies in effecting change. While Fernández presents a utopian Mexico in which the state successfully redeems its people through the school, Castellanos presents a world that resembles the one in which she grew up.

On the one hand the dissonance between *Balún Canán* and *Río Escondido* is to be expected. As this thesis has explained, Mexican Golden Age Film frequently communicated official discourse, while Castellanos most certainly critiqued Mexican—and particularly Chiapanecan—society throughout her life. However, this difference proves quite ironic because while Fernández never spent time volunteering to teach the nation's Indians, Castellanos dedicated several years to working for the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) from 1956 to



1961.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, during that time, Castellanos seems to have adopted—at least to some degree—certain terminologies common in official discourse, a fact that comes out perhaps most clearly in her essay, “Teatro Petul.” In this work she recounts that, while working for the INI, she and her companions would stage puppet shows starring an indigenous character, Petul, who learns of the world around him and presents the audience with “un triunfo sobre las supersticiones, del progreso sobre la tradición, de la civilización sobre la barbarie” (31). This draws an interesting parallel between the real-life Rosario Castellanos and the fictitious Rosaura Salazar, both of whom teach the nation’s Indians with the hope of an eventual triumph.

Thus, while *Balún Canán* questions the role of education, it is clear that it does not suggest that the school plays a negative role in society. Nevertheless, despite this clarification, there remain clear differences between Fernández’s film and Castellanos’s novel. For example, the mythic discourse that reverberates throughout *Río Escondido* asserts that the mere presence of a virtuous teacher will catalyze the redemption of the entire pueblo. Indeed, not even don Regino can effectively oppose Rosaura’s aims. When he assaults the *maestra rural* in a last-ditch attempt to curb her influence, his actions lead to his demise. The powerful *hacendados* do not face the same situation in *Balún Canán*, where Ladino men remain in control of education throughout the novel. Due to the influence of the elites in directing the town’s schools, education tends to play a conservative role in which it effectively upholds the status quo.

One of the clearest examples that emphasizes the differences between Castellanos and Fernández is each work’s treatment of the classroom. In *Balún Canán* incompetent teachers fail to present any worthwhile information to their students. This results in classes either becoming boisterous—as with the indigenous school—or becoming all too quiet such as with the land-owners’ school for girls. Students in either situation cannot be redeemed through education

because their institution is designed to keep them from attaining any sort of academic achievement. While Rosaura faces ostensibly similar circumstances to Ernesto—both teach indigenous students in a faraway corner of the country—she manages not only to maintain order, but to convey the importance of being “buenos mexicanos” and of opposing “los malos.” While Rosaura begins by teaching the alphabet, she eventually catalyzes a rebellion that ends *caudillismo* in Río Escondido. Clearly, education leads to very different results in each text.

In *Balún Canán*, the problem ultimately lies with the inability of the federal government to implement true education reform. As previously mentioned, don Jaime Rovelo seems to fear that providing teachers for the Mayan students will doom his *finca* because the Indians will no longer accept the *hacendados*' authority. However, when César hires Ernesto it becomes clear that education by itself will not help the Indians on his ranch. It is not academics that hurt the Tzeltal population, rather the people who control the schools and manipulate them to their own ends. The same can be inferred about the school that Castellanos's unnamed protagonist attends; the problem in this instance is not that education *cannot* help the girls, it is that it *does* not. This is due to the fact that the power lies with those who will not permit women to know as much as men. One of the most important messages that the novel communicates, then, is that the government continues to fail to implement a truly inclusional education system. This is particularly true in the case of the class that Ernesto teaches. The novel presents the language barrier as the key hurdle that is never overcome in reaching out to the masses. The Tzeltal children who attend Ernesto's farce of a class leave having gained nothing from their time spent. César, who understands this concept, chooses Ernesto particularly because he will fail. This signals another key problem to the education system in Chiapas: Ladinos continue to control what actually happens in Chiapas despite attempts from Mexico City to curb their power. Thus

the novel ultimately criticizes the federal government's inability to produce meaningful change in the area of education—an area in which it had invested a great deal, and took great pride.

This criticism of the government is almost completely absent in *Río Escondido*, which presents the paternalistic state—and the government that heads it—as the mechanism for peasant deliverance. While the language barrier plays a strong role in *Balún Canán*, it remains conspicuously absent in Fernández's film. The indigenous children already understand Spanish, and they immediately learn and understand everything that Rosaura teaches them. Thus the narrative world of *Río Escondido* is one in which progress seems imminent; an enlightened government has decided to emancipate its citizens and bring about change in “Río Escondido, México, y el mundo” (*Río Escondido*). *Balún Canán*, on the other hand, presents a world that is doomed to continue down the same dysfunctional path that it has always followed.<sup>2</sup> A new government, despite its idealist legislation, has done little to achieve concrete advancements in the lives of its citizens. This key difference helps to explain the overall tenor of each work. *Río Escondido* begins and ends to the tune of a triumphant march—a fact that helps to emphasize the movie's optimistic message of creating a new Mexico. However, *Balún Canán* begins and ends with a young girl struggling to understand, and even negotiate, her identity with herself—a point that mirrors the novel's attempt to pinpoint the nation's identity in general.

Ultimately, while these two texts present visions that are dramatically opposed to one another, they seem to agree that education—in its proper form—may help the nation in achieving greater equality, and even unity. Perhaps part of the difference in the message of these texts comes from when they were produced. Fernández filmed *Río Escondido* ten years before Castellanos published *Balún Canán*. Thus, *Río Escondido* appeals to the excitement of an ongoing program that aims to uplift Mexico, while *Balún Canán* speaks to the frustrations of

many by the mid-twentieth century, after the post-Revolutionary government had failed to make good on its promises. Despite the fact that Castellanos's text seems to present a more realistic vision of Mexico, both of these works present a mythic vision at some underlying level. While *Río Escondido* unabashedly communicates a discourse of progress, *Balún Canán* shares one of failure. Despite their differences, these texts speak to a reality that Mexico dealt with during the mid-twentieth century when it attempted to resolve its problems through education.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more on Castellanos's work with the INI, see Estelle Tarica (149-50).

<sup>2</sup> Numerous critics have noted an apocalyptic feel to this novel and the possibility of a new beginning. This interpretation comes about due to Mario's death and César's loss of any male heirs. Thus the *finca* is forever lost to the Argüellos. Cypess notes that "without him, there is no connection between the past and the future of the patriarchal position" ("Discourse of Power" 14). Juan Pablo Gil-Osle states that "tras la extenuación de la semilla de los Argüello, el éxito de los indios tzeltal sobre los ladinos es definitivo, no sólo en la sociedad indígena sino también en la ladina" (298). See Priscilla Mélenz's "Genealogía y escritura en *Balún Canán* de Rosario Castellanos" (356-57) for more information on this. While I most certainly agree that Mario's death represents the end of an era, I take issue with Gil-Osle's statement that victory is "definitivo". A successful apocalypse of one time period does not presuppose a redemptive genesis; indeed, while the *hacendados* have fallen, the indigenous people still lack any education. Many have never heard of Mexico. Along with the aforementioned problem, racial segregation continues to persist, but now favor lies more squarely with the Indians. Thus the heavily championed ideology of *mestizaje* fades into the background. Racial animosities persist, a fact that impedes progress in the pueblo. Thus the novel presents a people who is perhaps freed from forced labor, but they most certainly are not redeemed as are the characters in such official discourse as *Río Escondido*.

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